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Erica Ortiz Overcomes Adversity, Fights to Reclaim Racing Dream

Fueled by a desire to race, Erica Ortiz, marketing communications manager at Southwire's TRC Clearwater Plant, aims to return to the racetrack after a nine-year leave of absence.

Ortiz's desire to race dates back to high school, where she switched her focus from becoming a combat pilot in the Air Force to drag racing. In 2000, she officially began her drag racing career and immediately fell in love with the sport.

In 2003, Ortiz became the first woman in the drag radial class to navigate the $\frac{1}{4}$ mile course in less than nine seconds and drive more than 160 mph on a radial tire, a record she pushed up to 175 mph in 2004. After finding quick success, Ortiz turned her concentration to the PRO series.

After taking a season off and obtaining her Advanced ET license, certifying her to drive more than 200 mph and navigate a quarter of a mile in less than seven seconds, Ortiz began competing in the PRO series with a racing team operating on a small budget.

"We were competing with an old 1986 Thunderbird chassis and we used a production Ford engine block and antiquated parts," said Ortiz. "Most of my competitors had state-of-the-art racing equipment. We were the ultimate underdogs with just a fraction of the budget of our competitors."

During her rookie season in the PRO series, Ortiz finished second in overall points, second at two events and broke several records on the track. Most notably, she became the first woman to drive more than 200 mph and run in the "six second zone."

Following her rookie season, Ortiz decided to rebuild her racing program, but her plans were put on hold when the team lost sponsors due to the recession, forcing Ortiz to sideline her racing and focus solely on her marketing career. In addition to these trials, Ortiz was also diagnosed with cervical cancer during this time.

"Genetically, it ran in my family, and I had already had several earlier trouble spots removed," said Ortiz. "Although I had been very proactive about its progress, they had removed so much that it became questionable if I would ever be able to have a family of my own."

After reaching out to various specialists, Ortiz found one who was willing to perform a risky procedure that would remove the cancer spots, and allow her to have children. Ortiz is now cancer-free,



and in January 2013, she started a family. Through every battle Ortiz faced, she never lost sight of her dream: racing.

"Now that I feel like I've achieved success professionally and personally, the only unfinished business for me is the racing," said Ortiz. "I believe that no matter what your goals may be, if you do one small thing each and every day, it will bring you closer to your goal, and you will achieve it."

Ortiz continuously faces the challenges of being a female in a male-dominated sport. Early in Ortiz's career, she struggled with being a woman in racing because she felt a need to conform to her male competitors. She grew weary of this and embraced her femininity.

"I quickly grew very tired of this stigma and set out to change it," said Ortiz. "I wanted to let everyone know that not only could I set records and drive a 3,000 HP Pro Modified racecar, but I could also look cute in a pair of size eight Pradas."

Currently, Ortiz is working to attain sponsorships for her car, which she hopes will get her back to the track in less than six months. In the meantime, Ortiz advocates for women in the racing field and writes about women in motorsports as a columnist for Examiner.com. She also serves as a mentor and resource provider for women through her website, Horsepower and Heels, an organization dedicated to helping women navigate male-dominated motorsports.

For sharing her story with ISW, Ortiz wins a \$25 gift card for the Southwire Store. Send your suggestions to iswstories@southwire.com or call 770-832-4794.