

Erika's Story

Imagine taking the Grand Finale 4th of July Fireworks Show and having it contained in a teeny, tiny package, and then taking the top off and letting it rip.

That was Erika. From the minute she was born, she was a firecracker. She cried for the first 6 months because she did not like to stay put in one place. Once she could sit up and see the world, that magical smile showed up, and she wanted to move and see the world, walking at 8 ½ months. Once she was able to participate in school sports, she was a cheerleader and ran track and cross country in both middle school and high school and continued to run throughout her adult life. She loved anything to do with professional sports, especially her beloved Chicago Cubs and Chicago Bears! Rarely did you ever NOT see her sporting some type of hat, shirt, scarf, or even leggings with her team spirit proudly displayed. It did not matter whether she lived in Illinois, Canada, Florida, Tennessee, or Alabama (I did mention she did not like to stay put in one place, right?); her car always had a Chicago Bears license plate holder. Erika always wanted to become a teacher. She loved children and had an immense amount of patience and compassion, which made her perfect for this profession. She taught in Illinois, Florida, Tennessee (she secretly was sure she was going to marry Kenny Chesney and decided where better to meet him than in Nashville!), and Alabama, where she was the Biomedical and Biology Science teacher at New Century Technology High School in Huntsville, Alabama. In 2011, while she was coaching a track meet, she was introduced to the coach for the boys' team for the other school. Sparks flew in true firecracker fashion, and Mike and Erika were married on October 21, 2011. Mike has two sons, Bryce and Braden, from his first marriage, so Erika quickly became Super Stepmom! This was a perfect fit, with her love for children. Then in 2014, they welcomed Houston William Holt into the family, who quickly became Erika's "Mini-me". He has her beautiful eyes and compassionate soul. She was truly loving life.

When Erika was not teaching, she was coaching cheerleading and track, running a business selling fashion clothing for women, or preparing for her favorite holiday, Halloween. Every year she made matching costumes for her and Houston that could take first place in any contest, hands down. And more recently, Erika started participating in the Blossomwood Witches Ride to raise funds for school supplies for underprivileged children in Huntsville. After her first year of participating, she not only convinced her sisters to participate with her every year after that, but they did so dressed up as the Sanderson Sisters from Hocus Pocus. I am guessing by now you are understanding the first line of this bio.

Erika's Health

In 2014, Mike noticed a mole on Erika's back and mentioned she should have it looked at. A few weeks later it started to bleed and a friend of theirs, who is a Pathologist, also strongly persuaded her to "run", not walk, to a dermatologist. Enter Stage I melanoma into Erika's life, which after additional skin/tissue removal, was ultimately classified as Stage 2b (with ulcerative properties). Luckily, her lymph nodes were clear. For the next 5 years, Erika consistently went in for routine skin checks beginning with every 3 months, then moving to 6 months. In August of 2019, almost 5 years to the day after the first diagnosis, a mysterious cough caused her to go in for a chest x-ray showing a 2 cm mass in her lower right lung. The biopsy confirmed it was (BRAF+) melanoma and on August 20th, 2019, a cardiothoracic surgeon removed the tumor along with one-third of her right lung. She started immunotherapy immediately. Side effects placed Erika in the ER numerous times, but she refused to stop the treatments no matter how bad she felt. In March of 2020, a tumor surfaced in her spine, which she underwent radiation, and another surfaced in her pelvic bone, so more radiation. In 2021, a spot showed up in her left lung. She went in for a biopsy and ended up with a punctured lung, chest tube and 4-day hospital stay. A few months later she ended up in the ER for pneumonia where a CT scan showed tumors on her liver. The decision was made at that time to stop the immunotherapy and start the BRAF targeted therapy. Eighty percent of the people will go into immediate remission for about one year; then the tumors return. Twenty percent of the people stay in remission indefinitely. We prayed she was in the 20%. For the next 12 months, from September 2021-2022, Erika had the best year since initially fighting her battle. She not only felt the best physically, but she and Mike took their 10-year honeymoon trip, which had to be rescheduled due to her health, they took their kids on a Disney cruise, Erika spent 10 days in Canada to show Houston where she lived and was able to visit with all her friends, and she spent many weekends up north in Winneconne, Wisconsin with her sisters, brother, niece, nephews, aunt, mom and dad. It should be noted that while managing this disease, Erika was able to finish her master's degree in School Counseling. She wanted to help children that were underserved.

On September 25, 2022, one year after starting the BRAF therapy, Erika's CT scan showed a tumor in her hip. The targeted therapy was stopped so she could receive radiation on the tumor. Soon after she developed a cough, and by mid-October the cough was so bad they decided to perform another CT scan. The scan showed numerous tumors on the liver and both lungs. It was determined the BRAF therapy had indeed stopped working so a new immunotherapy treatment was in order. Erika's first dose of her new treatment was on November 3, 2022.

The following week her lungs became inflamed, which is a common side effect of immunotherapy, but this masked the underlying pneumonia infection which was causing the cough. On November 14th, 911 was called because Erika was not well. It turned out she was septic. Our family flew down, but by the time we could get to her she had to be intubated to take the strain off her heart. Septic shock caused multiple organ failure, so when we got to her, she was on complete life support. Twelve hours later we had to make the difficult decision to take her off the ventilator. Her lifelong firework show ended, but it was the most magnificent show you could ever imagine. As her Momma, I am humbled to have been there to see her enter this world and shattered to see her leave it.

Erika loved life so fiercely and touched so many lives. She accomplished more in her 45 years on this planet than most people in their entire lifetime. She lives on with her new niece, Brooklyn Therese, named after her Aunt, Erika Therese. And we know Erika. She is looking after all the children in heaven, singing Kenny Chesney songs, dancing to Whitney Houston, and cheering on her "*Sweet Hou*" with those piercing eyes and magnificent smile waiting to welcome us all home.

