

Long-time volunteer aims to inspire as Relay's Honourary Survivor



By Brock Weir

Relay for Life has always been a busy time for Michelle Clayton-Wood.

The long-time volunteer, and Newmarket resident, has been helping the Canadian Cancer Society plan their annual event for over a decade now using her expertise not only in the planning stages, but also organizing fun and games for the kids, and helping cancer survivors at the Relay itself.

This year, however, is different. Somewhat reluctant to put herself out there on the frontlines, she will share her story with the hundreds expected at this year's event as the 'Honourary Survivor' for this year's event.

The 2015 Relay for Life will be an event of firsts. This year, the Newmarket Relay will be the focus of Northern York Region, having merged late last year with the Aurora Relay, which was previously held at Magna Headquarters. 2015 will also be, for many, somewhat less daunting, whittled down to six hours from an all-night affair.

'I am just used to keeping my head down and doing all the volunteer work and the legwork, but this might be a chance for me to grow within the organization and help a little more and learn about other ways of helping to give back,' says Ms. Clayton-Wood. 'I am very happy to have this honour.'

Although I have been a survivor all these years, I haven't decided to be very public about it. Bringing up my kids and running my business, I just kept it in the background. I have always been a volunteer, but never really put up my hand [to share my story]. I am really excited and I also feel I can help people realise people can live with cancer and maybe I can be a little bit of a role model.'

When Ms. Clayton-Wood was looking for ways to give back, she looked no further than the Canadian Cancer Society because, in her view, without them, raising her children and running that business would have been decidedly more difficult as she battled the disease.

Diagnosed with cancer 15 years ago, she endured 40 radiation treatments and three weeks of chemotherapy, but the Stronach Cancer Centre at Southlake Regional Health Centre was still some years away from becoming a reality. Trips to Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital were a regular reality for Ms. Clayton Wood, a particular challenge when trying to run a business while raising two children aged 2 and 5.

'With the support of the Canadian Cancer Society, I managed to get through that,' she says. 'I was driven down to my treatments at Sunnybrook every day. They would take me down every day and every night, because I really wanted to be home with my children who were still so young, to see them every night before bed and have dinner with them, even though I couldn't eat. That was really important to me. I was trying to figure out the logistics of how this was going to work and [the Society] guided me through all that. I owe a lot to this organization.'

For more information on Relay for Life, to sign up, or support teams, visit www.relayforlife.ca. The combined Newmarket-Aurora Relay for Life takes place at Pickering College on Friday, June 19, from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m.