Cindy Strike

Knoxville, Tenn.

Knoxville resident Cindy Strike is a 46-year-old successful former manager with an 18-year-old daughter, Calie, who is a student in graphic art at Pellissippi State Community College. Strike has lived in Knoxville for most of her life, near her father and two brothers. While working as a manager from her mid-20s until recently, she traveled extensively for work and loved it. Strike said it was “quite a blow” to be diagnosed with both diabetes and kidney cancer within the span of a few years and to be unable to return to work. The immunotherapy she takes for her kidney cancer interacts with her blood sugar levels, causing them to spike dangerously. “My blood sugar is important to the role of my kidney function, and I only have one remaining kidney,” Strike said. She currently takes Mounjaro to control her blood sugar. Approval took two years, but Strike is determined to return to exercising like she did before her illness, running on the treadmill every other day to improve her prognosis and drawing on her history as a competitive high-school dancer. She spoke with THCC Communications Coordinator Lacey Lyons to advocate for legislation that would allow people with state health insurance policies to access obesity treatments.

“I’d been prediabetic for years without a doctor telling me. I was classified as type 2 diabetic in 2019. When things are slightly high or low, we just tend to ignore (them.) In my situation, it had been slightly high for so long. Nobody ever said anything (until I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.) (My doctor) explained what it meant to be type 2 diabetic and how I needed to adjust my lifestyle with diet and exercise.

I’d fallen into a job managing people when I was 19 and quickly moved up to supervisory positions. By my mid-20s, I was managing 600 employees and 22 managers. I’d spend six to nine months at a store that was struggling, turn it around, and move to another location. I’ve tried to eat healthier. That was very difficult when I was on the road, because I was working 70 hours a week. When I was travelling, I couldn’t take food back to the hotel and cook. I tried to choose healthier options, but you’re still eating fast food. Now that I’m home, I haven’t had the strength to cook. I’ve done a lot of prep meals.

I grew up in a family that was very sports-oriented. I played soccer; softball; volleyball and basketball. I loved (competitive) dancing. My high-school dance team finished fourth in the nation my sophomore year. By the time I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, my doctor and I discovered that my right hip was bone-on-bone. With my hip replacement, I stopped exercising and gained weight. Every pound you put on compounds not only the diabetes, but also, the pain. I’m in so much pain that I can’t exercise, but I can’t lose weight because I can’t exercise. Now that I have time to work out, I’m suffering from side effects from my cancer treatments.

(There are) interactions between my immunotherapy and my diabetes medication. The first two weeks after my infusions, my blood sugar really spikes. I recently went to the ER because it got up to 363. Before my infusions, I was at 115-150. How frustrating is it to go to the emergency room as a diabetic and somebody that’s getting cancer treatment to sit for seven

hours with no food or liquids? Of course your blood sugar is going to drop. Afterward, my doctor put me on short-term insulin.

My diabetes has played a role in not being able to return to work. When I was working, I was constantly moving to 23 stores in four different states. I've been doing physical therapy, but I have trouble with anything that requires standing, bending over or more than five minutes of walking. My daughter helps, but she's wanted to be a graphic artist since she was 12. She has a social life. Her responsibility isn't to take care of her mom. When you're in this much pain, it impacts you not only physically, but also, mentally and emotionally. It prevents me from living as much life as I can."

Strike says it's "ridiculous" for someone to worry about anything but getting better when they are sick, and in her case, it impacted both her personal and professional life. She feels fortunate to have the support of a couple who rents a room of her home from her and occasionally helps with daily tasks. But the stress caused by trying to maintain kidney function and lower her blood sugar builds up. "The medical community has been very reactive, instead of proactive," she said. "My goal is to keep my kidney as healthy as possible to ensure I don't have reoccurrence with my tumors, and try to find a way to move."