

ST. HELENA

Living

**MEET
ELIZABETH
AND SOPHIA
NAYLOR.**



POWERED BY
BVM
BEST VERSION MEDIA

LOVE WHERE YOU LIVE. SUPPORT LOCAL BUSINESSES.

ELIZABETH NAYLOR:

A warrior, a survivor,
and a valued member
of our community



BY JULIE MITCHELL • PHOTO CREDIT: PAOLA AVAZAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Naylor is tough. Not as in a muscle-bound bully but as in a warrior. In 2021, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she has fought it bravely. Elizabeth shares her story as well as her courage and determination as a mother, a cancer survivor, and a cancer-care advocate.

Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Elizabeth was the youngest of 13 children—six brothers and six sisters—and when she was 13 she moved with her family to Florida. She went to the University of Florida to study business. “I decided to take a semester off and visit my sister in Yosemite,” she divulges. “I went for the summer and stayed for five years.” Elizabeth worked as a tour guide during her first summer, followed by a role as a wine steward. “I experienced winters as a kid,” she notes, “but I remember waking up in Yosemite one morning, walking out to my car, which was buried in snow, and cross-country skied to work!”

After her chilly stint in Yosemite, Elizabeth moved with a friend to San Diego but soon realized it wasn't for her. A year to the date after that, she packed up her U-Haul and moved north to Napa Valley in 1995. She explains, “I started working at Sequoia Grove Vineyards,

and that's where I met my daughter's dad, Michael. We were together for 13 years. The love of our lives, Sophia Madelyn, was born in 2004. In 1998, I had gone back to school to receive my degree in design to complement my existing business degree, and I had started 'An Event to Remember,' a wedding and event-planning business. Since I had done some event work in Yosemite, it came as second nature to me. But once Sophia was born, I went from facilitating nearly 52 weddings a year to about five. I just didn't want to be away from her!”

In 2013, Elizabeth met Andy Florsheim, the owner of Goose & Gander, and he asked her to come aboard as a consultant. “They had an events person there,” she notes, “but I ultimately took that position over until COVID-19, and then I was furloughed. Shortly after that, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I didn't plan on going back to Goose & Gander and had already reached out to Kevin Love, who, at the time, played for the Cleveland Cavaliers. He now plays for the Miami Heat. I knew I wanted to give back, to help people. We had a call scheduled for August 5, 2021 but due to my diagnosis, I told him we needed to put the call on hold. And then I went into treatment.” Elizabeth has a deep connection to many professional basketball players.

Elizabeth tells us that talking about the story of her cancer discovery gives her chills. She recounts the night before she found out. "I've known my best friend, Julie, since we were five years old. She lives in Colorado and was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2020, had surgeries, but didn't have to go through chemotherapy or radiation. We hadn't seen each other in person in 22 years. So, I flew to Colorado, and we went to her ranch. The first night, we drank wine and laughed and cried. The next day, we went horseback riding which we used to do as children, and I went to bed that night, woke up at 12:35 in the morning, and put my hand on my left breast—where the cancer was—although I didn't know it at the time. I could not feel a lump. The next morning, I told Julie in her kitchen, 'There's something wrong.' I just knew. After I flew home, I had a mammogram and a biopsy. Seven days later, I was standing on aisle four at the Safeway in St. Helena when I got a phone call, and I asked, 'Do I have cancer?' And they said, 'Yes, you do!'"

Elizabeth had had a mammogram that came back clear eight months earlier. She explains, "The doctor who looked at it said it would have been trying to find a polar bear in a whiteout as I have dense breast tissue. If anyone reading this has dense breasts, ask for an ultrasound, even with a mammogram, because it could save your life."

One of Elizabeth's sisters, Madelyn, passed away from breast cancer in 2004, a month before Sophia Madelyn was born. Out of precaution, prior to her diagnosis, Elizabeth had tested for the BRCA gene and learned that she was not at risk genetically. The cause of Elizabeth's breast cancer diagnosis has been determined to be environmental. "As difficult as it was to get the news of my cancer diagnosis on August 3, to this day, August 4 remains the most difficult day of my life because that's the day I told my daughter."

Elizabeth's 16-year-old daughter had been on a trip with her father and wanted to tell her mother all about it. "So," sighs Elizabeth, "we sat right here on my couch, and I listened, and then I told Sophia that Dad and I had something to talk to her about. Her dad and I hadn't been together for 12 years, but we're committed to raising our child together. One of the greatest things happened at that moment. Michael turned to Sophia and said, 'Your mom is the strongest woman I know; she will beat this! I watched the color leave my daughter's face.'"

Her parents decided to get Sophia into therapy so she could speak with somebody impartial; they wanted her to be able to talk about it. "Nothing was off the table," states Elizabeth. "We discussed everything; it was a very open topic, and she was free to ask questions."

There were more bumps in the road for Elizabeth. The medical facility that had performed her first breast cancer surgery, had misdiagnosed her. She had a lumpectomy, and when she came out of surgery, the doctors told her everything had gone well, with no surprises. When Elizabeth went back a week later, however, the doctor said her tumor was over five centimeters, and they had removed four lymph nodes. "I vomited into my mask," Elizabeth tells us, "I ripped it off, started screaming, and said, 'Why would you tell me there were no surprises?' And the doctor's exact words were, 'We didn't want to upset you.' And I told them I was never coming back."

That misdiagnosis led Elizabeth to the Martin-O'Neil Cancer Center at Adventist St. Helena Hospital—one of the nation's top cancer centers—and to oncologist Dr. Ethan Schram. "Dr. Schram and I were friends before," she says, "and he called me that night after a friend of ours had told him what happened. He said, 'I need your scans.' I said on the phone to Dr. Schram, 'Am I going to die?' And he told me, not today. He connected me with one of the country's best breast surgeons, Dr. Charles Elboim. In their first meeting, Dr. Elboim told Elizabeth that things would progress quickly, and within 12 days, he scheduled her for a mastectomy during which he also removed 21 lymph nodes. Seven days later, she had a port placed for chemotherapy, which started a week later.

"Dr. Elboim is now retired, and I stay in touch with him," Elizabeth continued, "and Dr. Schram not only saved my life through connecting me to Dr. Elboim, but also through his ongoing support and oncology care. Both doctors were my two angels, and I don't know where I'd be without either of them." Elizabeth also consulted with Dr. Elboim's Breast Navigator, Marlene Lennon, on nutrition, her overall state of mind, her expectations, and what she needed.

To get the care she needed from top-notch breast cancer specialists, Elizabeth had to advocate for herself with Covered California insurance. For her surgery at St. Helena Hospital, she had to switch to Blue Shield. She had a total of six months of chemotherapy, 30 rounds of radiation, and five surgeries. She was denied disability pay because she had been furloughed. Elizabeth discloses, "I called the Governor's office 297 times and left messages. I called the media; I went to the Employment Development Department so many times they should have charged me rent. I had used my entire life savings, but low and behold, one day, I got a call, and the state reimbursed me for less than one third of my treatment expenses."

Elizabeth considers what she's taken away from having cancer. "One thing I've learned about myself in the 55 years I've had on this earth is that I'm truly about 'How can I help?,' a trait I got from my Mom. When I was sitting alone in an infusion room during the pandemic, it turned out to be a blessing. Because I spent a lot of time with myself. I wrote letters to each of my siblings in my journal. I listened to patients who were really sick in the infusion room, and I was heartbroken. There was a gentleman next to me. I couldn't see him, but I heard him. He was in his 70s and lived in Lake County. He had to get up at 5:00 a.m. to get on a bus to the cancer center for an eight-hour infusion.

Then he'd get back on the shuttle after 5:00 p.m. and wouldn't get home until after 9:00. He did this three to five times a week. And I thought, 'That's got to change.' I didn't know how I would do it, but I knew that if I got well, I would do it."

One of the side effects of the chemotherapy was Elizabeth losing her hair despite wearing a cold cap to prevent it, which resulted in another discussion with Sophia. "I asked her if it would be okay if I shaved my head," recalls Elizabeth. I always wore a beanie and am grateful I went through chemotherapy in the winter." She marvels at how prepared the cancer center was to help with nausea and other side effects like the loss of nails and hair. She shares that when she went





in for infusions, she always brought a lunch: a turkey sandwich, chips, blueberries, and cucumber slices with ranch dressing. "I never got super sick," she says. "I rinsed my mouth with peroxide and water; I put vitamin E on my nails and never got a mouth sore or lost a nail. I don't know why it went that way, and I'm glad because I didn't want to be seen as a victim."

Elizabeth had the help of her siblings and the community during her treatment and recovery. She remembers her sister coming in one day and saying, "Do you know this person?" and I said, "I think he lives in town." And she replied, "Well, he just brought flowers and a \$200 gift card to Sunshine Market! People would just show up. I realized how special our community is; in a way, cancer gave me a sense of purpose to realize how much community means to me."

Elizabeth was barely out of treatment when she started working with Crush Cancer Napa Valley. She knew she was ready for the next chapter after doing events as a career and wanted to support others coping with cancer. She notes that many people need financial support, education, and how to find and manage caregivers. "Other cancer survivors staff Crush Cancer Napa Valley; we're there to provide education, resources, and the support and services patients need as they navigate their cancer journeys. Our long-term goal is to offer workshops and to expand Crush Cancer beyond Napa Valley. When you're in treatment, you're taken care of, often five days a week, and you're fighting. Finally, you go home, and then what? You're supposed

just to get back to your life? But I woke up crying one morning, and I cried for a week. There is a grieving process that happens; I had to grieve for my old self. Everyone's cancer journey is different. We are there to hold your hand or not hold your hand, whatever you need."

Crush Cancer Napa Valley is a non-profit foundation led by cancer survivors. Elizabeth was named Executive Director of the organization last October. She has yet to make a salary, nor does her co-director Jane Ehrman. They are building a team that includes volunteer professionals in marketing and strategic communications.

While Elizabeth is no longer on chemotherapy and has zero cancer in her body, she is still a patient. She has labs drawn every three months and is currently on two medications long term. Some of the side effects Elizabeth endures are joint pain and fatigue. She motivates herself to walk two to three miles daily. "I'm so grateful to Dr. Schram," she states, "because he stays on top of my care. But you have to be your own advocate as well. I don't think about cancer coming back, but if it does, I know we can deal with it. Right now, what I'm doing gives me a sense of purpose in the world. I live joyfully and happily every single day of my life. I would tell anyone that there is life after a life-threatening illness. You get on with it and you just keep going."

Elizabeth mentions that she dislikes being referred to as "immunocompromised." She wears masks and is careful where she goes—like parties in enclosed areas—having already had COVID twice, she doesn't even want to catch a cold. "These are the choices you have to make. And the people who know and love you understand them. They know you have to prioritize your health."

Elizabeth is also a newly active Soroptimist in St. Helena. Through two dear friends she met through her foundation—Kaci and Sarah Spence—she was introduced to Soroptimists and immediately knew that she wanted to be a part of it. She relates, "I walked into the room, and I immediately felt the energy of these smart, intelligent, kind, resourceful women. They were talking about an upcoming auction and what kind of help they needed. I had managed many auctions for my daughter's schools in the past, so I decided to join the Soroptimists, and I'm their auction chair for this year!"

According to Elizabeth, Sophia was raised in St. Helena in what Elizabeth refers to as a "magical place." She tells us, "We live in a bubble in this community; our kids can run around night and day. It's a warm, safe place. Sophia went on to attend San Francisco State University. What a change. It's been eye-opening for her to go from this beautiful, Mayberry-like town to San Francisco."

Elizabeth continues, "Her dad and I separated, but it's not about us; it's about Sophia. Not only do we celebrate holidays together, some nights, as she's going to her dad's, I may even send dinner for both of them. At first, she didn't quite understand, but now she gets that we have mutual respect and care for each other. Her dad's girlfriend, Diana, is an extension of our family and loves Sophia. It's a win-win. It's been challenging for Sophia to go from St. Helena to San Francisco, but she's done it with grace, and she is doing well in college. She's studying environmental science, and she reminds me of how many household items that I need to get rid of! We no longer have a microwave; you won't find a plastic bag in our house, and I'm supposed to use bamboo paper products."

One of Elizabeth's greatest pleasures is spending time with Sophia when she comes home to St. Helena, and she enjoys going down to San Francisco to spend time with her. She also loves visiting her family in Massachusetts. Her housemates are two cats, Nala, who

was born in her backyard and had a litter of kittens, and Bowie, who was adopted after the Paradise Fire. She took care of the cats and kittens while undergoing chemotherapy during COVID.

Incredibly passionate about the NBA, Elizabeth started watching Celtics games with her dad when she was a little girl. As she grew up, she played multiple sports in high school, and in St. Helena, she played bocce for many years and was poached by St. Helena Police Department team. Now, Elizabeth has a lot of close friends who are part of the NBA. She divulges, "When LeBron James found out I had cancer, he got on a plane and came here, and he too told me I'm the strongest woman. He gave me his jersey and played that night against the Warriors in my honor. Kevin Love—who plays for the Miami Heat—and I are very close; his aunt and grandmother are both breast cancer survivors." Elizabeth is close to the owners and players of the Golden State Warriors team and attended Cancer Awareness night at Chase Center recently.

How did her connection to professional basketball begin? Through good old Goose & Gander. Elizabeth tells us the story.

"LeBron James walked in one night about eight years ago," she recounts, "and I went home knowing he was sitting in the bar. People started mobbing him; he's hard to hide at six-foot-nine. The staff didn't know what to do, so they called me, and I went back and stood between the door and where LeBron was sitting. For five hours, I was his security. I was getting pushed and shoved. Then he called me over to his table and asked me why I was handling security for him when he was a foot taller than I and weighed about 100 pounds more. At the night's end, LeBron wound up carrying me out of Goose & Gander over his shoulder. We became friends, and anytime he comes to Napa, I get a call ahead of time. Or if he's coming to play a game, I'll go; I fly to LA to see him play at times. I love him with my whole heart."

Elizabeth is also close to Joe and Nicole Lacob, the owner of the Golden State Warriors. Elizabeth came briefly out of retirement to help them with their wedding in St. Helena. Nicole runs the Warriors Foundation, and is also a breast cancer survivor. In addition she was the first person Elizabeth called when she got her diagnosis. Nicole gave Elizabeth a blanket with a handwritten note. "It makes me feel warm," Elizabeth declares.

What started the idea for the Crush Cancer Napa Valley blanket program was this gift from Nicole to Elizabeth. Now, Noreen Fetzer, a fellow Soroptimist and owner of Daisy Boutique, sponsors the blanket program for patients undergoing treatment of all types of cancer.

"It started because Nicole Lacob gave me a blanket, and how that made me feel. I wanted to give the same back to others undergoing treatment." And with that, Elizabeth whisks out the door to attend her first yoga class since finishing treatment. Elizabeth Naylor is a prime example of a woman courageous enough to never give up and whose mission is to give back. She is a testament to nurturing friendships with many, near and far. We wish her health and happiness and applaud her vision and service!





Over 80 Years
Serving Our Community
Commercial • Industrial • Residential



CSLB#214940

- Winery Maintenance & Repairs
- Solar & Battery Back Up
- Residential Service & New Construction

- Systems Generator Installations
- Tenant Improvements
- Commercial Maintenance & Repairs

www.napaelectric.com • 707-252-6611



**360 HEALTH + WELLNESS
NAPA VALLEY**
BEVERLY DAVIES

Massage, Energy Work, Somatic Education, LifeWave
USDA Certified Organic CBD Products and Consultation
Serving Napa Valley since 1993

360WellnessNapaValley.com | 707-967-9567
1485 Main Street, #204, St. Helena

