

Brain work



Chris Richards/Special to the News

'I've been given a second chance at life,' says Elizabeth Holzemer, with daughter Hannah and husband Mark.

Highlands Ranch woman adds her survival story to a growing list

By Elizabeth Holzemer

Special to the News

The ball shall be a sphere formed by yarn wound around a small core of cork, rubber or similar material. ... It shall weigh no less than 5 nor more than 5¼ ounces and measure no less than 9 nor more than 9¼ inches in circumference.

I am familiar with this definition. My husband, Mark Holzemer, is a professional baseball player for the Arizona Sidewinders. As a pitcher for the past 14 seasons, Mark has spent a lot of time manipulating that 5-ounce sphere. I've grown as comfortable recognizing its size and shape as he has, whether in a ballpark or sitting on a shelf in our Highlands Ranch basement.

So the coincidence wasn't lost on us when we learned I had something similarly sized growing inside me.

It was just more than two years ago that I had a baseball-size brain tumor removed. I further overcame the odds by becoming a mother a short time later and today am enjoying raising my infant daughter, Hannah.

But the chain of events that led to my life-altering discovery still sometimes seems inconceivable.

After five years of marriage, my husband and I decided to start a family. It was March 1999, and I had just finished taking my last packet of birth-control pills. I was told to expect irregular periods for several months as my body adjusted to being off the pill.

Months went by without a cycle. That summer, my doctor ordered blood work, ruled out thyroid problems and told me to

reduce strenuous exercise and increase my caloric intake. More months went by. I went through three rounds of drugs in an attempt to jump-start my periods. Still nothing.

In December 1999, I was referred to a fertility specialist, who said I had a disorder that prevented my ovaries

from releasing eggs. He said I might have a noncancerous pituitary tumor, but that could be overcome by taking hormone injections as part of my fertility treatment. Mark and I agreed we would pursue this option in January.

I mulled it over during the holidays and became increasingly unsettled. It had been almost a year, and I still wasn't having periods. I began having migraine headaches. Soon, I was hearing

For information:

For more information on brain tumors and research, call the American Brain Tumor Association at (800) 886-2282 or visit its site at www.abta.org.

For more information on brain-tumor clinical trials, call the National Cancer Institute's Information Center at (800) 422-6237 or visit www.cancer.gov.

Tumor might have been 10 years old

ELIZABETH from 3D

swishing sounds in my right ear before bed and when I woke up. It sounded like my head was stuck in a washing machine. I also began noticing frequent *deja vu* sensations; I would later discover they were caused by partial seizures.

The red flags caught my attention, and I told my doctor during a gynecological exam in January that I wanted a pituitary tumor to be ruled out before beginning hormone treatments. My doctors conferred and finally agreed to schedule an MRI.

The day after the imaging test of my head, I awoke to a life-altering phone call. My fertility doctor said that there was no sign of a pituitary tumor but that there was something more serious. "You have a meningioma," he said.

"How do you even spell that?" was all I could think at first. Although it was benign, I soon learned how serious my situation was.

Surgery would be risky, as my tumor was in a delicate place affecting three critical areas: the optic nerve, the carotid artery and the sinus cavity. My pituitary gland appeared to be normal, but the thalamus and stalk were compressed by the tumor, most likely explaining why I had stopped menstruating.

Because of its enormous size, it was suspected that the tumor had been my brain's roommate for as long as 10 years. The majority of meningiomas are benign and are most common among those in their 40s. I was 32.

My doctor at the Colorado Neurological Institute said I was lucky. He painted a grim picture: Mark could have tried to wake me one morning only to find me in a coma, he said. While there are no known causes of brain tumors, doctors said birth-control pills could have played a role in mine.

The size and pressure of my tumor was so great that it had actually shifted my brain. I felt numb as the doctor explained the black-and-white pictures. The images of a glaring white mass on the MRI films were difficult to accept.

I asked myself how this could have happened. I'm a healthy, active person. I love to hike and walk. I couldn't possibly be harboring a life-threatening tumor if I could lead a normal lifestyle, could I? I was scared for myself and for Mark.

I met with a team of doctors who didn't want to waste any more time. Eight days after my diagnosis, I would undergo seven hours of surgery to remove the tumor that had invaded my brain and my life.

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I was warned of the risks, including blindness, cognitive deficits, facial paralysis, left-sided weakness — even death. I also faced the possibility that doctors would be unable to remove the entire tumor.

The last image I had before being wheeled into the operating room was of Mark holding hands with friends and relatives, who encircled me as they recited the Lord's Prayer. During a last minute alone with Mark, he promised me the next time I'd be in a hospital would be to give birth to our son or daughter. Then he said goodbye.

I don't remember coming to or telling the doctor that I could move the left side of my body. My only recollection is begging for ice to quell the raw, fiery sensations in my throat. And then Mark was by my side, saying hello.

Six days later I was released from the hospital to begin my recuperation at home. The support was overwhelming.

Everyone came together. Neighbors organized huge dinners for two weeks after my surgery. Mark and I joked that we'd have to put another refrigerator in the garage.

The most difficult part of my recovery was when Mark left for spring training in Florida. Before he left, he drew up a calendar, ensuring that each week was covered by a friend or family member until I would meet him in Pennsylvania for the rest of the season.

Within an hour of saying our goodbyes, my childhood best friend flew in from North Carolina. She pam-

pered me with manicures, pedicures, nightly massages and homemade meals. Before she left, she gave me a letter, which I keep on my nightstand. Here is a sample of her words:

"Remember to feed your soul — if only for a few minutes each day — be it through prayer, meditation, music, reading, or finding what to be thankful for each day. You are a wonderful gift and have been given the gift of life, so enjoy it. Live each day to its fullest."

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The next May, I was reunited with Mark after a long two months. I started sleeping again. I seemed to be doing better until I noticed that a scab along my incision wasn't healing. The day after meeting with a neurosurgeon in June, I was undergoing brain surgery again to alleviate the risk of infection. I didn't think I could make it through such an ordeal again, but I did. At the end of September, I had my first period in 18 months. I never thought I'd be so happy to have cramps again.

I never thought I'd feel as I do today. I remember months of not being able to focus, the frustration of constantly looking up words in the dictionary I knew how to spell, the lack of concentration required to read a newspaper or a book.

I remember the physical deficits: the exhaustion I felt from just taking a shower, my clothes not fitting like they used to and the shock of being bald on one side of my head. I can now look in the mirror and smile. My hair has grown back, camouflaging a scar that resembles an upside-down question mark.

My biggest miracle occurred last Sept. 6. That is when my daughter, Hannah Elizabeth, was born. My quest to become a mother, which led to the discovery of my tumor, had at last come full circle. I've been given a second chance at life, and I plan to relish every moment of it.

Elizabeth Holzemer is a Highlands Ranch resident. Her husband, Mark Holzemer, is a Littleton native and plays for the Arizona Sidewinders.