

Mom keeps deadly disease at bay: Ovarian Cancer walk co-chair urges awareness

By LYNN SAWYER special to The Sunday Herald | Sunday, September 4th 2011

When Monique Hurley was in hospital for a routine ultrasound, she was eager for a peek at her baby.

To reach that 20-week ultrasound “is huge,” says Hurley, a 29-year-old teacher, who had been trying for two years to get pregnant.

“I know where the baby is,” Hurley told the technologist. “On my lower right side.”

But the tech kept going to the left. Hurley wondered why but wasn’t worried.

When the ultrasound showed a large tumor, shock overtook her joy. She was whisked away to the high-risk floor. She heard she might lose the baby; her body went numb.

In emergency surgery the next day, the baby kicked the doctor throughout. A 2.7-kilogram tumour and one ovary were removed.

Hurley had a month to recover before learning in September 2009 that the tumor was a rare ovarian cancer.

“It was like...knock the wind out of your sails. Everything completely changes...your perspective on life. The milestones of pregnancy became milestones of the disease.

“They wanted me to do chemo while I was pregnant. I was so close, I didn’t want to. I carried her until 34 1/2 weeks.”

Lauren weighed 1.5 pounds, less than the tumour.

“The day she was born, my first hour, was amazing,” said Hurley.

With a mix of joy and relief, she called her father in Yellowknife. It was the first time she’d heard him cry.

“After all that, she looks like her dad,” recalled Hurley. “Blond hair, blue eyes -- a mini Jason.”

Hurley started chemotherapy in just under two weeks.



Five days a week, hooked up to an IV, some days four hours, some for six. Reading counseling textbooks refocused her mind. She calmed herself by deep breathing or visualizing herself at Lauren’s school in a few years.

She became her own Therapist.

“I was so tired, but Jason and I still got up nights.”

Hurley was hardly eating. Food tasted metallic. Weak but determined, she wanted to bond with her daughter.

“This could be my only child. Like I only have one ovary.”

All that was two years ago. These days, Hurley, co-chair of the Sept. 11 Halifax Ovarian Cancer Walk of Hope (ovariancancerwalkofhope.ca), juggles Lauren’s potty training between emails, meetings and cooking for a cause.

So far, she is the second highest individual fundraiser for the Halifax walk. All walk-related funds support research for accurate early detection.

“We have not found a screening test yet,” said Jim Bentley, chief of gynecological oncology for Capital Health. “Typically, ovarian cancer is diagnosed in women over 50.”

It’s often not detected until it’s in late stages.

“In my case, it wasn’t too late,” said Hurley. “That’s why I think awareness would bring a lot of people the same opportunity I had.”

Hurley’s doctor is positive about her prognosis.

“Everything is looking good, so I’m going to keep thinking that way,” said Hurley.

Master’s degree in hand, she’s looking for a counseling job. She doesn’t stress over the hunt anymore.

In the meantime, she savours every moment with her husband and daughter.

“Everything happened for a reason. Everything is going to work itself out.”

