

Courtesy: Erica Vorhauer

By [Stephanie Booth](#)

Two days into her Maui honeymoon in 2002, Erica Vorhauer (pictured, right), then 32, began experiencing excruciating pain in her ankles and knees. She could barely climb aboard a boat. And although she and her new husband were spending their days relaxing on the beach, Vorhauer felt oddly exhausted.

After returning home to Richmond, Virginia, Vorhauer made an appointment with her family doctor. But she already knew what he was going to tell her: Like her father and grandmother, she had [rheumatoid arthritis, or RA](#).

A [chronic autoimmune disease](#) that attacks healthy tissue lining the joints in the body, RA affects about three million Americans and strikes two to three times more women than men. The disease usually first appears during middle age, even though it may occur in the 20s and 30s, which is what happened to Vorhauer.

“I always thought I would end up with RA because of my family history,” Vorhauer, now 39, says. “I just didn’t think it would happen so soon.”

When her doctor first explained that Vorhauer wouldn’t be able to return to her successful career as a property manager, she thought it would only be for a short time. “When he said, ‘No, you’re not going back at *all*,’ it was like having the rug ripped out from underneath me,” she says.

Within six months, Vorhauer’s [arthritis](#) had advanced to the point that she could no longer brush her hair or button a shirt. Her husband had to help her out of the bathtub.

“I had always done everything I was supposed to — [eaten healthy, worked out regularly](#) — and this was still happening to me? It was depressing.”

Her doctor prescribed various combinations of medications to attempt to alleviate Vorhauer’s pain, including [steroids](#) and antimalarial and [chemotherapy drugs](#), which inhibit activity of the immune system and have been used for arthritis treatment for years.

Through [The Arthritis Foundation](#), a national non-profit organization which seeks to improve the lives of those living with arthritis, Vorhauer found not only informa-

tion and support for her condition, but a new purpose.

“I decided I was going to get involved and make a difference,” she says.

She’s since devoted herself to increasing awareness about RA, speaking out on Capitol Hill and campaigning for legislation that would create more research funding.

Today, Vorhauer’s arthritis is in remission for the first time in eight years. It has come at a price — her current medication costs \$550 every six weeks. And she is no longer married.

“My condition put a huge wedge between us,” she says.

But she is taking [hatha yoga](#) classes, [walking](#) her dog and planning to spend her fortieth birthday in Paris with girlfriends, one of whom was diagnosed with RA around the same time Vorhauer was.

“RA is not an old person’s disease. Women in child-bearing age are being diagnosed with it faster than anyone else,” she says. “More attention needs to be paid to it.”

More About Arthritis:

[Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis](#)

[Go Vegan to Ease Arthritis Pain](#)

[Arthritis in the Workplace](#)