

Unprotected People #91 Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Christine Baze's Story

PopSmear.org is a Boston-based non-profit organization whose purpose is to raise awareness and educate women about how to prevent cervical cancer and HPV. PopSmear.org was created in 2002 by Christine Baze, a Boston musician who is also a cervical cancer survivor. She was just 31 years old when she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. In recognition of her educational and outreach efforts, Ms. Magazine named Baze in their annual award: "50 women who made a difference."

Christine Baze gave IAC permission to share her personal story:

I'm supposed to be a rock star — that's what I thought until April 18th, 2000. I had just left my day job in January to pursue my passion: music. My band was doing well and I could not have been happier, but then there was blood. I called my gynecologist and he told me not to worry. So I didn't. I went on gigging and booking and writing songs—the best 3 months ever. I was so happy and felt so lucky. Little did I know it would not last.

In March, I went for my yearly Pap test. I've had yearly Paps since I was 18 years old, and always had normal results, until this one. I was told that I had some dysplastic cell growth on my cervix and that he needed to do a colposcopy to biopsy the cells. I barely knew where my cervix was and certainly didn't understand anything about cell mutation—that's when I was told it could turn into cancer many years down the road if not treated. Cancer? Me? He assured me that I did NOT have cancer and that we would meet the following week to review the results of this biopsy and schedule a LEEP procedure [loop electrosurgical excision procedures], a mild surgery that would scrape off the bad cells.

He was wrong. At 8:15 the morning of April 18th, I received a phone call confirming an appointment

I did not have, with a doctor I did not know. Realizing I had not heard the news yet, the woman apologized on the other line, and stumbled over her words as she told me she was confirming an appointment with a gynecologic oncologist at a local cancer center. That's how I found out I had cancer.

It all happened very quickly after that. I was diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer with extensive lymphatic invasion. I had a radical hysterectomy 10 days after my diagnosis, a laparoscopic procedure a month later to move my ovaries out of the "frying zone," 5 weeks of daily pelvic radiation concurrent with 4 rounds of chemotherapy, followed by 3 rounds of internal radiation (brachytherapy). They gave me everything they had in order to save me. Within 4 months I was done with everything. Everything other than the deep dark depression, that is.

Everyone knows that treatment is hard, and everyone sees the toll it takes on your body. But for me, I think the depression that followed was almost worse. Once my body was no longer being assaulted, my mind started to digest all that had happened, and it wasn't pretty. I felt like I lost everything. And through it all, the one thing that always centered me, that always made me happy, was gone. The music was gone. I couldn't play, sing, or write. I had no desire for the thing I loved the most. I didn't know who I was anymore.

I decided to attack with full force: Individual therapy, group therapy, anti-depressant, acupuncture, yoga, journaling, Reiki, and more. I did anything I could to fight off the depression, and eventually it started to work. Time, absolutely was a huge part of it. Time, and the fact that I just refused to quit. I had worked way too hard to stay alive, and I wanted my life back.

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By the fall of 2001, I finally got back to my day job, felt strong physically and emotionally, but still hadn't found the music. I sort of felt like that side of me was gone, it left with my uterus and was never returning. But then I saw the movie "Harold and Maude." Maude is an older woman who embraces everything there is to embrace in life. Every sensation—touch, taste, smell—she lives in the moment and teaches this young boy Harold how to do the same. I was completely inspired by Maude's spirit and enthusiasm, as well as the Cat Stevens soundtrack. I heard the song "trouble" and was drawn back to the piano—I felt like the song had been written for me, that it was the story of the last year and a half of my life. This is when I returned to the piano.

Since then, my life has brought me all kinds of new and wonderful experiences. I decided I wanted to give back to the cancer community by raising money and awareness so other women don't have to go through what I did. I decided to do a benefit concert and call it "PopSmear." I was going to do it in my back yard, but soon it spiraled into a great big event. Jim's Big Ego, The Mudhens, and Catie Curtis all agreed to perform. Amy Brooks from WBOS emceed the night. We sold out the Paradise Rock Club in Boston and raised \$10,000 for the cause! It was truly one of the best nights of my life as a person, as a musician, and as a cancer survivor.

In 2003, I decided to take it on the road, created The Yellow Umbrella Tour, and went to six cities. Ms. Magazine named me one of the "50 women who made a difference in 2003." I've done the Tour every year since, and we have hit 86 cities, raising awareness and educating women about cervical cancer, HPV, and the modern technologies available to help women feel confident in maintaining their cervical health.

It is so important that women understand that cervical cancer is caused by HPV—a virus—and that there are new, fantastic technologies to help prevent it. Now there is an HPV vaccine to prevent the majority of cases of cervical cancer (for girls and women 9-26), there is an HPV test that can be done at the same time as your Pap (for women 30+), and there is a better Pap (a liquid Pap, for all

women). These technologies were not available for me, but they are available today, and can totally PREVENT cervical cancer. My case is the perfect example that the standard Pap is NOT enough, because even though I had my annual gyn visit every year, the Pap test missed the cell changes year after year (squamous cell cancers take 5-10 years to develop). The Pap can be wrong up to 50% of the time. But the liquid Pap in combination with the HPV test is almost 100% accurate. And the HPV test is the ONLY way you can know if you are carrying the virus BEFORE it becomes invasive, which is why it is so important to know your HPV status. It's amazing and every woman should know about it.

So my message is clear:

- Every woman (9-26) should get the HPV vaccine.
- Every woman (18+) should get screened with the liquid Pap.
- Every woman (30+) should be screened with the HPV test along with the liquid Pap

Ladies: Don't blow off your annual gyn visit. Go in and have a conversation with your doctor. Learn the facts about cervical health, be proactive and empowered. Protect yourself with the vaccine, and then continue screening with the best — a liquid Pap and HPV test.

I feel so fortunate to be given this opportunity to share my story, share my music, and make a difference. I'm grateful to all the sponsors, volunteers, friends, and family for their support and love. When people believe in what they are doing, wonderful things can happen, and this is a wonderful thing.

Thanks for the support.

Christine Baze

For more information about Christine and her organization PopSmear, go to www.popsmeat.org/