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BY JODIE SINNEMA, EDMONTON JOURNAL OCTOBER 4, 2010



From left, Lianne Hanson and her mom Mary McDonald and Lianne's daughter Abby take part in the Run for the Cure in Edmonton on Oct. 3, 2010.

Photograph by: Candace Elliott, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON - Magdalen Hanson knows Auntie Lianne is sick. Again.

But there's only so much the six-year-old -- dressed in pink sunglasses, pink hat with pink flower, pink leggings, pink hoodie and pink flowered socks -- can truly comprehend about what Auntie is facing.

Magdalen is trying to do her part, donating \$1 every week to fight cancer (the rest of her six-dollar allowance is spent on everything Barbie) and walking with 10,000 others during Sunday's Run for the Cure in Edmonton. Magdalen raised more than \$250 for the cause.

"I don't think it's really good to have cancer," she says simply. Her blond hair is in a bob and streaked with pink spray, leftover from her Deedee Doodlebop costume. "It was 10 inches (long) and I cut it off for wigs."

Auntie Lianne Hanson had no wig Sunday morning, only a pink bandana to protect her bald head from the bright sun and fresh morning wind.

The 33-year-old couldn't hold back tears as the crowd, all fighting for a cure, embraced her with dance, song and stories. Hanson thought she had done everything possible to ward off the disease. She had her breasts cut off, then rebuilt, after finding a lump in her right breast. She had her ovaries, uterus and Fallopian tubes sliced out before hereditary cancer cells took hold. She cut off her hair before chemotherapy could steal it away.

She gave up her dream to have a second child to ensure she would be around for first-born Abigail and husband Jason.

Most women face a 12-per-cent risk of developing breast cancer and less than two per cent of developing ovarian cancer in their lifetime. According to the Canadian Cancer Society, 180 men and 23,200 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in Canada in 2010. Between 84 and 87 per cent will still be alive five years later.

A small subsection of these people have hereditary breast cancer instead of the much more common sporadic breast cancer.

A rare genetic mutation of the breast cancer gene -- BRCA1, inherited from her mother and Nana -- ups Hanson's risk of developing breast cancer to between 57 and 85 per cent. It also puts her risk of getting ovarian cancer at 40 per cent, or 20 to 25 times higher than women without the BRCA1 mutation.

Hanson thought she had outsmarted that wonky gene.

Then, on July 5, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. Breast cancer. Even though she doesn't have any of her own breast tissue left, since she had her "bitty boobies" rebuilt with muscles from her back.

She has four lumps: one in her neck, one by a lung, one under her arm, one in the centre of her right chest.

"It's like a sheet (of cancer)," Hanson explained. During her first cancer scare, pathologists found out she had lymphovascular invasion, where cancer cells were entering vessels in Hanson's body that are so small that doctors have difficulty knowing if they're lymphatic or blood vessels. That meant Hanson's cancer may have spread through her blood or her lymphatic system, even though a November 2008 biopsy found no evidence of cancer cells in her lymph nodes.

As a precaution, Hanson had chemotherapy and had her reproductive cavity scraped out.

But in the end, "the one little cell did escape through my blood."

The good news: "It hasn't gone to my lungs or organs or bones -- I don't want to say 'yet.' "

The bad news: "It's not curable. It's not terminal, but it's treatable."

Most people in Hanson's shoes go into remission for five to 10 years before the cancer comes back. Only a small percentage are never infected again.

"Why can't it be me?" Hanson said. "Why not beat the odds and get rid of it?"

Her mom, Mary McDonald, calls it a family curse. Her mother had the gene and died from a horrific, painful cancer. McDonald had the gene and survived after a double mastectomy, hysterectomy and oophorectomy, where her ovaries were taken out. Lianne got that gene. Lianne's younger sister learned recently she has it too. The chances were 50-50.

"Honestly, there are no words," said McDonald, cradling two-year-old Abby in her arms while someone on the stage at the cancer run sang the Guns N' Roses song Sweet Child of Mine.

"We all believed everything would be fine," she said. "This has really opened up our eyes. We need to do more. We've got people with cancer to take care of."

McDonald won't succumb to the anger or the bitterness. Ironically, cancer gives life meaning, she said. She tells people she loves them more, hugs them closely, appreciates time with family.

"I believe in miracles. The people at this run are helping to make that happen. ... We will get through it because we are strong women."

"It's OK. I'm holding on tight," Hanson said.

The first type of chemotherapy didn't work. It only shrank three tumours while a fourth sprouted up. She's now trying a second kind of chemo.

"I can't just sit and die," she said, pulling out T-shirts for the team Hanson's Hooter Helpers. Around her were people in pink feather boas and pink cowboy hats, pink firefighter gear or pink angel wings.

"I want to live and my sister has the gene now and who knows if Abby will have it? We have to do something. We have to find a cure for this."

[jsinnema@edmontonjournal.com](mailto:jsinnema@edmontonjournal.com)

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