

She fought cancer -- and for chance at more children

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The tears wouldn't stop. She'd already lost so much.

Her sense of peace. Her newlywed joy. Her breast. The cancer took all that -- and threatened to seize even more.

She'd need years of cancer-fighting drugs after surgery. But the drugs would wither her chances of having a child with her husband, an Army sergeant.

There was hope. They could freeze embryos, which would grant the Orlando woman a sporting chance at motherhood again after what could be a half-decade of chemotherapy. But she had less than a month before starting the regimen to undergo the fertility treatment.

So Army Spc. Yissel Soto Rodriguez turned to Uncle Sam. But hope made an abrupt about-face. Her military medical coverage would pay to save her life -- not her fertility.

She had been warmed by the glow on her husband's face when he mentioned kids. Now, her guilt crowded out hope. And there was so little time.

But an ally stepped up. Her boss knew -- hoped, really -- that there must be a civilian doctor out there somewhere who could help. And in a Chicago fertility center, they found a physician who wouldn't let cancer force a 32-year-old soldier's motherhood into retreat without a fight.

Six years ago, Soto, a single mother, enlisted in Puerto Rico's Army National Guard looking to better her 6-year-old son Brian's life.

While working in personnel there, she met Kenneth Quiones, now 31.

"He was so grumpy, very quiet, very strait-laced, Army strong," she said -- the polar opposite to her outgoing, warm nature. But Soto saw something she liked beneath the sergeant's gruff veneer.

The feeling was mutual. They had a first date in December 2005. In July 2007, Quiones cooked a meal of plantains, pork chunks and guava sauce, paired with a fine wine and an engagement ring.

In December, during a ceremony at Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico, they exchanged vows and goodbyes. Soto would join her husband in Orlando, transferred to an administrative job with the Community Based Warrior Transition Unit, a program that lets wounded vets recover in their communities.

If only her back didn't ache so much, life would have been storybook.

Sudden stunning news

In January, while having her back examined at Patrick Air Force Base, Soto mentioned a mass in her right breast she had ignored.

You need a mammogram, the doctor said. Now. The results demanded a biopsy. The biopsy confirmed the worst: Stage 2 cancer.

"I'm crying [and] my husband, too," Soto said. "He was trying to stay strong, but he can't. You just start your life together, and you think you're going to die."

The surgeries came fast. In February, Soto underwent a lumpectomy and had lymph nodes removed. In March, after tests found more tumors, she had a mastectomy.

Soto knew chemotherapy would be challenging. But she wasn't prepared for the biggest challenge: The drugs could significantly reduce her chances of conceiving.

There was an option: fertility preservation. The doctor said she would have a chance at more children if her eggs were harvested and frozen. Doctors could also freeze embryos, made from her eggs and Quiones' sperm, for future use.

That gave her hope. Maybe they couldn't conceive by June, as she and her husband had planned. But, in five years, he could be marveling at every rise and fall of his first child's chest as the baby napped.

Soto stumbled out of the gate. No military fertility center could accommodate her in time. At an Orlando fertility clinic, she learned both about the procedures and the limitations of TRICARE, the health-care entitlement under which active-duty service members and family are covered.

TRICARE covers select infertility testing and treatment -- but not the harvesting, creation, storage or thawing of embryos Soto needed.

Didn't matter whether they could have a child together, Quiones reassured. He thought of her son, Brian, now 12, as his son, too.

'Totally unacceptable'

Throughout the ordeal, Soto had confided in her boss, Maj. Ardelia Levesque, a nurse by trade.

Levesque didn't have a gripe against adoption, to which Quiones was amenable. She had an aversion to giving up.

Losing out on motherhood "was totally unacceptable," she said of Soto, reckoning, "There must be some doctor in the [U.S.] that can take care of this, and rapidly."

She fired off e-mails, scoured the Internet and made calls to prove her hunch. Private clinics weren't interested in freebies.

Walter Reed Army Medical Center had the facilities, but its treatment cycles didn't fit Soto's deadline. The hospital offered a name: Dr. Eve Feinberg.

She had trained at the National Institutes of Health but had enjoyed a close rapport with Walter Reed and now worked at a Chicago fertility center. Levesque called and outlined Soto's case, pressed the deadline and braced for another "no" to pro bono.

Instead, she called Soto and said: "I guess you guys are going to Chicago."

'She's lucky, in a sense'

The Army covered the flight to Chicago, where the couple met Feinberg, a reproductive endocrinologist with the Fertility Centers of Illinois.

The procedure normally would cost \$14,000. Feinberg's facility covered a single cycle of in vitro fertilization, including daily ultrasound monitoring, surgical egg harvesting and embryo freezing, about \$10,000. TRICARE defrayed the \$4,000 medication cost.

Feinberg moved quickly to meet the deadline. In two weeks, she created five embryos. Using the rapid-freezing method, or vitrification, the center has achieved pregnancy rates of 43 percent. "She's lucky, in a sense, that her egg age is that of a 32-year-old," Feinberg said. "The risks are related to the age she was when she froze her eggs. In her situation, she's lucky that she's not going to face the struggles a normal 37-year-old faces. She should be in a good situation."

Eight months have passed since Soto mentioned the lump. Doctors are monitoring another in her remaining breast. And something that shouldn't be in her lung also bears watching.

Her long blond mane is gone. Her faith in the future remains strong.

"I'm going to be a survivor," Soto said, "and in two years, I can carry my baby."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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