STEFANIE POLAND

WITHOUT A WORD BEING SPOKEN, Stephanie Poland and her sister, Sarah, knew what had happened.

It was 2011, and both girls were in the middle of a Hathaway Brown varsity basketball game against Green High School. “Sarah looked in the stands exactly when my dad got the call. She knew,” Stephanie says. “She saw him and she just knelt on the ground. When I saw her, I knew.”

Their mother, Kristina, had died after an eight-year fight with stage 4 breast cancer.

“We just had a moment between us two,” Stephanie says. “We told our coaches we could go back in. We knew that she would want us to play.”

It was a close game. Sarah, a senior, stole the ball with seconds left and scored the winning basket. “We played for her,” Stephanie says. “My sister won that game for her.”

And that is how Stephanie and her sister have lived their lives since. Brave, strong and for their mother.

Sarah started Hoops for the Cure at Hathaway Brown and, since she left for Cornell University, Stephanie has taken it over. They both walked the 60-mile Susan G. Komen 3-Day in 2011 and 2012, alongside their father, Chris. Stephanie also tutors students at Cleveland’s East End Neighborhood House.

This fall, Stephanie will attend Colgate University, which is only about an hour away from her sister. Like Sarah, Stephanie will play basketball in college. Each year, the two schools play each other. Because they are so close in height (Sarah is 6' 3,” and Stephanie is 6' 4”), they are likely to guard each other.

“I always think that basketball kind of saved me in a way,” Stephanie says. “It took my mind off of things and offered some way to take out my frustration.”

The sadness never goes away, but it has become “more manageable,” says Stephanie. “Everyone has to deal with something at some point. I just had to deal with it earlier. I learned how to handle that. It made me such a stronger person.”

THREE THINGS STEPHANIE LEARNED FROM HER MOTHER [1] “The importance of helping people, not what you can do for yourself. She would do anything for anyone.” [2] “Work ethic. You’re not always going to be the best. You can always be the hardest worker.” [3] “How to treat people. She treated everyone with such respect. She was that person who would listen and make you feel better.”