
ALUMNI

A Profile in Perseverance

Chronic health challenges can't stop double alum
Melissa Kwiatkowski



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In many ways, Oakland University alumna Melissa (Zwolinski) Kwiatkowski is a quintessential overachiever. At 29, the Clinton Township resident has already earned a bachelor's and master's degree, and teaches at a nationally ranked high school in Bloomfield Hills. But her story is all the more remarkable in light of the hurdles she's had to clear to get where she is today.

When she graduated with her master's in History last April, she was barely a year removed from a life-saving liver transplant that was a decade in the making. In October 2006, during her senior year of high school, she had her gallbladder removed and was subsequently diagnosed with a rare disorder called Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis, or PSC.

"It's a doozy of a name," Kwiatkowski said, with a wry laugh.

This chronic disease causes scarring of the bile ducts, which leads to inflammation – and eventually failure – of the liver. It has no known cure and requires a liver transplant. Before receiving her transplant in March 2017, Kwiatkowski soldiered through the intervening years as the disease slowly siphoned her energy and made it difficult to get through the days.

"You can let a bad situation define you, or you can grow from it."

"It kind of snuck up on me," she said. "I always had a lot on my plate, so I just thought it was normal to be tired all the time."

According to the National Institutes of Health, [researchers estimate that about 6 to 16 people out of 100,000 have PSC](#). It is believed to be an autoimmune disease, which means that the immune system is overactive and attacks healthy bile duct cells.

Pushing through illness

In 2007, Kwiatkowski graduated high school and enrolled at Oakland full time. She majored in History and was accepted into the university's Secondary Teacher Education Program. While excelling in her classes, she also served as a student mentor for OU's [Pre-College Programs](#) and

as a tour guide at [Meadow Brook Hall](#), the historic estate of OU founder Matilda Dodge Wilson.

She later completed her student teaching internship, and just two months after graduating in 2013, landed a full-time teaching position at the International Academy in Bloomfield Hills. In 2015, she returned to Oakland to pursue her master's degree, specializing in World War II and Cold War history.

"I figured I could use it in my classroom right away, and I totally have," she said.



Melissa received her master's degree in April 2018

About a year into the program, her health started to rapidly decline. Exhaustion, loss of appetite and jaundice of her skin and eye told her something was seriously wrong. She went to the ER after coming down with a high fever, and medical tests showed that she needed a liver transplant.

She underwent more tests to make sure her body was strong enough to handle the procedure and was put on the transplant waiting list at Henry Ford Health System. While wait times are influenced by numerous factors and can take up to several years, Kwiatkowski was only on the list a week when she got the call.

"It was Ash Wednesday, and my mother had come over to take me to church to get ashes," she recalled. "I was feeling really down that day. I was almost ready to give up. My mother told me not to worry, and we went on our way to get ashes. That's when I got the phone call. I couldn't believe that at the time I needed it the most, this liver just happened to appear for me."

Twists and turns

The eight-hour transplant took place the next day at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. It was a double success, Kwiatkowski

noted, because the liver she received saved two lives.

“The liver was split,” she said. “I got part of it and an infant got part of it, so that was really special.”

The day before she was to leave the hospital, doctors told her they had found bile duct cancer in her old liver, and that she would need an additional surgery to make sure the cancer hadn’t spread to other organs. They performed a Whipple procedure, taking out parts of her stomach, small intestine and pancreas to check for cancer.

Thankfully, none was found.

“The surgeon told me I must be a pretty strong girl to have had the two most traumatic abdominal surgeries within 10 days of each other,” said Kwiatkowski.

She also marveled at her “good fortune” that the cancer had not been discovered prior the transplant.

“If the cancer would have been found beforehand, I would not have gotten that liver,” s explained. “I would have had to go through chemo and radiation.”

Making up for lost time

After the transplant, Kwiatkowski felt like a new person. She was soon back in the classroom at the International Academy, and at Oakland to finish her master’s degree. Without the looming threat of liver failure, she has more freedom to live her best life.



Melissa at Henry Ford Hospital, where she underwent a liver transplant in March 2017.

“Before, I was scared to do anything because I wasn’t sure when the time for the transplant would come. It was like a ticking clock, and I didn’t know when it would go off,” she said. “Now that I’m feeling good, I can take advantage of more opportunities.”

She and her husband, Paul, recently celebrated their second wedding anniversary and have vacationed at Disney World, Las Vegas, San Francisco and Punta Cana. This summer, she traveled solo to a history education conference at Stanford University, something she says she never would have done before the transplant.



Melissa and her husband, Paul, at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

She has frequent check-ups at Henry Ford and also keeps in touch with her master’s program advisers, professors Dan Clark and Karen Miller. She’s now in her sixth year at International Academy, where students and staff have become “a second family” to her

“I’m so thankful that I’ve had all these people and even these challenges in my life because it’s shown me how much amazing support I have,” she said. “You can let a bad situation define you, or you can grow from it. I just felt like I wasn’t going to let this stop me.”