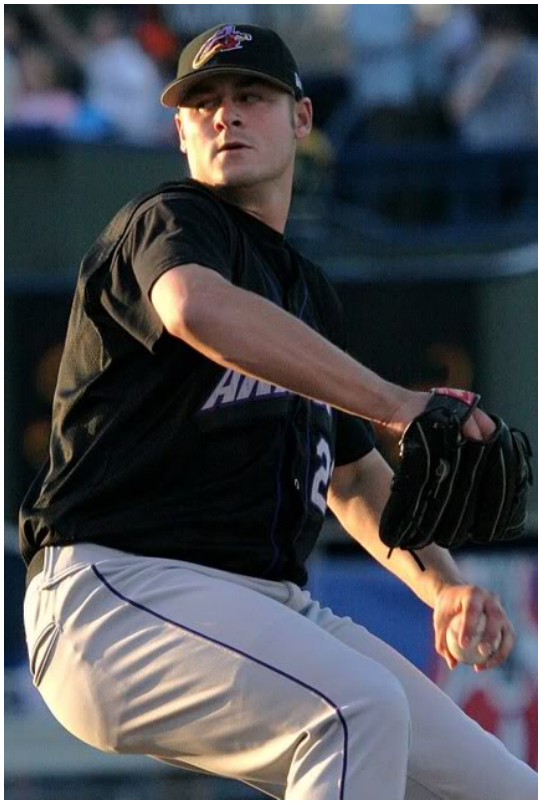
Indians left-handed pitcher Charles "Chuck" Lofgren IV is thankful that he has been blessed with the physical abilities and talent to play the game of baseball. But these days, even with all the talent in the world to throw a baseball, what Lofgren is most thankful for is to have his mother, Pamela, still with him. Pamela is a cancer survivor, and Chuck told her story to our Tony Lastoria in a recent conversation.



Thanksgiving is less than two weeks away. It is the official kickoff to the Holiday Season, and a time when friends and family come together for a feast of food and drink, enjoy the company of loved ones, and just be thankful for all you have in your life.

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You see, Pamela Lofgren is a cancer survivor. A little over two years ago she felt a lump in her breast and had it checked out by a doctor, and was later diagnosed with breast cancer.

At the time she was diagnosed her and her husband, Charles Lofgren III, did not immediately share the news with their son mostly because they did not want to distract their then 20-year old son from the fabulous season he was having at advanced Single-A Kinston in 2006 when he went 17-5 with a 2.32 ERA in 25 starts.

Eventually, against his mother's wishes, his father called him in the middle of the season to tell him the news.

"Basically in the middle of the 2006 season I got a phone call from my dad and he goes 'you got a minute and are you by yourself'," recalled Lofgren in an interview over the weekend. "The tone of my dad's voice was not very good, and I have never known my dad to cry as I have seen him cry only one time in my life and that's when his father passed away, so I knew something serious was going on when he said it was about my mom.

He said 'your mom did not want me to say anything to you but I am going to tell you because I think you should know.

She felt a lump in her breast and we went and had it checked out and the doctor diagnosed her with cancer'."

The news was a complete shock to Lofgren, and even after hearing of it he did not know how to react especially since there was no prognosis yet.

"They did not know the actual progression of the cancer or how bad it was yet since they had to run some tests and they just kind of kept her on chemo medication," said Lofgren. "Then at the start of the 2007 season the cancer had grown stronger and she had a mastectomy."

Even after the surgery, things took a turn for the worse earlier this year as his mother's condition worsened just before the start of spring training. The cancer had not gone away, and doctors pointedly stated that there was a very good chance that she could very well pass away soon from it. No one knew what was going to happen to her, and the very real chance he could lose his mother hit Lofgren harder than a brick wall.

"My mom is a very strong-willed person and if something was bothering her she would never tell me," said Lofgren. "She has the biggest heart I have ever seen. My dad was basically communicating through her and he had told me that she went to the doctor and they laid it on the line and said that there was a very strong possibility she could pass away from this.

When my dad told me that my heart sunk into my chest and into the middle of my stomach, and I did not know what to do.

Looking back on it and thinking about my mom as a person and the kind of woman she is - I am sure everyone feels their mom is the greatest person in the world - but for me personally to have such an inspiration and the kind of person in my life that she is, it struck me so hard."

There has been much talk about the personal issues that Lofgren had been dealing with for the better part of a year. This is mostly it, as he has been on an emotional rollercoaster every day for the better part of two years while the life of his mother hung in the balance.

It can be hard to concentrate on your everyday task at hand and your job when someone you love so much is so sick and you are thousands of miles away and can't be there with them.

"Throughout my whole career I have never really had any distractions," said Lofgren.

"I have never really had anything that bothered me.

Nothing.

For this to hit me the way it did, it was on my mind 24/7.

I couldn't get over it, and I didn't know what to do.

I tried to use it as what they refer to in the movie "The Water Boy" as my 'tackling fuel'.

I wanted to use it to my advantage where every time I went out there I wanted to pitch for her and let her know she is in my prayers.

Even though I tried to dismantle it from my mind it was still there.

It was one of those things that I could not explain.

It was just lingering on my mind.

No matter what people tell me it is just hard, and if you go through it I don't know how you can go through your season and daily activities without thinking about it five times a day."

Lofgren is a professional, and often you have to let things slide and focus, but he is still human and a young man. His mother was dying, and he was lost. Through all this, the Indians organization and many of his teammates have stood by his side.

Lofgren kept his personal issues private because it really was no one else's business, but mostly because he really did not know how bad it was or what was really going on since he was disconnected from the situation being in Kinston or Akron while his mother was in California.

"I had told the Indians about it in Winter Development this past season (Jan 2008), but I don't know how long the Indians have known," said Lofgren. "They were very supportive, from [Farm Director] Ross Atkins always asking me how my mom was doing, to my manager at Akron Mike Sarbaugh who was always asking me as well.

The Indians were very supportive of me, and I really acknowledged that because if anybody needs to support me in what I was going through they definitely did and I was really happy with that."

Probably the best support group he has had is the guys he lives with from noon to midnight everyday for six months a year from spring to fall. His teammates.

"I cannot specifically name all the teammates aware of my situation because I can't

remember them all," said Lofgren. "I am sure a lot more guys knew about my situation than I thought. It was the guys who went to baseball chapel on Sunday.
Scott Lewis, who is my best friend in the organization, really helped me with it along the way, as well as Erik Stiller who is also one of my best friends.

Steven Wright and T.J. Burton are guys who really came to my aide, especially T.J. with the passing of his mother the year before.

They were all very helpful for me."

Whether he admits it or not, Lofgren's performance on the baseball diamond suffered because of what he was going through. After a solid season as a 21-year old in Double-A Akron in 2007 where he went 12-7 with a 4.37 ERA in 26 starts, he returned there this past season and the bottom fell out from underneath him as he went 2-6 with a 5.99 ERA in 26 appearances (15 starts). Was there a correlation between the sudden drop in his performance and the worsened condition he learned of his mother just before the start of spring training? Who knows. But at some level it affected him on the field.

"I am not saying that that was the reason for my struggles because I knew it myself when I was putting it in my mind to pitch for her that my mechanics were a little off," said Lofgren.

"I knew that, and felt it when I was pitching and at times I felt they were good and other times felt they were not there.

The struggles of my season were because of me and the things I did.

I always work hard, that is never an issue, and I worked on delivery drills to try to get it back.

I think it played with my mind a little bit, but I don't want it to come off as I was thinking about it all the time and that is the reason for my struggles because you can't really say that is what it was."

There is no question it was a tough year for Lofgren on the field with his performance, and off the field with the declining health of his mother. Things finally started to turn around for Lofgren when he was moved to the bullpen midway through the season.

His performance improved, and except for a rough outing at the end of the year, he opened some eyes with how well he bounced back in the new relief role.

At this point, Lofgren feels that the Indians still want him to be a starter. While the Indians will likely not commit to what role he will have in 2009 until the end of spring training, Lofgren is happy he was able to show something in the new role late this season.

"I [began to] feel positive again and feel good," said Lofgren about the move to the

bullpen. "When the Indians put me in the bullpen toward the end of the year, I don't want to say this had a direct correlation effect with how I did, but before my last outing in the bullpen at the end of the season I had like a 2.30 ERA in the two months I pitched out of the bullpen.

I was doing well and the Indians saw it and knew that there was some light shed because of that."

Lofgren got a big boost at the end of the season when he received a phone call from his mother. She had called to let him know that the extensive treatment and medication she had been undertaking for the better part of a year was helping. Her health had improved dramatically, and the cancer cells were dying.

She was on the road to recovery.

"I felt that I needed to move on and put it in God's hands, and pretty much when the season ended she called me," recalled Lofgren. "She had been going through chemo and radiation treatments throughout this whole time and told me she had great news and that her treatments have been going very well and a lot of the cancer cells have died, and she was on a new test drug for cancer patients.

So the outlook and the hope was a lot better meaning that it was not in the same stage as it was prior so that put a big relief on my chest."

Pamela Lofgren is now a cancer survivor. She is still recovering, and there will always be the risk that it could return, but it is not in the critical stage it was at and she is a lot better.

She has to take several forms of medication everyday and is on a special drug the rest of her life.

She still goes in for checkups every two weeks.

But she is a survivor, and her never quit attitude is something Lofgren has adapted to his life over the years and is something he can use to sharpen his focus going into next season.

"Basically, she taught me to never give up," said Lofgren. "Never lose sight of the task at hand. If she can beat it and she can do what she wants, anybody can.

And I am a firm believer in that."

There has been some speculation that because of Lofgren's struggles this year on the mound that the Indians will put a bat in his hands because he was also a highly regarded outfielder who could hit very well coming out of high school. While Lofgren is open to becoming an outfielder and getting to hit again, until they make him stop pitching he is determined to not stop working on it.

There was even an erroneous internet report that his velocity had dipped to the low-to-mid 80s, something that came as a complete surprise to Lofgren.

"That is definitely not true, so I don't know where they got that report," laughed Lofgren. "I am actually throwing as hard as I ever have in my whole career out here in the Arizona Fall League (AFL). I have the charts for every game that I have been in out here and every outing I have been 88 to 93 MPH."

With his mother's health improved, Lofgren has his own issues he now needs to concentrate on and overcome to get back to the pitcher he was two years ago. On a much smaller scale, his performance has been affected by his own personal cancer be it personal distractions, poor mechanics, or whatever. He knows he has to battle through it and find his way, and is on a mission to come back strong as a pitcher next season.

"My mom is better and now I need to start anew, so I feel like that is what I need to do," said Lofgren. "Next year I will put it behind me and I am going to go right after them like I did in previous years. I believe 100% I will come back next year. This year was a disappointing year, so people out there have my word I am going to come into spring training in better shape than I have ever been. They can count on my coming back strong by working hard, and I am going to come out lean and on a mission."

Lofgren is currently wrapping up his six week stay in the AFL. He has been living in his house he owns out in Mesa, and fellow Indians minor leaguers and AFL participants Erik Stiller and Neil Wagner are living with him.
His first week out there his mother came down from California to stay at the house and take care of them with some good home cooked meals, which was a blessing because while these guys may have the talent to throw a baseball they sure as heck don't have any talent in the kitchen.

With AFL play set to wrap up next week on November 20th, Lofgren's mother and father are both staying at the house for the final week.

As for Lofgren's performance so far in the AFL, the numbers are not very good (0-3, 28.29 ERA, 9 games, 7 IP, 18 H, 15 BB, 6 K). However, while the numbers are ugly, there are smaller more subtle positive things that are happening that do not show up in the box score.

Things that people cannot see unless they are there watching him pitch.

"My numbers are not great, but I feel like with every outing I have been making better progress," said Lofgren. "The AFL experience has been good and the competition is unbelievable. You have some of the best hitters in the minor leagues out here, the air is really thin and the ball really travels so you know there are going to be more home runs given up. I have been

working on a lot of stuff out here and it is going to come around.

I am not having as many walks, and a lot of my outs I am getting ahead in the count and I am putting away guys with my slider, which has really grown as a weapon for me.

Pitchers get into slumps.

Look at hitters, they get into slumps and things happen, and once they correct it and come out of it they are great again.

It is one of those things where stuff is going to happen and once you correct it, it all will click back together

I just feel that now that this has been taken off my shoulders I can fully focus on the task at hand and that is being a major league baseball player and pitching for the Cleveland Indians and someday contributing at the major league level."

While out in the AFL, Lofgren is currently enrolled at the University of Phoenix and taking on-line courses. He has been doing this year-round since the 2005 offseason, and he already has his associate's degree and is working on his bachelor's degree in criminal justice.

If the baseball career does not work out, he wants to follow in his father's footsteps who has been a San Francisco police officer for 35 years and is a veteran of the Vietnam War.

Once the fall league wraps up next week, Lofgren will take some time away from baseball to decompress by spending the rest of November and December home for the holidays with his mother and the rest of the family. After that, things will quickly shift to making that big comeback in 2009.

"Once I leave the fall league I am going to go home and celebrate Thanksgiving with my family and see a lot of my family members that I have not seen in a year or two," said Lofgren. "Then on January 1st I am heading down to Los Angeles and working out with my agent. They setup a facility to workout at as well as a trainer that I will be working out with everyday. Then I will report [to spring training] in mid-February."

When Lofgren reports for spring training his parents will be able to attend much easier than in years past since the Indians will now be training in Goodyear, Arizona. Lofgren plans to live in his house during spring training and make the 40-minute commute each day, and expects his parents and possibly other family members to stay with him for most of his time there.

As always, Lofgren's mother will be there to cook some more good meals and continue to be her son's biggest fan. She has always been there for him, and one of his greatest memories of his mother came his junior year in high school when he hit a game-winning home run in the bottom of the ninth inning against St. Francis High School for the league division championship, a game played at Santa Clara Stadium.

"She came over to me as the whole team was celebrating going crazy and giving my high fives and hugs, and I turned around and she was walking toward me," recalled Lofgren. "Her eyes were filled with tears and she was crying so hard and she just came up to me and hugged me and I felt right then and there I wanted to cry there with her because that was a moment we shared that meant so much to her and to me as well.

My mom has always been there for me and done everything I have ever asked of her and has always been very supportive."

Like when he was a little boy in T-ball or Little League, or when he hit that game-winning home run his junior year in high school, Pamela Lofgren will be there to support her son as he sets out on what will be a crucial year for her son's baseball career. That is Pamela Lofgren. A loving, supportive wife and mother, and courageous to no end.

"She is not only a miracle," said Lofgren, "but she is a woman that God has truly blessed and an inspiration for everyone.

Be sure to listen to Smoke Signals next Thursday November 20th at 9:30pm EST as Lofgren will be a special guest on our radio program.

Photo courtesy of Carl Kline