

# Olga, 61

**“I set myself a goal of doing that mile - and I was determined to achieve it.”**

Olga is 61 years old and has two grown up sons. In March 2017, she woke up one Saturday morning with a 4.3cm tumour in her right breast, and within a month the tumour had grown 0.2 cms and she had had a mastectomy.

Olga recalls “The tumour appeared over night which was very painful. I think I’d been struggling with fatigue for a long while but I’d just been fighting it and not paying attention to how I actually felt”

The mastectomy healed very well and she opted not to have re-construction ‘Flat and fabulous’ is her motto. She knew she’d have to have chemotherapy and so decided to cut off her waist length hair into a short bob in advance and donated it to The Little Princesses Trust, a charity that makes wigs for children also undergoing treatment for cancer. It was not long after her first chemotherapy session had started that her hair literally came off in handfuls. She knew that her hair would eventually grow back and so decided

to face the world bald and beautiful, only wearing a head scarf when the weather was really cold and the one thought she had was ‘How do bald men cope in the cold.’



The chemotherapy treatment made Olga so seriously ill, that within four days of having each round of chemo, she was hospitalised with severe vomiting, constipation or diarrhoea and neutropenic sepsis. There was a point where she thought the chemo would kill her as she became so unwell but she had faith in all the at staff West Suffolk Hospital in Bury St Edmunds that looked after her so well.

Olga also underwent 15 rounds of radiotherapy in Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge and underwent several sessions of physiotherapy. She also put on weight during the chemo as she was so inactive.

Olga was away from work for 14 months in total because of the breast cancer and the subsequent treatments and she knew she had to heal before she could go back to work, as her work environment could be demanding.

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Olga knew she needed to do something to put her on the road to recovery and start to feel well again so she could get back to work and back to 'living' again, but her right shoulder didn't work well after her operation and she was feeling very down.

A good friend of hers told her about the Great East Swim Outreach Programme, and she signed up for the mile swim, despite struggling to swim two lengths when she started.

She found the swim coaching quite difficult because the chemo had left her with peripheral neuropathy in her hands and feet which affects her mobility and it could be extremely painful. She found getting into cold water helped with the pain in her feet and made the pain more tolerable .

During the programme she would also swim a couple of times a week to build her stamina - just doing the lengths was important. She tried to do front crawl, but she just couldn't manage it with her shoulder issues. However, she was determined to do the mile she signed up for and so she decided to swim it backstroke and she completed the 1 mile swim in 1 hour and 31 seconds, being placed 10th for her age and gender with her friend David swimming beside her for support.

Olga said "I definitely felt physically healthier during the programme, and I became trimmer. I was getting stronger, but the chemo had absolutely trashed my body and I was still very fatigued but the training helped and equally as important, I felt mentally fitter, which is where I

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think I got a lot of the strength from and I pushed myself which I think is so important.”

“I went into it with no idea of what it was going to be like never seeing the course or distance that I would swim but I set myself a goal of doing that mile - and I was determined to succeed.”

Her sons were very proud of her and supported her at the event even though she didn't think they were there, but she spotted them just before she entered the water, which was a massive boost.

As she finished the swim she said to her friend David, whom she'd completed the course with

“Two miles next year.”

Olga is still swimming now, often with David, and she dances too - Ceroc Jive - although her right shoulder causes her some issues. She went back to work in June, at a health care unit and although she admits it's still tough for her and she gets very tired, she is coping very well with some adjusted working conditions.

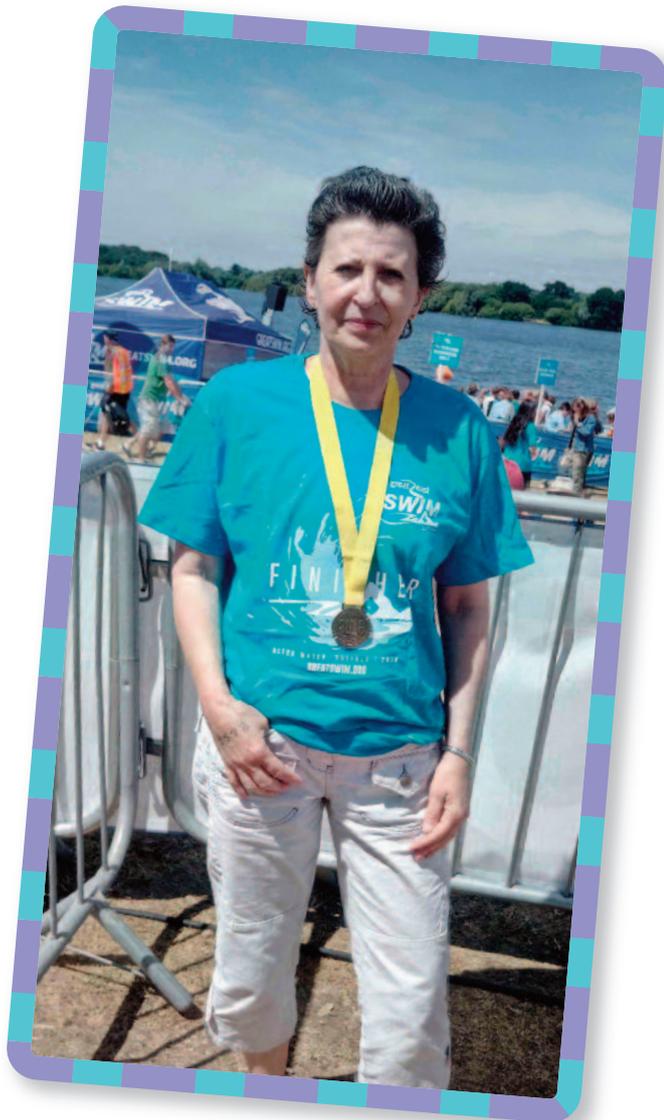
She is now happy with her weight, she feels more toned and her legs have more muscle definition, but she feels the biggest health benefit has been the motivation that it has given her and the fact that introducing exercise in her life is making her feel more like herself again.



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Olga says “The best thing is that I did it and I would urge anyone to have a go. However much you feel that you can’t do something ...chances are you probably can.”

## GREAT EAST SWIM 2018 OUTREACH PROGRAMME

Supported by Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Sport, Sport England, Allied Health Professionals, and local pool operators, aims to support inactive residents, who want to make a change to their physical activity levels, using a mass participation challenge as their motivation.

The programme, provides 12 weeks of supported coaching, encouragement, membership to their local pool, free wetsuit hire, fast-track physiotherapy support and entry to either the 1/2 mile or 1 mile Great East Open Water Swim held at Alton Water reservoir near Ipswich.

In 2018, 82 people between the ages of 18 and 64 registered to take start the programme with 72 completing it.

Many are continuing to swim and exercise on a regular basis and have made a positive change to their health and physical activity levels.

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