

{A Strong Story}

She was saved... by shorts

By Vija Vāvere

Yes, mother of three and owner of the *Skaistas lietas bērniem* baby clothing shop Zane Cinglere Kraukle was saved from melanoma, the most aggressive form of skin cancer, purely by chance. This summer she was one of four Latvian cancer patients that travelled to Mont Blanc, Europe's highest peak, to prove that cancer doesn't have to be the end of your life.

“Everyone knows – the quicker your cancer is diagnosed, the greater the chance you’ll survive. I was lucky, because the day I went to the doctor, it was a hot day and I was wearing shorts. My doctor Alona Bergmane received patients at the Alsters Clinic in the Teika district of Riga. I’m quite outgoing, so I often get to know people quickly. I was also on a first name basis with my doctor Alona. She’s an interesting person and a good doctor who has helped me a lot in the past. Alona has a talent for always seeing things a few steps ahead. I’ve seen from experience that what she says usually also happens. Four years ago on that fateful May day I had an appointment with her to discuss some back pain I had, most likely from lifting something that was just too heavy. I sat down in a chair, crossed my legs and suddenly the doctor asked me: “What’s that by your knee?” I answered, “Nothing, just a black mole. It showed up a while ago and has grown larger since then.” Alona scolded me “Are you crazy?! That looks a lot like melanoma and that’s dangerous. It’s the most aggressive form of skin cancer, haven’t you read about it? You have to go straight to an oncologist!” It was almost like that old joke: “Doctor, what’s this?” to which he responds “Oh my God, oh my God, WHAT’S this!?” My doctor immediately sent me to an oncologist and by the end of May I was already scheduled for an operation. Sometimes I think to myself: what would have happened if I had worn a dress that day or long pants?

For my operation I was given general anaesthesia and all of the tissue was removed nearly all the way to the bone. As is often the case, right after the operation the doctors didn’t say a thing. They promised to get in touch with me once the tissue had been tested. When I called, they told me that it wasn’t a conversation to have over the phone and that I should visit them at the Latvian Oncological Centre. I immediately knew that it wasn’t good news or they would have told me over the phone. The doctor was curt: “You have melanoma, the first stage of cancer.”

Blame the whole world

“You have cancer, go home – it’s possible that the doctor was so blunt because he’s accustomed to giving diagnoses like mine on a regular basis, but to me it was like a kick in the head. I think that you should have a lengthy discussion with cancer patients explaining what can be expected of this horrible monster and what the

chances are of recovery. It would be best if a psychiatrist or psychotherapist broke the news. I've heard that the necessity of such an approach is now a hot topic and maybe it'll happen in the near future, but no one tried to console me. With the help of Google I read all kinds of horror stories. I thought that I was going to die and that nothing could be done. I became depressed. I sat in my bed and cried. I didn't say anything to my children or my parents. Only my husband and my youngest brother knew about my misfortune. My husband was in shock: "I finally found a person that I love and now I could lose her..."

I was angry at the whole world. What had I done to deserve this? Why was I being punished? The world is full of criminals, paedophiles even, and look, they're all healthy! I'm not even 30 years old! I still have two children to raise and I've finally met the perfect man for me... Why me?! Everyone who's diagnosed with a serious illness probably asks that question. And just like all of them, I didn't receive a reply."

A difficult path

"Now I'm happy to say that I was lucky. I met the right people at the right time and my husband and I have survived the whole ordeal and are happily going on with our lives. But it wasn't like that from the start.

I grew up in the country, in Litene parish. Until the age of 17 I worked in the fields ploughing long rows in the earth for sugar beets, among other things. Thankfully, it turns out that this experience would come in handy. I married when I was very young and moved to Riga to study, to take on the world and to enjoy family life. I was a distance learning student at the University of Latvia's public relations faculty and I also wrote articles for local media outlets about off-road motorcycle racing, a passion of mine since childhood. Not that I enjoyed participating in the sport, but rather writing about how others experience it. Things, however, weren't going well at home: our son Kristers was only a year and a half old when we decided to get divorced. Better to make the decision early, so as not to destroy the relationship to the point where you wouldn't even say hello to the person if you saw them on the street. We managed to do that and we still remain friends, but it was difficult raising a child on my own.

I met another man and we began a relationship, but I soon understood that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with him. But I was pregnant at the time and couldn't turn my back on this new child. Virdžīnija was born as wonderful as Latvia – right on November 18, the nation's 90th anniversary. Now I was a single mother with two children and that was much more difficult. I remember walking from Virdžīnija's day care centre in Purvciems all the way across town to the city centre just to save some money on public transport. We drove there by car, but I would always walk back even when it was only minus 20C outside. I have to admit that I did feel sorry for myself back then. The three of us had to survive the whole week on just 15 LVL (€21), so I had to do some extensive calculations to make it work.

I was always getting offers from men to meet up or to go on dates on the local social media website *Draugiem.lv*, but I wasn't interested. One of the men, a guy named Jānis, was particularly persistent, but I always turned him down as well. I was afraid to fall into the same trap again. I celebrated New Year's Eve in 2013 at Riga's Krastmala embankment. I was surrounded by happy people and here I was, absolutely miserable... I made a resolution to start a new life. When I got home I wrote a letter to Jānis and let him know that I was willing to meet him. We got to know each other well after communicating on the web, which is probably why our relationship advanced so quickly. Jānis didn't have any reservations about helping me raise my children and even mentioned that he would eventually like to have another child with me. Why not, I thought? But I didn't want to rush things.

I had only been in a relationship with Jānis since January, but here I was at the beginning of May in my shorts in my doctor's office. I thought my life had completely fallen apart..."

My hair didn't fall out!

"At the beginning of June I finally received a call from the Oncology Centre and was told to visit Elita Šapovalova, a chemotherapist at Gaiļezers Hospital. So chemotherapy after all! I had already read all kinds of horror stories online about what to expect. Perhaps people are simply built in a certain way, which is why at first everyone wants to complain about the most difficult part that they've experienced. The positive lessons learned are often kept hidden within, which is why so many of the stories I read were so visceral.

Of course, I was initially most worried about my hair, which I would probably lose. What woman wants that! But I wasn't sent to chemotherapy, I was prescribed virotherapy. The doctor explained that it was a much gentler method of therapy, which destroys the bad cancer cells, but doesn't hurt the body's healthy cells. A virus is injected into the body and you let it do its job. The majority of virotherapy patients don't lose their hair. Once a month I had to go for a virotherapy injection after receiving frozen vials of the medication at a pharmacy. I had to buy a special bag, because the vials can't be refrozen. They can only be thawed out right before an injection. The medication, which is certified in Latvia, was invented by Latvian professor Aina Muceniece and melanoma patients in Latvia can receive it free of charge.

The beginning of the therapy process put me at ease and I stopped crying in my pillow and feeling sorry for myself. The worst is when you don't do anything at all and constantly think of the negative possibilities, but once you actually start to do something you begin to feel some hope. I had to go for check-ups every three months – x-rays of my lungs, ultrasounds, all kinds of tests. Thankfully, the tests revealed that my body was healthy. Even so, every morning I used to run to the bathroom mirror to see if any hair had fallen out. Is it really possible that no hair has fallen out yet? No,

nothing at all! I soon got used to my situation. When I went for check-ups I could help other people suffering from cancer, letting them know where to go and what to do. I tried to give them encouragement, because I know how important that is at the beginning. Everyone felt sorry for me: “You’re so young, and you already have cancer!”

But I slowly awoke from my numbness... Maybe it’s time to start thinking about a third child?”

Waiting for Emīlija

“I asked the oncologist about the possibility of having a child. I was immediately told that it wasn’t a good idea: pregnancy could aggravate the process. I could maybe think about doing it in five years. I consulted with other doctors, both in Latvia and abroad, and they all had the same answer – absolutely not! But I felt good and I realised that my husband Jānis also really wanted a child. Maybe we should risk it? In February I found out that I was pregnant. When I informed my oncologist, she organised a special council of doctors to consult on the matter. I stood behind a closed door and waited for the doctors’ decision. Finally, they called me in and pronounced their verdict: taking into account my test results and the fact that my health had improved, they would allow me to keep the baby. Naturally, it would be my responsibility. I often wonder what I would have done if they had told me it wasn’t possible. I probably wouldn’t have listened to them. It’s one thing to discuss something theoretically, but quite another when you’re already carrying a child beneath your heart. Thankfully, my primary doctor also supported my decision. “If it was meant to be, everything will be alright. As they say, those who don’t take risks, don’t drink Champagne,” she said. I was considered to be in a special risk group for pregnant women and not every gynaecologist was even allowed to take responsibility for the birth. We finally found a wonderful gynaecologist, Sarmīte Lejniece, who arranged for the birth to take place at the P. Stradiņš Clinical University Hospital. She warned me that it would have to be a C-section and that the child would probably be born premature.

It wasn’t easy. One after another nearly all of the usual symptoms of pregnancy arrived: nausea, my legs became swollen like tree trunks, I got migraines and, of course, my belly was huge. On top of all that I often considered whether or not I had made the right choice. Would my child be healthy? To make things even more complicated, the Motocross of Nations competition was held in Ķegums that autumn – the first time such a major off-road motorcycle competition had been hosted by Latvia. The organisers of the event offered me a position as their public relations specialist and the job was just too good to turn down. We drove around Europe in a caravan, me with my huge belly, and tried to convince potential participants that Latvia wasn’t some backwater populated by polar bears. We managed to convince the majority of them that it was worth attending.

The baby was due at the end of October. I rushed to finish my work before then. In the final days of September I watched the Nations Cup of Motocross at the *Zelta zirgs* track in Ķegums. I did, however, have to watch from the safety of the press box as it was too dangerous to be near the track with my big belly. That same summer I had decided to start a small business – a shop selling baby clothes. I researched what was on offer in neighbouring countries and later happened to travel to Estonia on a business trip. My Estonian colleagues looked at me sceptically and said that my little girl would most likely be Estonian, because she would likely be born there. But I made it home! On Wednesday I was in Estonia, but by Friday Jānis was already driving me to the University Hospital – our Emīlīja let us know that she couldn't wait any longer! Dr. Lejniece admitted me to hospital and scheduled the operation for Sunday, October 12.

When I heard the baby crying during the operation I was so happy! She's alive, her lungs are working, my daughter is breathing! The only thing that bothered me was something that I heard the doctor say while I was barely conscious – *forty five...* What does that number mean? Later I discovered that that it was simply her length in centimetres. She also weighed two and half kilos. A tiny, tiny baby, but healthy! Only one thing struck me as odd – her hair was curly, almost like Afro hair. The doctor said that it was a possible side effect of the Rigvir virotherapy, because my husband and I have straight hair. In the meantime, Jānis was nervously pacing the halls outside. When the nurse gave him the child to hold, Jānis was frightened because he had never done anything like that. The nurse ignored his trepidation and simply placed her in his hands. Since then we've been a family of five."

Who stole the little boot?

On March 8, 2016, I opened my shop just opposite the Ziedoņdārzs Park. My parents cautioned me to wait until the children were older, but look how quickly life changes – I don't have time to wait! I named my company ViKrEm after the first two letters in my children's names – Virdžīnija, Kristers and Emīlīja. We sell clothing for children up to one year in age and some items for children that have already begun walking. The clothes are made in Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Turkey, Ukraine, the Czech Republic and, of course, Latvia. I often create the designs myself and sometimes they come to me in a dream. I once dreamed of pretty children's overalls in grey with pink. I asked a designer what she thought. She said: "I think it's a disaster, but I'll sew one up and take a look." The result was fantastic!

Our shop has the added value of kindness and understanding. An anxious young man entered the shop. His wife is already at the maternity hospital and he doesn't know what to buy or how to welcome them home. After we spoke for a while I could see that he calmed down. It's so great to help someone! In the beginning I was a one woman show – owner, distributor and sales person. Today if I need help, Ieva, a mother of two, can stand in for me. We've had some frustrating experiences, too. For example, we couldn't find a single baby bootie, but soon spotted something very

similar in a competitor's shop. So-called smart blankets are another example. The Germans have discovered a new kind of technology. They use a special material using OUTLAST molecules, which regulate temperature. If the room gets colder, the blanket warms up and vice versa. That's also why they're expensive. But some people sell something similar claiming the same properties, but the blankets don't actually have the self-regulating thermal effect. Of course, it's cheaper! That's fraud. I try to educate my customers and ask them to always ask for the proper manufacturer's certificate because the German companies always add it to their products.

I don't have much free time these days, but I try to write regular blog posts at maminklubs.lv. I offer advice to mothers, comforting the unlucky ones who have been diagnosed with cancer. At the beginning of the year Einars Repše, the former prime minister of Latvia, walked into my shop. It turns out that he's now in charge of the Virotherapy Foundation."

Let's climb Mont Blanc!

The offer was sudden and unexpected: let's climb Mont Blanc! I found out everything that the foundation wanted to achieve – who would climb, why and what the foundation hoped to prove. Without hesitation, I agreed because I really liked the idea. Einars said that we had to prepare for the climb, to train at the gym and to buy the necessary equipment. The Foundation would pay for travel costs, accommodation and meals. Although I kept nodding my head, I have so much work and so little time and I quickly forgot about the whole thing. I don't want to complain, but when you have three children every day is planned down to the minute. Our house is located deep in the forest not far from the town of Tīnūži. During the school year we left the house at 06:30 in the morning: Emīlija was left at day care in Salaspils, the older children each at their own school in Riga. Kristers has floorball practice three times a week and on Wednesdays both of the girls have lessons at the Liene Šomase studio – Virdžīnija sings, Emīlija dances. On those days we get back at night after 21:00. My husband has a physically demanding job installing fences around houses throughout Latvia. Naturally, my *Mont Blanc adventure* would severely complicate daily life for Jānis and the children, but on the other hand we have to try to escape the rat race every now and then. Jānis understood.

In July they announced our departure date and I suddenly realised that I wasn't prepared. But a promise is a promise. I went to the *Virsotne* outdoor sports shop to buy all of the necessary clothing for the mountains and I was shocked by how much gear was required including triple insulated jackets of fleece, down and Gore-Tex and special pants that cost up to €250. I learned what crampons, carabiners, ice axes, draws and harnesses are used for. Thankfully, our mountaineering instructors Kristaps and Kristīne Liepiņš provided those for us but we had to put on the equipment ourselves. Jānis helped and borrowed some things from his friends who used to go climbing often when they lived in Nice in France. My friends also helped out.

On July 28 we flew to Geneva from Riga. We met at the airport and met our fellow teammates: Einars Repše, Dr. Linda Brokāne, two instructors, two cameramen and four cancer patients from Latvia – Elita from Valka, Indra and Jevgēnijs from Riga and me. Later we were joined by Zoya from Russia, Kristina from Ukraine, Solezhan (also known as the Admiral) from Chechnya and Jane from the USA. Said, a skilled mountaineer from the UEA, met us in the mountains. A bus drove us from Geneva to a mountain cottage in Argentière, not far from Chamonix.

We slowly got to know one another. It was an interesting group. Indra had had breast cancer, Elita ovarian cancer and Jevgēnijs, like me, had had melanoma, but on his back. Zoya and the Chechen had battled cancer in their kidneys, but Kristina had been diagnosed with melanoma. Jane was still being treated with virotherapy (I stopped using virotherapy once I became pregnant) and Indra and Elita had been treated with chemotherapy. In other words, a very interesting group of people! Jane, a vibrant woman around 70 years of age, stood out the most from us. She had read about virotherapy on the internet and immediately signed up for the treatment and the trip to Mont Blanc. She had melanoma in her eye, which was replaced by an ocular prosthesis. I only found out that she was blind in one eye after a week. Jane also had a genetic heart defect which required her to use oxygen. Jane used oxygen when she slept and often carried oxygen bottles during the day and also when she climbed. Naturally, the men helped her. We once spent more time up top than expected and she began to run out of oxygen. She started breathing loudly and heavily, growling like a bear. That's where she got her nickname Bear. But we all loved her. She had such courage and determination!"

Fear of heights

"I already mentioned that I'm an outgoing person and while I was getting to know everyone and who they are I completely forgot about my own minor affliction – fear of heights. I can step out on a balcony, but my husband always takes the kids to the top of observation towers and the like. I always wave to them from the bottom. And here I was about to climb Mont Blanc!

Kristaps had devised an acclimatisation plan: every day we had to climb higher to get used to the altitude. He knows Mont Blanc better than Gaizinkalns (Latvia's tallest mountain) and has led other climbing groups there several times. I had heard rumours that he was a gruff man, but Kristaps really helped me. He often encouraged me: "Zane, you can do it." I was able to pull myself together and overcome my fears during the first few days. The craziest part of the climb was across the crest of the Midi route, two days before sumitting. The last hurdle was to pass a sheer cliff wall before reaching a cabin 3,800m above sea level. We would spend the night there and train on the glacier before setting out for the summit the next morning another 1,200m above us. On one side was a wall of ice and on the other, a gorge. Roped together, we made our way past the vertical edge of the wall on a path so narrow we only had room enough to place one foot in front of the other. When I showed my family the photos

back home Virdžīnija shrieked, “Mum, you walked that? You’re crazy!” I had the same thought while I was doing it. My head was spinning and hands and legs were shaking. On top of all this, I had come down with acute suppurative tonsillitis that day and I had a fever. Even worse, we had to jump over a crack in the ledge about a half a metre long. But I made it to the small cabin. On the way back we were able to take the Midi chair lift where we met some tourists who were whispering behind our backs: “Those people are real mountain climbers...” I had to laugh – me a genuine climber??

When we hiked up an average part of the trail that didn’t have a gorge on either side I even made it to the front of the group. Kristaps praised me: “You’re among the fastest climbers, you can definitely make it to the summit!” Who knows? If I hadn’t become ill, maybe I would have, despite myself. But the next morning I felt terrible and made my way back down the mountain. Jane didn’t summit either and I listened to her laboured breathing the whole way down because her oxygen bottle was nearly empty. The rest of the group began their ascent to the summit at one in the morning and after eight hours had reached the top. After another five hours they had already made their way back. Everyone was alive and well, but exhausted to say the least. To welcome our heroes home I made my signature dish – a creamy cheese soup that most people absolutely love – but some of the team were so tired that they had trouble eating.

We returned to Riga on August 10. My husband greeted me with a special cake that we only order for big family gatherings and special occasions. Although I didn’t reach the summit of Mont Blanc, I had conquered new heights of my own. I’m happy that I participated and that I was able to overcome my fears. I now have many more friends around the world who, like me, have endured extreme circumstances. We discovered that cancer is a global disease that doesn’t discriminate between young or old, black or white, good or bad. I believe that together we proved our primary goal: a cancer diagnosis doesn’t have to mean the end.”