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Denise DeMartino wears her Chemo for Demo T-shirt, the sales of which will help offset her medical bills.

Jake Breedlove

On the first day of school, crammed full of syllabi, new classes and summer stories, things couldn't get any more

normal. You walk down

the chemistry hall in search of your next period. But nothing could prepare you for what is to come. As you enter your class, a woman with bright pink hair wearing a black shirt with neon letters stands at a desk.

"Welcome to my class."

Last May, science teacher Denise DeMartino headed into what she thought would be a summer of travel and I-Present Summer Institutes. But on July 4, she became suspicious of a lump in her breast. The next month involved one doctor's appointment after another until she was officially diagnosed with breast cancer on Aug. 3. DeMartino had recently lost a sister-in-law and brother to cancer, so she was terrified about what might happen.

"The first thing you think about is, 'Oh my gosh, I'm gonna die,'" she said. "But, [to my oncologist] the idea of dying was never on the table. I wasn't at peace until I talked to [him]."

Upon diagnosis, DeMartino's cancer was a stage 2 invasive, ductal carcinoma. In basic terms, it means that the cancer has spread into surrounding tissue. This is the most common type of breast cancer, making up 70 to 80 percent of all cases.

She began her first chemotherapy treatment Aug. 11. Since then, she has finished her final of four chemo procedures known as the Red Devil Treatments — the most intense ones.

"Everyone I talked to, including my doctors, said that the Red Devils are the hardest of the treatments," DeMartino said. "The worst is the day after the treatments and three days following. [I experienced] very strong flu-like symptoms and nausea. It feels like you got hit by a truck, and I'm not exaggerating."

After just one treatment, the tumor responded. DeMartino then finished her first couple of treatments and the doctors said that the tumors are no longer palpable. They even had trouble locating them.

"I had a huge sense of relief that the worst was over," DeMartino said.

DeMartino is now doing weekly taxol infusions and is hoping to complete all 12 soon. Unlike the Red Devil Treatment which has two

drugs, the taxol infusions are just one drug that attacks the cancer in a different part of its replication process.

"The side effects are less difficult to deal with [compared to Red Devil Treatments]," DeMartino said. "My last treatment will be on Christmas Day."

With 15 to 20 doctor appointments a week, the early stages of her cancer were overwhelming. These days, other than occasionally being tired, DeMartino has noticed few adjustments to her everyday life.

"[Even when I'm tired], it's a manageable fatigue if I take a lot of naps," DeMartino said. "The biggest effect that cancer has had in my life is the amount of support from former students and teachers."

The news of DeMartino's cancer shocked her current and former students, but many expressed confidence in her strength.

"My favorite thing about DeMo is how real she keeps things," 2015 graduate Lulu Allen said. "She does not sugarcoat anything, which is refreshing. DeMo is a badass, and she is not going down without a fight. I have 100 percent confidence that DeMo can beat this cancer."

Allen had DeMartino for her junior and

FIGHT FUTURE

Westlake community comes together to support science teacher battling breast cancer

senior year, and they worked together on the prom committee. The love that DeMartino has for her students is obviously reciprocated. She has taught students to recognize their appreciation of science while simultaneously impacting their lives outside the classroom. Perhaps her influence contributed to her being named Westlake's Teacher of the Year last May.

"She's a passionate person and not just about teaching or her hobbies," said 2011 graduate Maya Hunt, who had DeMartino for AP and Organic Chemistry. "When you speak with her, she truly cares about you as a person and wants you to succeed. She's been one of the biggest inspirations in my life as I enter the science field as a woman."

DeMartino is a role model for many students, and she shows them that they can do anything they set their minds to.

"Any frustrations or doubts about myself that arose were eased by thinking about what DeMo would likely say," Maya said. "[DeMartino would say to me] 'Just do the damn thing, why are you worrying before you have to?' She never once doubted my abilities or intelligence."

DeMartino continues to help students and inspire them in many ways in her everyday life.

"DeMo is an amazing woman and an amazing teacher," senior Natalie Walker said. "I am so lucky to have her in my life. This woman has taken the extra mile to help me succeed in her class. She is such a role model to me. I hope one day I can be so wonderful at something I love doing."

DeMartino cannot imagine not teaching at Westlake and misses very few days despite her treatment schedule. She wears bandanas, hats and colorful wigs which show off her personality.

"I roll my eyes when people complain about silly things now," DeMartino said. "[When people say] 'Oh my hair is such a mess today, I need to get it dyed' while I'm thinking, at least you have hair."

DeMartino's diagnosis affected both her students and her friends. Jenna Nelson, who is DeMartino's roommate, fellow teacher and close friend, was devastated upon hearing the news of DeMartino's diagnosis. Nelson has been friends with DeMartino for seven years and made the initial doctor's appointment to see if anything was out of the ordinary. After DeMartino was officially diagnosed, Nelson was there for her friend.

"It was hard to balance being scared and trying to be strong for her," Nelson said.

She and DeMartino came up with a slogan to help focus on what's important during this situation. It's called "Forward." They made it to help themselves focus on the future rather than what has happened in the past. Besides this, Nelson believes that DeMartino is a fighter and a champion.

"She could be having the worst day and have just gone through the hardest treatments but always puts friends, students and colleagues first," Nelson said.

Working together, DeMartino and her fellow teachers set up a website, youcaring.com/chemofordemo, that gives updates about her well-being to those who are concerned. It also has a fund set up to help pay for her medical bills and once you donate to that fund you get a 'Chemo for DeMo' shirt which can be seen worn all around the campus. In addition, students in National Honor Society are selling shirts to members of the club and all the profits are going to DeMartino's fund.

This whole journey has been a humbling experience for DeMartino.

"It is flabbergasting to me how many students from years past reached out and told me what kind of a difference I made on their lives," DeMartino said. "It really motivated me and gave me a new appreciation for what I do every day. It makes me want to fight this and continue what I do as teacher. It reinvigorated my love of teaching."

—Amanda Goldsmith

By her side

Chemo For Demo is an organization that supports chemistry teacher Denise DeMartino in her fight against breast cancer. A support group of present and former students, staff and many other community members are representing and aiding DeMo as she overcomes obstacles.

If you would like to support DeMo or buy a Chemo For Demo T-shirt, you can donate at her website:

[youcaring.com/
chemofordemo](http://youcaring.com/chemofordemo)