HUMANS
OF THE 904
The Donna Foundation’s story started with cancer, but this isn’t a “cancer” story. When you meet Donna Deegan, you quickly learn that being a three-time cancer survivor is not what defines her.

“My mantra is love over fear. That means getting up every day grateful for the opportunity to live and breathe. I don’t feel defined by cancer anymore than I feel defined by being a journalist, or my foundation,” Donna said. “My goal every day is simply to find the joy in whatever comes my way that day and to do as much as I can to share that joy with others.”

Anyone who meets Donna gets the impression that she crosses off goals on a list like it’s her job. So it’s not surprising to learn that she describes herself as “type A.” Growing up in Jacksonville, she went to Bishop Kenny High School and then on to FSU where she studied communications and journalism. She knew from the time she was in 5th grade that she wanted to be a journalist and excelled in broadcasting. She graduated and took her first job in Tallahassee, went to West Palm Beach for work, and then back to Jacksonville, which had been her goal all along.

In Jacksonville, Donna started as a weekend anchor and eventually became the nightly news anchor for First Coast News. Her passions were politics and investigative reporting and then, after giving birth to her second child, running.

“I was like Forrest Gump, once I started I never stopped,” she said about running.

Had cancer not shown up, this story would be about a determined marathon runner who had an impressive 30-year career in journalism. But, cancer did happen.

In 1999, Donna was diagnosed with breast cancer and said that at the time, it didn’t really register as something life-threatening. She scheduled the surgery and went through chemo and radiation, which she referred to as “the atomic bomb on the ant hill.” But once treatment was over, she didn’t look back. With two young children at home, she was focused on them, her career and the community.

However, a little over two years later, the cancer came back, and this time it was in one of her lymph nodes.

“I told my news director, ‘I don’t want to talk about this on television again,’” Donna said. So after seeing a friend’s online journal, Donna and her news director agreed she should start “Donna’s Journal.”

The journal is where her story really begins. It was on the blog that she began sharing her treatment and struggles with cancer, and connecting with women who were struggling, too. For some of those women, their struggles were compounded by financial instability, high medical bills and a total lack of support.

“I heard from women who said ‘I can’t choose between putting food on the table and buying my medicine. I’m going to feed my family,’” Donna said. “I thought, maybe I can start using this megaphone attached to my mouth to spread some good.”

That megaphone ended up becoming the Donna Foundation. She began inviting people to join her for runs, selling T-shirts, and coaching others to run marathons, with all proceeds going to help women with breast cancer.

From there, she began brainstorming ways to help on a larger scale with her oncologist and running partner, Dr. Edith Perez. They thought about starting a race when they realized...
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there was no marathon for breast cancer. So, the Donna 26.2 was born and has become the Foundation’s main fundraising event.

Clear from cancer with the Donna Foundation up and running and a marathon on the horizon, it seemed Donna had turned a bad situation into an amazing story.

But then it happened a third time, and this time the cancer was in her left lung, Donna describes leaving her appointment, getting into her car and thinking, “This is probably it.”

After a successful surgery to remove the cancer, she began another round of chemo.

“[I didn’t have] internal joy and most type-A people don’t. We are so focused on the next rung that we aren’t focused on what’s in front of us,” she said.

But beating cancer required more than determination or reaching a goal. She needed to shift her focus.

“You shift that sense from being one of fear to love and it will change your life,” she said. “After the third time when I was truly faced with a dire situation, I knew I didn’t want to spend whatever time I had left in fear, so I started to pursue pathways to peace. The goal was to change the channel in my brain, get rid of the constant fearful chatter on the inside.”

That mindset was evident as she prepared to run the first Donna 26.2. Only months after her third diagnosis and halfway through a chemo treatment that left her hands and feet covered in blisters, she stepped up to the starting line with her husband and doctor beside her. The plan had been to relay the race, but Donna ran the entire thing saying, “I never felt my feet touch the ground.”

Today, Donna has been cancer-free for 11 years and the Donna Foundation is currently funding groundbreaking research at Mayo Clinic and helping underserved women across the U.S.

This story might have started with cancer, but it’s certainly not how it ends. After talking with Donna, you get the sense that really, she’s just getting started. It seems that cancer was only the first chapter in her journey to joy.

The Donna Foundation’s mission is to provide financial assistance and to support those living with breast cancer and fund groundbreaking breast cancer research. To learn more or donate, visit thedonnafoundation.org.