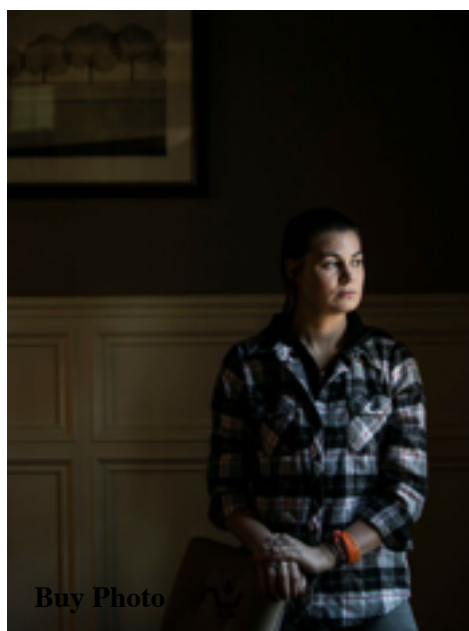


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For WKU volleyball All-American, there's 'hope' despite cancer battle

Justin Sayers, Louisville Courier Journal Published 7:47 a.m. ET Dec. 20, 2018 | Updated 2:00 p.m. ET Dec. 20, 2018



(Photo: Matt Stone/Courier Journal)

Alyssa Cavanaugh (http://wkusports.com/roster.aspx?rp_id=901) tries to sleep in as long she can each morning, usually making it to 9 a.m. before her dog, Hope, finds her noisiest squeaky toy.

Then it's time for breakfast and her cocktail of a dozen prescription drugs. After that, she cleans her PICC line and it's off to the doctor for up to seven hours a day before coming home for dinner.

The former Western Kentucky volleyball star was diagnosed with leukemia in early September. In the last three months, she's traded her daily routine of workouts, classes and practice for doctors visits, blood tests and chemotherapy.

While her hair is shorter and she sometimes feels so nauseated she can't make it off the bathroom floor, she hasn't lost her positive attitude or sense of humor, admitting she pulled the "cancer card" to rescue Hope.

"We named her to keep hope," said Cavanaugh, 22.

More: [Western Kentucky football, Tyson Helton add 16 to 2019 signing class \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/2018/12/19/western-kentucky-football-2019-signing-class-tyson-helton/2367257002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/2018/12/19/western-kentucky-football-2019-signing-class-tyson-helton/2367257002/)

Doctors told her she can increase her chances of beating the cancer with a bone marrow transplant. [Be The Match \(https://bethematch.org/\)](https://bethematch.org/), a program aimed at growing the database, said more than 650 people have been registered into the bone marrow registry in her name.

"Just to be able to do that is enough for me," she said. "Just to be a voice for someone else."

Star-studded career

In volleyball, Cavanaugh described herself as a "late bloomer."

She was 5-foot-2 as a freshman at powerhouse Assumption High. By the time she graduated, she was a 5-foot-10, four-time state champion and high-school All-American.

Cavanaugh committed to WKU as a sophomore. Hilltoppers coach Travis Hudson remembers being drawn to her not only because of her athletic ability but also because of her "fire."

"She has this competitiveness about her. She has this toughness about her," Hudson said. "That's kinda what I come from, that's kinda who I am. I think I understood her pretty early on."

Before her freshman year at WKU, the two butted heads after a decision to move Cavanaugh, an outside hitter, to the left side. Hudson thinks that the fact it worked out built trust between the two.

More: [WKU's Tyson Helton on past success: 'We just need to go do it again.'](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentuckiana/2018/12/18/wku-football-new-coach-tyson-helton-five-questions-interview/2323744002/) (<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentuckiana/2018/12/18/wku-football-new-coach-tyson-helton-five-questions-interview/2323744002/>)

"I always joked that her and I must be the most hard-headed people on earth," he said.

Four years later Cavanaugh was one of its most-decorated players in the program's history. She was a four-time All-American, two-time Conference USA Player of the Year, and Conference USA Female Athlete of the Year as a senior. The Hilltoppers made the NCAA tournament all four years she played. She ranks in the top-10 in WKU history in kills and solo blocks.

She was also known for her on-court emotion, and sometimes cartoonish facial expressions.

"She just had this bigger-than-life-personality," Hudson said.

A life-changing diagnosis

After graduating in May, Cavanaugh planned to pursue a master's degree at Northumbria University in England, where she could also play volleyball — and jump start a professional career abroad.

But less than a month before she was supposed to move, she started having trouble finishing her workouts, found random bruises on her body and had kidney pain.

Her mother wanted her to get checked out before leaving. Alyssa did and was diagnosed with a kidney infection. Antibiotics didn't help, so she went to the emergency room. A blood test revealed her white blood-cell count was sky high.

Cavanaugh was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia on Sept. 5. She started chemotherapy the next day.

"It was kind of like really stressful and you couldn't really take it all in," she said.

Her mom, Leslie, said she was devastated.

"The fact that it could happen to someone so young and in such good health and completely out of the blue," she said.

Leslie escorts Alyssa to all her appointments. She has chemotherapy and bloodwork done up to four times a week, and has had three bone marrow biopsies.

"We go four or five weeks where we will have a doctor's appointment every day," Leslie said.



Alyssa Cavanaugh, a former WKU volleyball player, is needing a bone marrow transplant due to her diagnosis with cancer. The chemo treatment leaves her winded she has to climb the stairs to her parents home. She's hoping to get people to register as bone marrow donors. (Photo: Matt Stone/Courier Journal)

More than a coach

When Hudson found out about Cavanaugh's diagnosis, he just had to see her. So despite being in season, he drove from Bowling Green to Louisville visit her in the hospital.

"It was like hearing that news about one of your own children," said Hudson, who himself has beaten melanoma and survived a heart attack.

Hudson said he and Cavanaugh differ because he likes to show his emotions. So he coached himself up the entire drive to not cry.

More: [After losing his wife to breast cancer, Bart Conley trains to be a nurse](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2018/12/20/breast-cancer-victim-jill-conleys-husband-become-nurse/2215577002/) (<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2018/12/20/breast-cancer-victim-jill-conleys-husband-become-nurse/2215577002/>)

"I walked in that hospital room and I walked over to her and the first sentence out of my mouth my voice was starting to crack," Hudson said. "She looked at me and stopped me and said, 'Hey, we're not doing that.'"

The WKU athletic department helped out, too. The school [announced her diagnosis](http://wkusports.com/news/2018/9/7/womens-volleyball-i-believe-in-alyssa-cavanaugh.aspx) (<http://wkusports.com/news/2018/9/7/womens-volleyball-i-believe-in-alyssa-cavanaugh.aspx>) on Sept. 7 with the message, "I believe in Alyssa Cavanaugh." It also included an address to send cards and flowers.

Over a four-day span in early-November, WKU held a [bone marrow donor registry event](https://wkuherald.com/sports/wku-to-host-bone-marrow-donor-registration-event-for-alyssa/article_338fe81a-dc78-11e8-b4dc-4b53d7e60e22.html) (https://wkuherald.com/sports/wku-to-host-bone-marrow-donor-registration-event-for-alyssa/article_338fe81a-dc78-11e8-b4dc-4b53d7e60e22.html) during volleyball, and men's and women's basketball games. Be The Match said 622 people from WKU have signed up as donors, as of last week.

A couple of nearby colleges, Kentucky and Purdue, also held registry events. About 40 more people signed up.

Hudson decided to take it to the next level. He pledged to pay the tuition of any WKU student who is a match and goes through the donation process. It's a big pledge considering Hudson's annual salary is \$97,416 in 2019, while the cost of a semester's [tuition could be upward of \\$13,000](https://www.wku.edu/bursar/tuition_fees_1819.php) (https://www.wku.edu/bursar/tuition_fees_1819.php).

Hudson said he came up with the idea during a promotion during a basketball game, and announced it after consulting with his wife.

"Every student that walked in, it couldn't leave my mind that that may be the person right there that saved Alyssa's life or saved someone else's life. It was so powerful to think about," Hudson said.

Keeping it positive

Since her diagnosis, Leslie said she's only seen Alyssa cry twice.

The first was when the doctors confirmed the diagnosis. The second was when she was told she would have to cut her hair.

Leslie admitted it's been tough for her. But she draws from her daughter's strength.

"I had my meltdown at the hospital right after the diagnosis," Leslie said. "We've had some ups and downs but Alyssa has been amazing through this whole thing. It's very easy to stay positive because she's positive."

Meanwhile, Alyssa said she, too, stays positive based on the efforts of others, including the strangers that contributed to a mountain of cards.

She also stays busy. She does girls' nights with friends, watching movies or going to places like Main Event. She does weekly family dinners with her parents and brothers. She also makes as many trips as she can to Bowling Green to see Hudson and her boyfriend, Jared Savage, who is on the basketball team.

She tries to stay active by going shopping and doing minor workouts. But even that's tough.

More Tops: [WKU wants the next Jeff Brohm \(no pressure, Coach Helton\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentuckiana/2018/11/28/western-kentucky-university-football-coach-tyson-helton-jeff-brohm-influence/2122627002/) (<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentuckiana/2018/11/28/western-kentucky-university-football-coach-tyson-helton-jeff-brohm-influence/2122627002/>)

"Walking up a flight of stairs makes me feel like I'm having a heart attack," she said.

She and her mom admitted they sometimes take it a little too lightly. One time they were out shopping, and the cashier asked if they would like to donate to cancer research.

Alyssa started laughing and was like "You can't say no, now." The cashier looked at them funny, so Leslie told her Alyssa had cancer, with a laugh.

"The lady was like, uh, feel better," Leslie said. "We said, 'We're fine.'"

Leslie said she's amazed by her daughter every day.

"As every parent that has a child that's sick, you wish that it could be you," she said. "It's not me, it's my 22-year-old daughter. It's very hard but she absolutely has not let this stop her one bit."

Future Plans

Alyssa Cavanaugh uses the word "when" and not "if" when she talks about beating cancer.

She already has an established timeline of her transplant, isolation, recovery.

She estimates she'll be able to come home in May, just in time to lay out in the sun on her family's boat at their lakehouse during the summer.

Her family also agreed to reward her with a vacation of her choice when she beats cancer. She picked Hawaii.

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Alyssa keeps her volleyball memories in the downstairs of the Cavanaugh's Norton Commons home. Two shelves are overfilled with trophies. A framed red No. 7 Hilltoppers jersey is on the wall next to the stairs, with a metal hanging off the side.

She said she wants to keep playing volleyball, but she's not sure if she's going to continue pursuing a professional career. Her goal is to play in the Marshall Madness Volleyball Tournament, an annual July event in Bowling Green.

"Hopefully I can get back into shape," she said.

In terms of a career field, she has her sights set on something unrelated to her recreation administration degree — firefighting.

The idea came from Hudson, who received an email saying fire departments are in need of women and told Cavanaugh about it. She was drawn to it's physical demands and adrenaline-inducing work.

"Ever since it's just kind of been in the back of my head," she said.

Ironically, Alyssa was already a member of the bone marrow registry program. She signed up two years ago as part of a donor drive for a family friend.

She was preliminary matched with a 64-year-old male in July. But because she was leaving for Europe she couldn't go through with the process.

In the meantime, she said she's going to continue her efforts.

"There's a lot of people out there that are looking for a match but they don't have as big of a voice because they don't have the NCAA and they don't have the college scene. I would like to use my platform to get more people to sign up, even if it's not for me it's for them," Alyssa said.

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Text "Cure154" to 61474 to begin the sign-up process. The online registration process takes less than 10 minutes. Once registered, a cheek swab kit will be sent to your address within 3-7 business days. When the kit arrives, swab the inside of your cheek and return it then sit back and wait to be called if you are a match.