

ATHLETE PROFILE

An Accidental Athlete

Judy Lynch

By Jenna Caputo

Judy Lynch was stuck in every parent's worst nightmare. Her daughter, Katie, was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia, the most dangerous type of leukemia and a disease that generally hits people over 60 years old. Katie was 30. Treatments for this particular type of cancer had not changed much in decades, and chance of survival was slim. Running is what helped Judy survive.

Judy started running in 1997 when she was 47 years old, initially trying to lose weight. She didn't see the results she was looking for, but she realized she loved to run. It helped relieve her depressive tendencies and provided great stress relief. She continued to run just for the fitness aspect. Another friend from work, also a runner, urged her to try competing. They ran the Freihofer's Run for Women 5K together. After, Judy began training on a more serious level. She started to receive awards for her age-group and decided to train more for distance. In 2001 she ran her first half-marathon at the Adirondack Marathon Distance Festival around Schroon Lake.

She then set a long-range goal to run a marathon after she retired in 2007. Originally from Chicago, Judy thought the Chicago Marathon would be a good one to try, knowing it was a flat and fast race. Unfortunately, it sold out quickly and she wasn't able to register. So she looked for some national charities and began what would become a long line of races to benefit a cause. She signed up for the 2007 Chicago Marathon as a fundraiser for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, but at mile 21 of the race, they cancelled the marathon due to the extremely hot temperatures and a shortage of water. They forced the runners to just walk it in, despite the fact the clocks were still running.

Judy wanted to see what she could really do so she signed up for the Philadelphia Marathon which was located near her other daughter, Julia. Katie came down the night before as a surprise, and Judy had her whole family there to cheer her on, as she finally finished her first marathon! She realized her time was not far off from her age group's qualifying time for the Boston Marathon so she signed up for the New Jersey Marathon in 2008. However, it was too soon and she ended up injuring herself and never ran it. She ran the Philadelphia Marathon again in 2008 but was short of qualifying for Boston.

Then on Labor Day 2008, just after becoming engaged, Katie was diagnosed with leukemia. Her treatment started with a hospital induction – chemotherapy 24/7 for a week and spent a month in the hospital. For five more months she was admitted one week at a time for additional chemo treatments. This initial

AFTER BOSTON MARATHON 2011

treatment seemed successful. Judy asked Katie if it would be okay if she raised money in her name. Katie agreed and Judy ran the Long Branch Half Marathon in May. Katie and her fiancé, Shashi Madugula, planned to meet her at the finish line to greet her as she came in.

In the meantime, the doctors determined Katie's blood type to try matching her with a bone marrow or stem cell transplant donor in case of relapse. There are 12 factors in typing and they needed to have a match with at least 11 out of 12 in order for it to possibly work. There were very few potential matches so knowing her choices were limited, the doctors instead decided to harvest her cells. The bone marrow biopsy before the harvest showed the leukemia was back, which meant that a transplant was her only option.

The Long Branch Half Marathon became Judy's fight for Katie's life, and she raised more than \$12,000. Instead of meeting Judy at the finish line, Katie started with the induction again – this time using a more targeted approach. It didn't work. They tried the standard induction. Still did not work. She then had to have total body irradiation before they finally matched her with an 11/12 donor and completed the transplant. Less than 40 days later, she relapsed again. Katie's oncologists tried experimental treatments, but unfortunately, she passed away only 14 months after her initial diagnosis.

"Running was my therapy. It was my stress relief, it was my thinking time, it was my everything," says Judy. "Everyone asks what they can do to help, but there's nothing people can really do. After her memorial service, I needed something to get me to move forward through the next year." Judy had just turned 60 when Katie died, and her previous marathon time qualified her for the 60-64 age-group at the Boston Marathon. She decided to run the event in Katie's memory, but just two weeks before the race, she pulled a hamstring and couldn't run. She was able to defer, and finally ran it in 2011.

Her son-in-law, Brian, suggested they find other races around the country to raise money in Katie's memory. They found a 10K in Atlanta, and Judy ran the race with Brian and Shashi. This planted the seed in her head to continue fundraising and she resolved to do one event a year. She joined the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Team in Training, and completed her

FAMILY: Husband, Charlie. Daughter Julia (33) & Son-in-Law, Brian Leahy of Boston

AGE: 64

OCCUPATION: Retired North Colonie Teacher and Librarian

RESIDENCE: Schodack

MAIN SPORTS: Running, Cycling

HOBBIES: Teaching English to Non-Native Speakers, Reading, Volunteering, Knitting



JULIA, CHARLIE, JUDY AND KATIE AT THANKSGIVING 2008.



MARINE CORPS MARATHON 2011

first event with them at the Adirondack Half Marathon, exactly 11 months after Katie died. Judy was the top fundraiser for TNT, raising more than \$9,000. She ran the Marine Corps Marathon in October 2011 – two years after Katie died – and raised more than \$9,000.

In 2012, she wanted to test herself even more. Katie was a competitive swimmer and captain of her college team. Swimming had been a big part of her life. Judy had zero confidence in her own swimming ability, but she signed up for a triathlon in honor of Katie. She bought a road bike, taught herself how to clip in and out of the pedals, and began working on her swimming. Judy competed in the Nation's Triathlon in Washington, DC, and again raised more than \$9,000.

Last year she challenged herself to complete a century ride around Lake Tahoe. She enjoyed the fast and fun nature of the cycling world and raised \$11,596 for the ride.

This year she is doing another bike ride, this time riding 108 miles across Long Island in The Ride to Montauk on May 31. Her fundraising goal is to raise at least \$10,800. She is at 90 percent of her goal and climbing.

Pushing yourself for these endurance events can be tough regardless of the circumstances. How does Judy persevere to constantly reach these new limits? "I'm very goal oriented, very determined. If I set a goal, I will work at it. A lot of this is because of Katie. She's my inspiration. I'm a very unstructured person, but I like the structure the training imposes on me, and I like following the training plan."

Judy's husband, Charlie, has been a huge support to her as well and attends all her fundraising events. He also contributes to the fundraising efforts by making his own craft beer – Craft Beer for Cures – a \$25 donation will get you a six-pack of his renowned home brew. The rest of Judy's fundraising goes directly through her site on TNT's webpage. Family, friends, and anyone else interested in the cause have donated directly to TNT through



NATION'S TRIATHLON 2012

this site in Judy's name. Judy covers all of the expenses of the races herself, so every dollar donated goes directly to LLS research and patient support.

Judy has raised more than \$62,000 for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society to date. She has been awarded the Team in Training's Triple Crown, for completing events in three disciplines, and is considered one of their top national fundraisers. "I hadn't thought of myself as an athlete, but I guess I've become one!"

Her advice to others? "Don't sell yourself short. Be willing and open to trying new things." She also recommends becoming involved with the training community that supports your event whether it's running, triathlon, etc. It helps to be part of a supportive group and to have other people sharing these experiences.

And as for the question, what can people do to help? Donate to help the researchers find a cure for this devastating disease. If you can't monetarily donate, consider donating blood because patients need transfusions frequently, and join the bone marrow registry. It can save someone's life.

For more info on donating to Judy's Ride to Montauk for TNT, visit pages.teamintraining.org/uny/montjune14/jlynch. If you would like Judy to ride in memory or in honor of a loved one that has struggled with cancer, be sure to leave a message to let her know. She will wear all the names of these people on the back of her jersey while she rides. 🌱

Jenna Caputo (silverpenproductions.com) is a freelance writer and ballroom dance instructor based in Saratoga Springs. In her spare time Judy also enjoys yoga, Zumba, and other fun outside adventures.