

IRONWOMAN

BY KRISTIN M. SIMONETTI '05



photo by Ben Torres

Dave Young calls his good friend and fellow triathlete **Maura Guthrie '87 G'92** the “world’s oldest teenager.” She has infectious enthusiasm, razor-sharp wit, and a love of adventure and new challenges. You can see it in her smile.

“There’s a little bit of mischief behind it,” says Young, who serves on the board of USA Triathlon’s South Midwest Region. “How do you not smile and feel good about yourself when Maura smiles at you?”

Guthrie wore that smile last November as she crossed the finish line of the Florida Ironman Triathlon in Panama City, after swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112 miles and running 26.2 miles. She finished in near darkness among the last of the race’s competitors, and many of the spectators had long since gone home. On that day, the smile may have been less of mischief and more of relief. Though Guthrie had plenty of Ironman finishes to her credit, this was the first she’d finished since learning she had high-grade infiltrating ductal

carcinoma, an extremely aggressive form of breast cancer.

She learned of the diagnosis on March 17, 2010. Her birthday.

“I didn’t really tell anyone because I thought, ‘Well, it’s over. My life is over. I might fight for a couple of months or a year, but I probably won’t live through this,’” Guthrie recalls.

But despair isn’t really Guthrie’s thing. Action is. She realized that, though the details differed and the stakes in this case were higher than any she’d ever faced, she’d been at similar crossroads before.

Like when she was cut from the volleyball team at Penn State and found herself unhappy, struggling in the environment of a large university. She could have chosen to gut it out.

Instead, she came to Elon, where she enjoyed what she calls “one of my notable happy times in my life.”

Like when she found herself in the middle of a successful career with AT&T, but after 12 years became uncomfortable in the corporate largesse and longed for an opportunity to help clients on a personal level. She could have stayed on her lucrative career path with AT&T. Instead, she established a thriving financial planning business and now serves as a first vice president for UBS in Dallas, Texas.

Like when she attended her first World Duathlon Championships in 2005 and found herself completely outmatched by her competition, even her American teammates. She could have given up on the sport. Instead, she used the experience as motivation to build herself into an elite endurance athlete.

“Throughout your life, you should make assessments of yourself. Ask yourself, ‘Is this the best I can do? Am I happy?’” she says. “Instead of being in an unhappy situation for a long time, you need to make immediate adjustments.”

For Guthrie, the cancer diagnosis offered

another crossroads. She could have accepted the hand she'd been given. Instead, she decided to fight.

She found inspiration in a fellow triathlete, Bronda Starling, who competed in Guthrie's age group in the USA Triathlon South Midwest Region. Like Guthrie, Starling received a devastating cancer diagnosis, but that didn't stop her from racing in duathlons. Even when she had surgery during the week to remove tumors, Starling was out on the course the following weekend, biking and running.

"I'd watch this crazy girl race with staples in her head, and I'd think to myself, 'I want to be like that if anything happens to me,'" Guthrie says of Starling, who died in July 2008. "Well, you get what you ask for."

Determined to maintain the lifestyle she loved, Guthrie worked closely with her doctors to develop a treatment plan that allowed her to continue working, training and competing.

"The doctors were totally amazed at her response," Young says of Guthrie. "She wasn't breaking down in the office, weeping and crying. She was saying: 'Let's get going. What do we have to do?'"

But the answer to that question was less than clear.

"I'd ask the doctors, 'Am I still allowed to run?' I was still running a 10K a day," Guthrie recalls. "They'd answer, 'I don't know, do you feel like you can?' There just are no studies to guide this kind of situation.

"At the end of the day, the answer was, 'We don't know. Go for it.' So I did."

Guthrie underwent three surgeries to remove tumors in April and May 2010, competing in the St. George (Utah) Ironman between the last two.

Then came the chemotherapy. Before beginning treatments, she read Lance Armstrong's memoir, *It's Not About the Bike*, in which she learned to carefully research the side effects of chemotherapy drugs. She and her doctors settled on a protocol called ACT—it stands for the drugs Adriamycin, Cytosin and Taxol—that spares the lungs, which are crucial to an endurance athlete, but can damage the heart.

"My heart is really strong, I work on it all the time," she says of the choice. "Chances were that I could dodge that bullet."

Guthrie kept training and competing, against the recommendations of some family members such as her sister, Cathy Wilder. Wilder, who lives in Fort Worth, Texas, about

an hour from Guthrie's Dallas home, stood by her sister's side for each doctor's appointment and every race.

"There were times that Maura had to slow down. I'd watch her run races in pain, but I never saw her consider not competing," Wilder says. "I was in awe of Maura so many times."

Guthrie raced in July at the 2010 Duathlon Nationals in Oklahoma City during her eighth week of chemotherapy. But later that month, the treatments had weakened her body so much that she fell severely ill and required hospitalization. The illness precluded her from competing in the Long-Distance Triathlon World Championships in Immenstadt, Germany, which she'd qualified for long before her cancer diagnosis.

It would have been a perfect time for doubts to creep in. But Guthrie insists they didn't.

"I didn't want my life to change," she says. "I wasn't looking for an excuse to sit on the couch."

She resumed training as soon as the doc-

news: an MRI of her heart showed the ACT had not damaged the organ. She celebrated by traveling to Cozumel, Mexico, to compete in her fourth Ironman of the year.

At the USA Triathlon South Midwest Region annual banquet in January, Young introduced his good friend, Guthrie, before she received the region's Phoenix Award. The award recognizes competitors who rise above significant adversity to compete, volunteer or participate in the tight-knit athletics community.

"You need inspiration? You need a reason to get out of your comfort zone to try something new? You need an example of spunk and fight and perseverance to overcome your own personal adversity?" Young asked in his speech. "Then I give you Maura Guthrie."

Though honored by the award, Guthrie prefers to stay away from the spotlight. She considers the chapter of her life that was 2010 closed, and she's looking forward to a year of relative normalcy. But she hopes that when she does share her story, as she has for this article,



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tors allowed it. In August, she competed in but didn't finish the Louisville, Ky., Ironman. At the end of August, the chemo treatments ended, but radiation treatments began. In late September, she competed in the USA Triathlon Nationals and performed well enough to qualify for a spot on Team USA for the 2011 Triathlon World Championships in Beijing, China.

In November, Guthrie crossed the finish line of the Florida Ironman, but she'd also come to the end of another ordeal—her treatments. The tumors were gone, and in a December checkup, Guthrie got more good

her words offer support and hope for those going through difficult circumstances.

"Change your life whenever you're unhappy, and don't wait," she says. "Somebody could be telling you tomorrow that you have five years to live. You're going to be really sad if you didn't live it the way you wanted to live it."

In March, Guthrie returned to the hospital to have her one-year review with her doctors. She had only one request.

"I asked the doctors to wait to do the tests until after my birthday. I want to enjoy it this year," she says.

You could hear the smile in her voice. 🍷