

Stokes prepares to fight toughest battle yet

Rep. begins chemo for breast cancer

BY REBEKAH ALLEN

rallen@theadvocate.com

Even before her cancer diagnosis, Julie Stokes was a fighter.

As a state representative, she fought hard battles sometimes against members of her own party - in pursuit of stabilizing the state budget. Last year, she surprised herself when she spoke out, loudly, against casual sexism in the State Capitol. And for the past seven months, she's fought for what she called her dream job as she campaigned to be the next state treasurer.

Earlier this month, Stokes set that dream aside as she prepared for her toughest battle yet. One week before qualifying for an election in which she was considered a front-runner, the Kenner Republican was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer that required her to start chemotherapy immediately.

"I tried so hard. I tried so, so hard," Stokes said in an interview at her home one day before her first chemo treatment. "Up until the bitter end, it was like, 'But I could still run for office, right?' But it just wasn't doable."

It was just a few weeks ago that the 47-year-old mother of two noticed a small lump in her breast. Stokes didn't rush to get it checked out because she assumed it would be something benign - after all, she has no family history of cancer.

Meanwhile, she was in campaign overdrive, walking in parades, meeting with business organizations and traveling across the state to deliver her message. After seven months on the campaign trail, Stokes had raised more than \$500,000 for the October election.

But she did eventually have the growth examined, and the prognosis was sobering. Doctors told Stokes she has stage 2, triple-negative breast cancer stemming from a small tumor less than 2 centimeters wide.

Triple-negative breast cancer is more aggressive, tougher to treat and more likely to return than most kinds of breast cancer, said Donna Williams, director of Louisiana cancer prevention and control programs

and an associate professor with the LSU Health Sciences Center. The good news, Stokes said, is the cancer hasn't spread to other parts of her body.

Stokes' chemotherapy, which started Tuesday at Ochsner in New Orleans, is scheduled to last five months - the full duration of the treasurer's race, which likely will go to a runoff in November.

Triple-negative breast cancer means the cancer is not being fueled by the three typical culprits - estrogen, progesterone or a hormone referred to as HER2, or human epidermal growth factor receptor.

"Triple-negative has none of those receptors, and what that means is we don't have a treatment to block the substances that help the tumor grow," Williams said, adding that chemotherapy is still an effective treatment. "It tends to be a little more aggressive and harder to treat, but it's not hopeless, and it's gotten better over the years."

Breast cancer is the second most frequently diagnosed cancer in women, behind skin cancer. In Louisiana, there are 3,200 diagnoses of breast cancer every year, Williams said, and only 15 percent of those diagnoses are triple-negative.

The five-year survival rate for a person diagnosed early with breast cancer is more than 90 percent. For triple-negative, it's 75 percent, Williams said.

Dream job

Initially, Stokes found herself mourning the lost opportunity to run for the state office and the threat to her health almost equally.

"This is something I felt deeply called to. It was a perfect fit," she said. "So it was really hard to come to terms with that."

Stokes, a longtime certified public accountant for some of the biggest names in the business, wanted the job because she said she's disturbed about the direction the state's budget is headed. The October election is to fill the seat left open by U.S. Sen. John Kennedy, who served as treasurer for 17 years.

"I feel like in the Legislature, we are trying to solve very pragmatic problems with very political solutions, and it's failed us for years now," she said. "If you can't even agree what the problem is, then it's impossible to fix it. And we're in a place in this state where we can't even agree what the problem is."

Stokes said she wanted to use the office as a platform to speak objectively about the state's finances to help guide the Legislature.

"It's a role that's perfectly suited to someone who wants to be objective and take the politics out of everything because that's what it should be. You don't hire a CPA to look at your business so they can tell you everything you want to hear. You hire them to tell you what you need to do to solve a problem," she said.

Stokes was well-positioned in the race. She had a sizable war chest. She started her campaign early. And as a moderate Republican in a field without a strong Democrat, she was expected to attract both liberal and conservative voters.

"There would have been a lot of moderates registered as Republican and Democrat who would have given Julie Stokes really serious consideration based on her extreme qualifications for the job," said Mary-Patricia Wray, a political strategist associated with major Democratic campaigns.

Stokes, who was born and raised in Jefferson Parish, also stood to benefit geographically: Analysts said higher voter turnout in neighboring New Orleans, owing to the mayor's race, might have boosted some of her numbers.

The three leading contenders left in the race are all Republicans: state Rep. John Schroder, state Sen. Neil Riser and Angele Davis, a former budget administrator under Govs. Mike Foster and Bobby Jindal. Stokes said she doesn't know if she will endorse any of them.

The qualifying period for the election was earlier this month, and Stokes knew it would be painful to watch from the sidelines. But on the first day, she was heartened to see her phone lighting up all day with social media notifications. The hashtag #FightLikeJulie, honoring her, has taken off.

A steady stream of legislative staff members, state officials, members of her community and candidates showing up to qualify for elections posted pictures of themselves wearing pink in honor of Stokes' breast cancer fight.

"It took away the sting," she said of the outpouring. "You know the emoticon of the blushing, happy face? That's how it felt. It was so humbling and it meant so much. It softened the blow."

A moderate

Stokes' passion for state budget policy grew out of her work in the Legislature, where she has staked out a place as a fiscally focused political moderate in an increasingly partisan body.

She's taken on Louisiana's complicated sales tax structure, which taxes items differently in different parishes, creating burdens on business owners and state collections. And she's made some unsuccessful pushes to replace the income tax system with flatter rates in exchange for eliminating the tax break for federal income taxes.

Stokes is one of the few Republicans in the Legislature who believe the state does have a revenue problem, which puts her at odds with those in her party who argue that Louisiana's budget problems can be fixed with spending cuts.

She came to that conclusion through her own analysis of the state's spending, which found that when adjusted for inflation - and leaving out Medicaid payments - the state is spending roughly the same today on services as it was in 2005.

She received an official reprimand from the state Republican Party after she voted this year to support a 17-cent hike in the gas tax. She points out that the tax was supported by every chamber of commerce in the state. She also was one of a handful of House Republicans who broke from the party to approve the state budget, which was backed by Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat.

"I stand by the fact that I'm very conservative, but I'll never be conservative at the expense of thought," she said. "If that's what people really want in politics today - people who will do 100 percent of what the party tells you - then stop electing smart people."

State Rep. Tanner Magee, a Houma Republican, said Stokes is known for standing up for her principles.

"She fights for what she believes in regardless of whether it's politically viable or not," Magee said. "She doesn't put up with the rhetorical b.s. She fights for sound tax policy and she's pretty dogged about it."

Stokes said she in some ways found her voice in the Legislature last year when she took an unexpected stand that was picked up by media around the country.

After a Republican colleague filed a sarcastic amendment that would have regulated the weight and age of exotic dancers, Stokes watched many on the House floor explode into laughter and throw dollar bills down next to the podium in jest.

Stokes rose before all of her House colleagues, the vast majority of whom are men, and condemned their behavior.

"Looking out over this body, I've never been so repulsed to be a part of it," she said. "It has got to stop. That was utterly disrespectful and disgusting."

After the speech quickly went viral, Stokes said she was nervous what the response would be. She was floored when many people thanked her.

"I became someone who would be outspoken in that moment," she said. "But I was outspoken with the truth, and that's why I was OK with it. I look back and say, 'Well, that needed to be said.' " So what's next? Stokes said she's not done fighting.

She said she plans to return to the Legislature next year and keep working on tax reform. She wants to foster more bipartisan compromise by creating a caucus of Republicans and Democrats who will work together.

"I have a lot of faith that there is a bigger picture and a bigger hope, and that something very productive and good will come from this journey," she said.