

# 'YOU HAVE TO FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE'

Cancer patient Amy Aubin-McDougall says support group for young adults has helped her on her 'journey'

For someone about to mark her 30th birthday, Amy Aubin-McDougall has been through more than most people could imagine, yet a lot of times, she feels like she's stuck in neutral.

Her birthday will come and go Sunday (May 13) without much anxiety or excitement, she says, because losing six "cancer friends" under the age of 31 in five weeks has been demoralizing— even though she's only communicated with some of those victims via social media.

As a Stage 4 ovarian cancer patient, Aubin-McDougall has undergone a series of energy-sapping radiation and chemotherapy treatments since she was first diagnosed in 2006 that have turned any idea of normalcy for her and her family into a distant hope.

The local native hopes that the most recent chemo treatments will be her last. Husband John and five-year-old daughter Avery accompanied Aubin-McDougall to Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto last month for her final chemotherapy sessions, to be followed by a few months of rest and, if all goes well, remission of the tumour's growth.

In remission previously for five years, a bout with cervical cancer followed in 2011 and the ovarian cancer metastasized to her right lung, requiring six more rounds of chemotherapy treatments that finished in early April.

Along the way, Aubin-McDougall connected with a group called Young Adult Cancer Canada (YACC) and last year went to a retreat in Newfoundland to spend a few days with a group of people who were also battling cancer.

She said that YACC has helped her keep positive about her "journey" and the organization has made great strides in offering support and spreading awareness about the plight of young adult cancer patients in Canada. Approximately 7,000 young adults are diagnosed with cancer each year in Canada and the survival rate for the 25-to-40 age group has gone unchanged since the 1970s.

"You're told that you're so young that it couldn't be cancer, and even the doctors,



Cancer patient Amy Aubin-McDougall (right) at home with filmmaker Mike Lang and daughter Avery, 5, and pet pooch Dora.  
Photo by Eamonn Maher

they don't know how to handle younger patients. Cancer is something that people in their 50s and 60s get and not someone who's 24," Aubin-McDougall said.

"There are so many young adults diagnosed with cancer every year and yet we're so under-represented. We're like the forgotten generation. Most doctors are really hesitant to even test you for a lot of types of cancer because it's so rare for someone of our age to get it, so I had to see four or five different doctors before I could get my first diagnosis to go and see an oncologist. The doctors are like, 'Oh, it's cramps or a strained muscle.' They overlook a lot, so it's hard because you really have to be pushy and know your own body and realize that things aren't right."

She started a blog in May 2011 ([http://](http://aubgall.blogspot.ca/2012/03/we-must-all-meet-our-maker.html?spref=fb)

[aubgall.blogspot.ca/2012/03/we-must-all-meet-our-maker.html?spref=fb](http://aubgall.blogspot.ca/2012/03/we-must-all-meet-our-maker.html?spref=fb)) to share her feelings and experiences, maintaining a positive outlook to try to counteract the constant pain.

Having moved back into her parents' Georgetown home, Aubin-McDougall remains optimistic about her future and can't wait to get back to managing her stationery printing business full-time, but the whole experience has left many physical and emotional scars.

"A lot of things I thought I would have accomplished by now haven't been done and that's a hard thing to make peace with, knowing that a lot of your goals that you've been working towards might never be accomplished, so it really changes your priorities in life," she said.

## Aubin-McDougall's story to be featured in Calgary filmmaker's 'webisode'

Having "gone through the ringer" physically and emotionally after years of cancer treatments, local resident Amy Aubin-McDougall is now preparing to tackle the white-water rapids of the Grand Canyon.

She's recovering from the latest round of chemotherapy in her parents' home, but has planned and paid for a 188-km rafting trip down the spectacular Colorado River and will fly to Las Vegas in August to begin the journey.

"Being able to go on an airplane and not have to wear a mask and gloves and use big globs of hand sanitizer will be a nice change," she quipped, referring to her fears of contracting illness from others during recovery from treatments.

The trek to Arizona will be filmed for an upcoming movie in part about Aubin-McDougall's battle with ovarian cancer called *Valleys*, contrasting one of the Seven

Natural Wonders of the World with the 29-year-old married mother of one's day-to-day life in Georgetown.

While at a Young Adults Cancer Canada (YACC) retreat last year, Aubin-McDougall met Mike Lang, a Calgary resident who had his own bout with Hodgkins-Lymphoma a couple of years ago. Lang started up his non-profit Hands On Film venture after experiencing the frustration faced by many young adult cancer victims in this country, making movies called *Wrong Way To Hope* and *Ebb & Flow Story*, which can be found on Youtube.

Lang, 25, was intrigued by Aubin-McDougall's story and spent two days in Georgetown last month shooting footage of her family that will become *Valleys* and

is slated to come out in the fall in a "webisode" format. In order to make the film, Lang and Aubin-McDougall had to raise \$17,000 in a month and both were pleasantly shocked when donations reached the goal a few days ahead of the deadline.

"When you're a young adult with cancer, you have really unique needs and unique issues to deal with, so YACC has been amazing and done a lot for me," Aubin-McDougall added. "Hopefully making this film will make a big difference in the lives of people who are facing the same types of issues."

Lang explained that the movies aren't necessarily intended to spread awareness about the challenges facing young adult cancer victims; rather, his goal is to help

"You're at a point in your life when you're supposed to be starting a career, having a family and making money, but after you get cancer, it just doesn't work that way. You lose a lot of your friends because they're moving on with their lives and you're struggling to keep up, so you miss out on that stuff. A lot of time you end up moving backwards and when it's finished, you're not always the same person."

Aubin-McDougall was an aspiring corporate tax lawyer working on her degree at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University, when first diagnosed.

She and John were still able to have "miracle baby" Avery, who recently turned five, before Aubin-McDougall had hysterectomy surgery.

John works in Toronto at the provincial government's registrar general's office and Amy is still pursuing her law degree studies. She also started up a business called Lennox Printing Press that specializes in social and wedding invitations, but hasn't been able to devote as much time to that as she'd like because of treatments.

Even though John's medical insurance coverage picks up most of the expenses, Aubin-McDougall said it's been frustrating to rely on one income, but adds the support of both sets of Georgetown-based families has been a godsend.

Always one to make grandiose plans prior to her cancer diagnosis, Aubin-McDougall for now feels held hostage by illness and the dreaded waiting game surrounding her long-term prognosis.

"Unfortunately, I've been told that with my type of cancer, at some point in my life it is very likely to show up somewhere else," added Aubin-McDougall, who plans to coach Avery's soccer team this summer.

"You have to focus on the positive. You have to when you have a (five)-year-old. She knows more about what I'm going through than I would have expected when this started. We tried to talk about it with her in a way that she could understand without completely freaking her out, but she asked a lot of questions and wanted to come to the last chemo round. Aside from trying to organize rides to the hospital and keeping up with Avery's schedule, I can't really plan anything. You never know day-to-day what you're going to feel like."



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