Erika Zak, Whose Fight for a New Liver Inspired Millions, Has Died

The 39-year-old mother was well known online for her posts detailing her diagnosis and fight for treatment.

August 28, 2019 By Casey Halter

Erika Zak, the liver disease advocate who went viral on social media while fighting for a transplant, died late last week during surgery, CNN reports. She was 39.

Zak, a mother from Portland, Oregon, inspired millions around the world after sharing her story about cancer and her 15-month battle for a liver transplant online. In 2014, after giving birth to her daughter, Loïe, Zak was diagnosed with Stage IV metastatic colon cancer that had spread to her liver.

Over the next five years, Zak survived more than 70 rounds of chemotherapy and was hospitalized 19 times for her condition. She chronicled her journey every step of the way.

According to her family, a liver finally became available for Zak last Thursday, and her transplant team at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio worked quickly to prepare her for surgery. A day later, she was brought into the operating room. Zak died during surgery. Her family said her body couldn't handle some of the trauma.

"While our family is devastated by the loss of our beautiful wife, mother, daughter, sister and friend, we do want to express our deepest gratitude to all of those who have supported Erika and our family through these very difficult weeks, months and years," Scott Powers, Erika's husband, told CNN in a statement. "Through her perseverance in life, Erika embodied hope and set an example of strength."

Thomas Nealon, president and CEO of the American Liver Foundation also weighed in on Zak's death, saying that her fight to get the best possible care and her will to survive mobilized the online liver community in a way he's never seen before.

"It is my hope that all of those who have been touched by her story dedicate themselves to make sure there are no more Erika Zaks," said Nealon in a recent interview about her death.

Earlier this year, Zak's family moved across the country to be near the Cleveland Clinic, in case a

liver became available. The young mother penned a now-viral plea directly to the CEO of UnitedHealth Group pleading with him for her health and blasting what she called the “shockingly incompetent manner” in which the nation’s largest insurer handled her case.

Zak’s family has set up a GoFundMe page for her funeral and to raise funds to help support her 5-year-old daughter, which you can check out here. The family is also asking people to sign up to become an organ donor at OrganDonor.gov.

To read Zak’s full obituary on CNN, click here.

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