



### **My Journey – Lauren Race**

Growing up in a small town that consisted of mostly prisons, antique shops, and bars made it easy for any child to know that almost all activities were meant to be outdoor adventures. Whether it was swimming at the local pool, riding bikes, or swinging from ropes across a creek; they were all under the blistering Colorado sun. Back then, wearing sunscreen was advised but never forced. Oh, how I wish it was.

It all started before I was even in high school. I realized that my skin always turned into a beautiful tan after only a couple days of suffering sunburn. That was not a problem for me; beauty is pain, right? Any chance I had to roll up my pant legs and arm sleeves to let the sun beam down on me, I took. I can remember a handful of severe sunburns ranging from scabs on my shoulders, blisters on my legs, and even my lips, but that never stopped me. All these imperfections would go away, and I would soon have that perfect tan.

Not only did I love to feel the natural sun shine, but I loved the fact that I could get even better results from a tanning bed. I learned that lying in a tanning bed for just twenty minutes was equivalent to laying on a beach for four hours; so I made sure to include the twenty minute sessions of UV rays into my daily routine. Sometimes I would even let the time run out and start it all over again. After all, I wanted to have the best “glow” at prom, be the darkest on the volleyball court, and Lord knows, I couldn’t let my true shade show during the winter. Using tanning beds was a part of my life for nearly ten years. I was addicted. Nothing felt better to me than to lie in the warm bed, close my eyes, and doze off to wake up to an even darker complexion. It was just too easy.

I attended cosmetology school to become an esthetician-someone who works in skin care and is knowledgeable in the best ways to care for the epidermis, go figure. I remember the week we learned about skin disorders and diseases, a light bulb turned on in my head. We were going through the ABCDE’s of Melanoma, and I realized that a certain mole on top of my head had these exact characteristics, but still, I didn’t think to go to the doctor. No one ever thinks, “Why yes, this is probably cancer.” Just like when you have a tooth ache, the last thing you think about or want to do is go to the dentist.

A couple months had passed, and this mole was only getting worse. My grandma finally made it clear that I had to see a doctor, so I went just a couple days later. I explained to the dermatologist what this mole was doing. Whether it was oozing, bleeding, or peeling, something was not right. Without hesitation, the doctor insisted a biopsy be done. He numbed me and removed it faster than I could say, “Ouch.” One thing that still pops into my mind when I think about this appointment is near the end of the visit, he told me that he would pray for me. What? I’ve never heard a doctor say that. Did he know something was wrong?

About a week later, the phone finally rang and it was the call my family and I had been waiting for. We were sure it was nothing, that he would have only good news to tell us. How wrong we were. The mole he had removed was a Melanoma, a Stage 4 on the Clark Scale. He pointed us in the direction of a head and neck surgeon to have a wide excision done on my scalp, as well as a sentinel node biopsy.

Before this procedure, the surgeon was confident that there would be no spread. He told us there was only a twenty percent chance it would have gone anywhere. With this statistic, it was easy to feel the slightest bit of comfort. The surgery went well, but there we were again, waiting. Another week had passed, the phone rang, and everything changed. I remember like it was yesterday; he said, "We did an amazing job on your scalp, the margins were perfect and there was no Melanoma found. But, they did find a little Melanoma in the sentinel node." Getting that news once is hard enough, but twice? There are no words to explain. I was back under the knife exactly a month later for a complete neck dissection to remove all remaining lymph nodes, and I was officially a Stage III Melanoma patient.

Just nine days after the dissection, I was admitted to UCH in Denver for my first round of biochemotherapy, the most aggressive strategy against Melanoma. This consisted of three types of chemo, and two bio medicines. I was hospitalized for five days with a twenty-four hour drip. I would have two weeks in between cycles, so just enough time to feel almost normal, and then it was right back to where I started. I completed four of these cycles, and I am so thankful to know that biochemotherapy cannot be done twice. Nothing makes me happier than to know I will never have to go through that again.

Recovering was hard; I was weak, and I am still weak. But, my attitude and outlook have never been so strong. I never let the thought of death cross my mind; it was not an option. No matter how miserable I was, or how alone I felt, I knew that this was just a huge lesson for me, for people I love, and for people I'll soon meet. I couldn't have fought this battle without all the love and support from my family and friends, especially my mom and dad.

I strive to be a role model for others that have dealt with or who are dealing with Melanoma: patients, patients' families, friends, and neighbors, anyone who has been affected. Understanding this disease and how to prevent it is crucial, and I am ready to spread the awareness and make a difference. Know your skin. Check your skin. Love your skin.

Epilogue, August 12, 2014 – This was written in 2013. Lauren was flown in from Colorado, and spoke at our annual luncheon and fashion show; she was amazing. Lauren was doing well for about one year, and then had more surgeries and another aggressive round of chemotherapy. We keep hoping that Lauren can beat this and live a long and happy life. Her story is an inspiration, but most importantly, a warning for everyone, **NOT TO USE TANNING BEDS.**