

Honourary Survivor made every moment count



By Brock Weir

'Expect to lose about a year of your life.'

That was one of the messages Lori Futterer, then 37, received over five years ago when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

The words may have been well-meaning preparation for what was to come as the mother of three got into the right mindset to battle her illness, but turned out to be more than a simple caution. It was a watershed moment, a catalyst to do her utmost to make the exact opposite a reality.

'At the time, what went through in my head is I can't imagine losing a year of my life when I don't know how long my life was going to be,' says Ms. Futterer. 'It was at that moment I made a very conscious decision I was going to make it the best year I could under the circumstances and mapped out a plan moving forward. How could I make this the best possible scenario for me, my kids, for my friends and approach it in a way that is going to make it okay?'

During her illness, she took a year's leave of absence from her work as a business professor at Toronto's George Brown College, started to make the preparations for the year ahead, underwent a double-mastectomy and then prepared her children for what was to come. They were 13, 10 and seven at the time and she and her husband decided the best approach was complete honesty but still accentuating the positive.

'Once I had my surgery and could look them in the eye and say I was cancer free, and we started from there,' she recalls. 'When I went through chemotherapy, I told them. 'Mom's cancer free and isn't this a wonderful thing that we have this medicine that is going to make sure she stays healthy?'

'When I was going to lose my hair, and instead of waiting for it to fall out, I had a big party and invited all my girlfriends over. My kids actually shaved my head for me, we celebrated and made it a really cool thing. We went through all the milestones as celebrations to make them feel comfortable with everything.'

Ms. Futterer is doing a lot of reflection these days over her battles and will be sharing her remarkable story of survival and positivity with people who may be battling the disease, survivors, or those who may be affected by it next month as the Honourary Survivor for Aurora's Relay for Life.

She first got involved with the Canadian Cancer Society, the hosts of the Relay, in the early days of her cancer journey. A native of Elora, ON, her mother and her life-long family friends wanted to do more to support her in her battle than just dropping off a casserole or taking turns driving her to her appointments. They decided to enter a team in their local relay in her honour. According to Ms. Futterer, they were so successful their first year out they decided to do it again and she herself joined in at her own one year mark. Eventually they brought their 'Circle of Sisters' team to the Aurora Relay where they have been ever since.

As part of her Honourary Survivor duties, the Aurora resident will not only be asked to share her story but lead the way in the moving 'survivors lap', one of the showpieces of the annual event.

'It is going to be very emotional,' she says. 'I have always said you need to find our milestone and getting there was big in my recovery. That will be emotional and the fact that my kids will be there and my friends and family, it feels to me that I have achieved a lot in my life, but this is the biggest accomplishment so far.'

'I think the lesson sounds cliché, but I think awareness of living in the moment heightened my appreciation for it,' she says. 'One of the biggest messages I tell my students is that positive and negative are directions and you have to choose which direction you're going to take. It is a choice and any obstacle that we can come against, we can choose to either feel beaten down and scared, frustrated, and lonely, or we can choose another path and to live that path. Sometimes you're dealt a crappy hand, but you still have to go all in. Put the poker chips on the table and live like you're engaged, all-in, there and present.'

This positive attitude has been passed onto the next generation. Ms. Futterer's son, Tyler, now 16, is undertaking a fundraiser of his own to raise money for the Circle of Sisters, organizing a night of good music and good food in Oak Ridges on May 5. Having singlehandedly booked the bands and the venue, he aims to raise \$6,000 for the team. For more information on the event, email futterer@sympatico.ca.

For more information on Relay for Life, visit www.relayforlife.ca/aurora.