

?Reluctant survivor? is inspiration behind Aurora walk

By Brock Weir

Debbie Antonio is not your typical survivor.

Ms. Antonio has had a clean bill of health for five years after a long battle with ovarian cancer. The plight of the Bradford resident inspired her sister, Gayle Palmer, to bring together friends to form the Aurora Walk of Hope, an annual September walkathon to raise money for Ovarian Cancer Canada, in conjunction with the Aurora Farmers' Market.

In recent years, Ms. Palmer has described her sister as a ?reluctant? survivor, but this year in the lead up to the Walk of Hope, Ms. Antonio has shared her journey. The reluctance is still there, however. When asked what it feels like to be the inspiration behind the walk, she bristles just a little bit.

The reluctance, she says, is not a matter of shyness, but hesitating in case she becomes the ?face? of an issue which afflicts so many Canadian women each year.

?I am willing to talk about my story, but I don't want it to define me,? she says.

While the motives to raise money for Ovarian Cancer Canada are well-intentioned, just as important to her is the drive to raise awareness of the disease. Her story begins when she was not as well versed with the disease which was eventually her diagnosis.

Her body, she said, gave the first signals acting in unusual ways. Eventually the diagnosis was made and the journey began. After four rounds of chemotherapy, she eventually had a full hysterectomy. A tumour marker is normally between 0 and 35 for people with a clean bill of health. Upon her diagnosis, it was at nearly 4,100.

?My husband was surprised the surgery only lasted, from start to finish, an hour and a half,? she says. ?The doctor didn't see any tumour on the ovary with the naked eye and they didn't see any cancer. All they had to do was a complete hysterectomy with the ovaries. Then I had two more rounds of chemo and after that my CA-125 was back down to seven. I have had check-ups with oncologists, I'm clear, and in April I just celebrated my fifth year of being clean.?

Through her journey, Ms. Antonio says she found her chief source of support in her personal belief in God, her church and her family. Her church added her to prayer chains and she says there was comfort knowing she had so many people in her church community backing her in her fight.

She returns the favour, being an active volunteer in the church and wider community, focusing her energy on the less privileged and spending her time volunteering at A Hand Up, a clothing room operated by a local ministry.

Despite her reluctance, Ms. Antonio does indeed come out to support Ms. Palmer and her core group of volunteers who run the Walk of Hope in Aurora each year. Their efforts are not limited to the walk itself, but building awareness of Ovarian Cancer Canada throughout the community.

This spring their volunteers were on hand at Aurora's Boston Pizza eatery as celebrity servers. A portion of the food sales they brought in were donated to the charity.

?Nobody chooses to have cancer, but I felt because I didn't choose to have cancer I didn't want it to define me,? she says. ?I have a life outside of cancer, it effected my life and it has ongoing effects, but I personally didn't want to pick up the torch and be a spokesperson.

?Earlier in my journey, it was encouraging to be with people who had come through or had been further along on their journey. If I

am with someone whose loved one maybe didn't make it I feel safe for them, and, in some ways, I think then I have to battle survivor guilt to some degree.

?It is emotional because I know my sister Gayle took this and ran with it. That is her personality and she can carry it.?

The Aurora Walk of Hope will start off at Town Park on Saturday, September 14. Free registration begins at 9 a.m. In addition to the 3.5 km walk, there will be live music from Sarah Carmosino, speeches from survivors, a silent auction, jugglers, face painting, and lots of food and entertainment. For more information contact gaylepalmer@msn.com.