

# DAILY NEWS

## She takes long road to marathon in N.Y.

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EVEN THOUGH she grew up an "Army brat," Monica Szymanski never considered herself an athletic type.

"I was always an outdoors person, but not that coordinated," she says. "I never would have pictured myself in a role of finishing a marathon."

But that is exactly what the 37-year-old Szymanski will attempt to do this Sunday in the 35th running of the New York Marathon. Only unlike most of the 36,000 entrants, Szymanski will rely on the strength of her arms to conquer the 26-plus miles through the five boroughs.

Nearly a year and a half ago, doctors at Walter Reed Army Medical Center performed 10 hours of surgery to removed Szymanski's left leg after she was diagnosed with a cancerous mass in her pelvis.

She was only five months removed from giving birth to her first child, Nicholas, and two months removed from hav-

ing lost her father, Charles, to cancer. The cataclysm of events immediately put her life into fast forward.

"Initially, after surgery, I felt defeated," says Szymanski. "I felt like I was looking down a dark water well. It was scary. Many times over I felt like I was within inches of falling into the well."

However, with the help of the Achilles Track Club, Szymanski found what she thinks will be a catalyst for overcoming all future physical challenges. Along with more than 300 participants in the club who compete with prosthetic limbs or in wheelchairs, Szymanski will head to the starting line Sunday in a hand-crank wheelchair with the goal of making it to the finish line at Tavern on the Green.

She will also have a special rooting section on hand. Nicholas, now nearly 2, as well as her husband Chris, will make the trip from their home at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. Chris is a 1st Lieutenant with the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations and just returned from his second tour in Kuwait.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime event," Szymanski says. "I'm getting butterflies and am really nervous. I just want to finish. You really can't put a price on what this means. I was so scared at first that I wasn't going to be able to live another day and see my son grow up."

"There's frustration in every day that I live. I'm a very independent person and what kills me is that I'll have to rely on help — always — for the rest of my life. So just being able to do it will be amazing. For me, crossing the finish line will allow me to say, 'This is for me.'"



Monica Szymanski, shown with son Nicholas, will compete in Sunday's marathon in hand-crank wheelchair.