

Coosa Middle School's Sarah Emmer is bringing more than math and science into the new school year

Educator and breast cancer survivor's classroom is a place where hard questions are welcome and strength and resilience are modeled every day

ROME, GA., JULY 29, 2026 – Sarah Emmer knows the first days of school can bring plenty of questions.

For students, there are new schedules, new teachers, new classmates and new expectations. For Emmer, a teacher at Coosa Middle School, the new school year also carries deeper meaning: It is another step toward normalcy after breast cancer changed nearly every part of her young life.

Emmer is among 20 cancer warriors whose stories and portraits are featured in the Faces of Hope gallery at the Harbin Clinic Cancer Center, 255 W. Fifth St.

Emmer is a scientist and mathematician by nature. She earned a degree in biology, teaches math and science, and tends to approach problems the way a researcher would — by asking questions, looking for reliable information and trusting data. That mindset became especially important when she discovered a painful lump in her breast while she was 30 weeks pregnant.

At first, she was told the pain was likely related to pregnancy or motherhood. But the pain persisted after her son, Baker, was born. Emmer knew she had a higher-than-normal risk for breast cancer because of family history, so she began researching her symptoms through medical journals and science books. She learned that a small percentage of breast masses that form during pregnancy can turn out to be cancer.

"Something was off," Emmer said. "My gut was telling me I have breast cancer, and that is what I went in and talked about."

A breast exam led to the diagnosis of a very large fibroadenoma, which her physicians did not believe was cancerous. Because it was painful, Emmer decided to have it removed. Three days after her surgery, she received the words that changed her life: "I am so sorry, but you have breast cancer."

Emmer was 22 — far younger than the age when annual mammograms are typically recommended. She was a new wife, a new mother and a new teacher. Her diagnosis was triple-negative breast cancer, and genetic testing showed she was positive for the BRCA 1 genetic mutation. Treatment began quickly, including six months of chemotherapy, a double mastectomy and participation in a clinical study involving medicine that targets the BRCA 1 gene.

"We were excited about that," she said. "Thankfully the Harbin Clinic Cancer Clinic has some really great studies that they are a part of."

Even during treatment, Emmer's science brain stayed active. When she shaved her head in anticipation of hair loss, she joked that it became an at-home experiment.

"I got to compare my hair growth with my newborn," she said.

That outlook helped her process what was happening, but it also followed her back into the classroom. Emmer did not hide her diagnosis from her students. When one student asked if something was wrong, she chose to answer honestly and use her experience as a lesson.

“I decided to use this as an opportunity to say, ‘I had to shave all my hair off, and everything is fine. I’m just out there living my life. It’s OK to look different, to be different,’ which is what a lot of my students at the time needed,” she said. “There were some good lessons all the way around.”

As she prepares for the new school year, Emmer is thinking about routine in a way many teachers understand — the rhythm of lesson plans, students settling into their classes and the daily work of helping young people grow. But for her, routine also represents recovery and normalcy.

She’s worked hard to regain range of motion and strength — important components for someone who enjoys powerlifting, weightlifting and swimming. The Harbin Clinic Oncology Rehabilitation program helped her recover from her initial surgery and from the breast reconstruction surgery she had this summer, a date she chose with her students in mind.

“I wasn’t missing eight weeks of the school year again,” she said.

That decision reflects how much teaching has remained a part of her identity through cancer, motherhood and recovery.

This past year has been a season of making up for the time she feels cancer took away. She does not remember much of her son’s first Christmas or her first Mother’s Day. She credits her husband with carrying much of the load when she was too sick to care for their son the way she wanted. Now, she is focused on enjoying time with her family and making new memories both inside and outside the classroom.

Her new students will see that Emmer teaches from the perspective of experience: the importance of asking tough questions, trusting science and the power of research. But that’s not all. Emmer is teaching both her students and her community lessons in resilience, honesty and strength.

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