



Writing Sample

CHOOSING TREATMENT: A BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR STORY

The following article was part of a larger report titled: *Risky Decisions for Canadian Cancer Patients*. The report earned a Canadian Association of Journalists award in 2016.

STORY BY JESSE YARDLEY

It's still dark out. The sun is hiding below the horizon, stubbornly refusing to shed its warming rays on a growing crowd of Calgarians who have come to run or walk for the cure. There's warm coffee though, and a few early birds are taking advantage, trying to get warm on this crisp October morning. Everyone is adorned in pink, the internationally recognized colour of breast cancer awareness. People wearing pink wigs, feathered boas, gloves and hats congregate in small circles. A man in a gorilla costume sporting a pink bra and tutu kindles a few warm smiles. Many are wearing t-shirts marked with the word "hope." It's a common sentiment amongst those who've come to show their support, including 44-year-old Stephanie Dobbie and her husband Tim.



Stephanie is a breast cancer survivor. Like many others who've battled cancer, she's traversed a rocky road on her path to recovery. Along the way, she's made excruciating decisions about her treatment and puzzled over questions like, Should I have surgery? Should I do chemotherapy or radiation? What about alternative therapies? Stephanie says her fight with cancer started six years ago, at age 38, when she began feeling intense breast pain just taking off her bra. Medical tests determined she had breast

fibroids. According to the Canadian Cancer Society's website, fibrocystic breasts can cause tenderness and pain. Stephanie says the pain was enough to bring her to tears.

The tumours were non-cancerous, but there was a risk cancer could follow. She opted to have a lumpectomy surgery to remove the tumours and surrounding tissue, but the problem was recurring. The lumps kept coming back and each time the surgeon would remove them. In total, Stephanie had 18 tumours removed in five separate surgeries. Three of the lumps, located close to her ribs, were discovered to be cancerous after pathology testing.

Opting for a breast reduction surgery, Stephanie hoped this procedure would put an end to the recurring tumours, but when the doctor found more cancer behind her nipple, she was faced with the prospect of losing both her breasts. She decided a double mastectomy was the best way to avoid the risk of it coming back.

After five surgeries in as many years, Stephanie recalls saying, "That's it. I'm done. They're both going." Patients with genetic markers who are predisposed to breast cancer are typically prioritized for double mastectomy surgery. But Stephanie didn't have the markers, so she was categorized as lower priority. She'd have to wait.

"I was stage one when I was first diagnosed. They just kinda left me like that for a while before they did the surgery," Stephanie says. In the meantime, she underwent chemotherapy treatments and when she got too sick to continue, she was treated with radiation. That's when a friend recommended cannabis oil.

"I started ingesting it every day, three drops a day, and I started feeling better," she explains. On May 30, 2014,

Stephanie had her double mastectomy. Following the surgery, the pathology of the tumours came back clear. Stephanie was cancer free for the first time in four years. Although Stephanie admits she has no concrete proof, she believes cannabis oil was a big factor in her recovery.

“I’ve been told many, many times that cannabis oil kills cancer cells. It’s a cure. I’ve fought many people on this,” she says. “A lot of people don’t believe it’s true.” Some of those people included her friends and family who urged her to avoid alternative treatments. They don’t credit cannabis oil with same success. Instead, Stephanie says they credit her recovery to conventional approaches like the surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation she endured.

She knows it’s controversial but contends, “My belief — it was the cannabis oil. I don’t believe my treatments were the reason [I got better] because my treatments made me super sick.”

By January 2015, Stephanie was feeling great. Her appetite was back and she had regained her weight. With her cancer in remission, she was preparing to move on with her life. The plan was to move forward with a breast reconstruction surgery. It was a procedure she’d been looking forward to for a long time. “I was all excited about getting my boobs back,” she says with a laugh.

Then in June 2015 her throat began to hurt. Her family doctor prescribed antibiotics, but to no avail. Next, she was referred to a throat specialist who discovered her lymph nodes were as hard as rocks. After a series of tests, the news returned. It was throat cancer. “All I could think was, I thought we got it,” she laments.

Now, Stephanie is facing difficult treatment decisions once again. She says she’d like to continue cannabis oil, but worries about the legality of using this substance.

“There are many, many days when I’m crying myself to sleep,” she says. “The best thing to do is go back on the cannabis oil. But trying to find it is the hardest thing. It’s not legalized and I’m not an unlawful person.”

She says it’s a horrible feeling to have to break the law to get treatment. She suggests that Canada legalizes it. For now, she’s decided to stick with the conventional treatments she’s been advised to take. That means chemotherapy pills four days on, three days off.

Despite recently being diagnosed with throat cancer, it hasn’t stopped Stephanie from attending events like Run for the Cure and supporting others who are also fighting cancer. “Just because I’m sick, doesn’t mean I’m dead,” says



Stephanie defiantly. “I’m living my life as best as I can. I keep a smile on my face and keep as positive as I can. I’m going to kick the crap out of the beast.”

A few days after the Run for the Cure, Stephanie’s treatments are taking their toll. “My hair’s gone already. Tim and I just decided to shave my head. We were choking on it,” she laughs.

Having the support of her friends and family helps Stephanie deal with the fact that she’s back on the battlefield. “It’s overwhelming. I have more support now than I did before and it feels good,” she says.

But it’s a two-way street. Stephanie gives as much support as she gets, and undergoing chemotherapy hasn’t stopped her from giving her time to help others in need. On Nov. 7, 2015, she modeled in Calgary’s True Beauty Gala Fundraiser, an event designed to raise awareness and pay tribute to breast cancer survivors.

Her husband, Tim Dobbie says he’s very proud of his wife’s strength and courage. “It’s hard not to get emotional,” Tim says. “[But] just because you’ve had this diagnosis doesn’t mean your life is over.”

Although she has plenty of emotional support, it’s financial support that has been harder to come by. Some of the complementary therapies Stephanie would like to use, such as acupuncture, are not covered by her healthcare plan.



On Nov. 12, 2015 she set up a GoFundMe page with the goal of raising \$10,000. She posted on Facebook, “Well, with a lot of soul searching, and tons of swallowing of my pride.... I’ve had to open up a gofundme account. Please help and share. Thank you.”