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Young cancer survivor ready to write next chapter of her life

Pat Healey



Photo by: Shari Tucker

ENFIELD: Jennifer Williams is living life like any normal 10-year-old girl would, however, she isn't a normal 10-year-old. Jennifer is a survivor of cancer, having been diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Burkitt's Lymphoma two years ago. For her bravery in fighting through, she is among 30 other survivors who were a part of a photo-shoot to show how they've overcome a disease that takes many lives each year, as a way to show that Cancer is beatable.

The photo shoot for Jennifer took place May 21, at the Halifax Public Gardens, where she would go many times with her family while in hospital for treatment.

"I like going there. Before going into the hospital for treatment, we would never go there a lot," Jennifer said. "It's very pretty." Jennifer and the 30 others, all under the age of 30, will have the photographs taken during the shoots used as part of the 2009 exhibit aptly titled, Young and Fearless - Inspiration of Cancer Survivors, put on by Halifax-based photographer Shari Tucker. This year's event, which will bring together all the participants, their friends and families to see the photographs Tucker took of each, along with a story from each survivor, will take place in October.

Seven of Tucker's photographs from her first exhibit in 2008 were selected to be a part of Photosensitive's Cancer Connections national exhibit tour, which will stop at Dalhousie University in Halifax Sept. 10-27.

One of the photos Tucker took of Jennifer symbolized her defeat of cancer and included a box of hats.

"I threw them all up in the air," Jennifer exclaimed. "I don't need these anymore."

A definition of the type of cancer Jennifer had is described on pharmaceutical research company Merck's website (<http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec14/ch177/ch177c.html>). It states, "This type of disease is fast-growing and originates from B lymphocytes. It can develop in a person of any age, but is most common in children and young adults, specifically males and has a specific geographic distribution, that being Central Africa and is very rare in the U.S."

The Grade 5 student at Enfield Elementary School was eager for the exhibit to arrive, so she can meet the other participants and hear their stories.

"My friends thought it was pretty cool (to be in an exhibit)," Jennifer explained. "I'm doing it so other people who have cancer will have hope."

During the photo-shoot, there was no time to be down in the dumps as Tucker kept her spirits up because she was so cheerful, Jennifer said.

Although she's in recovery mode, Jennifer doesn't like to think about what she had suffered through during the time she was getting treatment for the disease.

"It's a chapter of her life she likes to put behind her," mom Lisa said. "She doesn't like to be reminded of that and is trying to live as normal a life as possible."

Lisa recalled when the family received the prognosis from their doctor, who returned with sobering news, after tests were completed on Jennifer.

"When they came back with the results and said lymphoma, they asked if we knew what it was. 'Yes we know what it is, but you can't be right' was our response," Lisa added "Then you go through all the emotions, denial, but you deal with it."

Jennifer has to go for regular checkups every six months to ensure the cancer hasn't returned and so far, it hasn't. Doctors told her if it's not back within a year following diagnosis, and that milestone has since passed, then she should be good.

But that still hasn't eased her parent's minds when they hear her cough or she isn't feeling well.

"It's really hard dealing with that because you try to treat her like a normal little girl and it's a normal little cold, but in the back of your mind you still panic," Lisa said. "It's still hard."

Lisa couldn't ask for anything more than the support the family has received.

"Enfield is an amazing community," Lisa added. "Everybody pulls together and helps you in anyway they can. Anything we asked for, people would be right there willing to help."

Jennifer is thrilled to be able to be part of Tucker's exhibit.

"It's going to be great to be able to share my story with people and show them this disease can be defeated," she said.

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