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Olivia Newton-John Talks About Her Career And Battle With Breast Cancer

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GRAMMY award winner Olivia Newton-John talks with EmpowHER about "Grease", getting "Physical", and advocating for her health after her breast cancer diagnosis.

Transcript:

Todd Hartley:

Joining us is actress and four-time GRAMMY award winner Olivia Newton-John. Hi Olivia!

Olivia Newton-John:

Hi, how are you doing?

Todd Hartley:

I'm doing great; real nice to talk with you.

Olivia Newton-John:

Thank you.

Todd Hartley:

Our audience is excited to get caught up and to know about what you are doing now but before we get started can we talk about "Grease" a little bit?

Olivia Newton-John:

Of course. How can you not?

Todd Hartley:

Of course, right? How can you not? Why do you think that movie is so beloved by so many?

Olivia Newton-John:

I think it's just got an amazing energy and the music is great and it's the costumes -

everything is larger than life and it's just got this amazing energy, people, it seems, love things about school because everyone has I guess, incredible memories of being in high school and everyone in it is a character that you probably recognized in someone that you know. It just has... I don't know. I guess everyone has been trying to figure out what it was and do it again but they can't, so, except, I guess "Glee" and "High School Musical" are on a similar theme to that because people love things about schools.

Todd Hartley:

It seems like we all grew up with the music. We know it by heart so when it comes on we're singing it. I'm wondering, have you ever been in public and somebody has been singing your song or singing to your song and you have kind of spied on them, you know, without them knowing? Did you ever have an experience like that?

Olivia Newton-John:

I don't know if I've had exactly that; I had some pretty wild experiences though with people and they can sometimes spontaneously burst into song, yes.

Todd Hartley:

Truly funny, I'd be the person that'd get caught. Is it a coincidence? It's been 30 years since roughly the start of the fitness revolution and now we are coming on the 30-year anniversary of the release of "Physical". You hit it at the right time and now you've tapped into another big thing so talk to me about, first about "Physical" and the release 30 years ago and the fitness craze that really started right around that same time.

Olivia Newton-John:

Well it was really amazing timing. I always thought, "I probably should have done the video," right? But it did seem to be the start of that particular interest in getting physical. Jane Fonda did an amazing video right then, but it was interesting because the song was a song that I knew it was a hit but the minute after I had recorded it I kind of freaked out and thought I had gone to far and I called my manager and I said, "You've got to pull it off. Don't release it. It's too raunchy. I am nervous about it." He said, "Well, it's too late. It's gone to radio," and it went to radio and it went to No. 1 in like three weeks. I mean for ten weeks it was like one of those things that I grew to love but I was freaked out in the beginning and I was banned in Utah and all this stuff, so it's been an interesting journey.

In fact, we just re-released it. When I did a recent episode of the show "Glee" I re-recorded it and sang it with Jane Lynch so I've had a couple of anniversaries - "Physical" anniversary and the "Grease" anniversary.

Todd Hartley:

I remember being at the Universal Amphitheatre when you performed "Physical" and I don't know, it was like 1981 or 1982 but it was a big moment in my life and I'm sure at that age you were going through a lot of pressure. Can you describe some of the emotional pressure that a young performing star goes through and then what comes to mind when you are seeing a young, emerging star going through similar pressures?

Olivia Newton-John:

Well the pressures were different then. We didn't have the Paparazzi craze like it is now and the lack of privacy and invasion of privacy. I mean I remember being photographed a few times in situations like over a fence and freaking out but it was not a common thing in those days. But now it is part of the ... unfortunately, part of the world that these whole young people have to deal with and I think it's very difficult.

My pressure was more on myself. I put a lot of pressure on myself in those days. I was a perfectionist and I always wanted everything to be perfect and I was always scared of forgetting something or getting something wrong. So I was just, you know, I had nerves about performing, but I think that's normal and that's probably good. It gives you energy and makes you focus well.

Todd Hartley:

I read that when you were diagnosed, that same weekend was the weekend that your father passed away.

Olivia Newton-John:

Yes.

Todd Hartley:

And for those struggling with challenges right now, and EmpowHER deals with providing answers, can you provide some type of wisdom for a woman who might be going through life's challenges right now?

Olivia Newton-John:

Oh goodness, I think everyone deals with it in a different way. I would suggest they find some kind of spiritual outlet in some way. Something that's going to give them some solace, whatever that would be, whether it would be mediation, whether it would be prayer, whether it would be singing, whether it's walking in nature - something that makes you feel good and brings you back to the moment. Release your tears and fears. Have someone to either talk to or don't feel embarrassed about that because it's normal and it's great to be able to talk to someone that you feel safe with about what you are going through.

They have lots of groups now for people who are going through cancer, which is wonderful you know, with the Internet you can find groups of people, even meet them without having to actually meet them, but you can talk to people.

What I find is really helpful and helpful for me at the time, often when you are going through something like cancer, people's reactions will freak you out. You will tell someone and instead of them going, "Oh you'll be right," which is what you want to hear, they burst into tears and it frightens you. Get somebody else to deal with talking to people about your journey and what you are going through so you can focus on the healing and not on the illness all the time because that's not a positive place to be.

Think positively about the outcome because your thinking affects your outcome and your

reality. Your thoughts affect your reality so try and find things that make you feel positive about life. Of course learn about dietary things that can help you, what medical channel you want to go to, focus on the positive. Laugh and laugh as much as you can because laughter is very healing and of course do all the things with the vitamins in the food and all things that are important and exercise, but that's probably a nutshell view of the million things that you will go through.

Todd Hartley:

At EmpowHER we help women advocate for themselves. Going through your breast cancer battle, what did you learn about advocating for yourself?

Olivia Newton-John:

Gosh, I learned so much. I probably didn't realize how much I learned until now or many years later when you look back. So at the time, I think a lot of women think, "Oh gosh, I don't think I could do it if it happened to me," and then it happens to you and you realize you can do it and you will do it and you'll get through it and you'll find strength that you never knew you had and you pull on strengths and I think very often the people that think they are the least likely they'll be able to get through it do, but I think also the ones that are very fearful have to keep this positive attitude about, "I can get this."

So this is one of the reasons I like to talk about it is because here I am 18 years later and I am talking about it and I was fearful of talking about it the first five years because a lot of women are until we get to that five-year marker, but all I can really say is, here I am and I am here so you can be. You know, it's like having that positive thought and believing that you can be, of course not everybody is as fortunate and I realize that and I am very grateful that I am, but that positive attitude does really help in how you go through the journey.

Todd Hartley:

Yeah, it seems like, if I'm understanding what you're saying, you've taken the mess that you were given, your breast cancer, and you've turned it into your message.

Olivia Newton-John:

I like that.

Todd Hartley:

It's really beautiful.

Now I understand in October you are traveling the globe. You are promoting Liv® Aid and it's a breast self-exam and you've already had 1.3 million distributed, is that right, 1.3? That's amazing.

Olivia Newton-John:

I believe that's how many have been given and I walked the China Wall many years ago and promoted it so it's been going on for a while but now we've joined up with the partner of Geiger - a wonderful company who are partners in distributing the Liv® and you want to see it?

Todd Hartley:

Yes.

Olivia Newton-John:

Okay, it's an amazing thing actually. It's a heart shaped medical device that helps women do regular self-breast examination. It's a reminder. It's very simple - you just place it over your breast and it actually magnifies your touch. If you want to come forward I can show you how it works.

Todd Hartley:

Is it the water that magnifies the touch?

Olivia Newton-John:

It's not a water. It's a very special fluid in here, I don't know the name of it but I can ask my medical expert Dr. Bodai to give you the name.

Todd Hartley:

It's not necessary.

Olivia Newton-John:

But it's a very fine material, but just feel this with your fingers and then feel that. Now there are rice kernels in there. Can you feel them?

Todd Hartley:

A lot better now.

Olivia Newton-John:

A lot better now. And I like to do it with the salt, which is, you know how tiny salt kernels are. Feel that with your fingers. Now do it on the inside, now feel it.

Todd Hartley:

Yeah, it's very magnified, you're right.

Olivia Newton-John:

So therefore if there's any lumps in your breast and you are doing this on a regular basis you can see what's normal for you and what isn't and if it grows or changes and then you can go to a doctor and have it checked out. And I found my lump myself, that's why I am so gung-ho about this device. I think it's amazing because you trust your fingers and you know, when I went I found a lump myself, not with the Liv®, just with my hand and my doctor sent me for a mammogram and it didn't show and he did a needle biopsy and it didn't show.

So if I hadn't found it by my hand I wouldn't have been so emphatic that we went further and we did and we found breast cancer. So that's why, and I found it early and that's why I encourage women to do this regularly and if you find anything, and usually it's nothing, but if it is something and you find it earlier your chances of survival are much greater.

Todd Hartley:

Yeah, and ounce of ... what is it, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Olivia Newton-John:

That’s right. You should write a book with your little sayings.

Todd Hartley:

They aren’t my sayings; I feel them. Now I do notice that you’ve got a breast cancer docudrama coming up called “1 a Minute”. Can you explain how women can get involved and help support the docudrama?

Olivia Newton-John:

Well they can go see it. It’s going to be in about 500 theaters and it’s going to benefit Susan G. Komen. I have forgotten, it’s part of her organization -- Susan G. Komen organization and it’s about women’s journey going through cancer and I’m one of them, I’m only one of the people in the documentary but Jaclyn Smith and Melissa Etheridge are also involved and I think women from all around the world who have been through the cancer journey. So I think it will be a wonderful experience.

Todd Hartley:

You know it’s been really nice experiencing your life and what you create along the way and Olivia Newton-John, thank you so much for helping us improve health and change lives.

Olivia Newton-John:

Thank you, nice to meet you.

Todd Hartley:

Thank you.

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