

STILL A LOT OF TEARS, SAYS KATHRYN'S MOTHER

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In many ways, Kathryn's summer has been typical of any teen, with her time spent hanging out with friends and vacationing with family.

But unlike most, she has also been attending appointments at SickKids and starting a new trial to treat the inoperable cancer that's currently in her skull, hip and spine.

"The cancer is on top of the bone, like paint on a pipe," explained mom Heather. "If doctors were to go in and scrape it, the cells would go everywhere."

Kathryn's cancer journey began when she was just five years old. It was June 2008, and the local youngster had been vomiting for a few days.

"My mom felt something beside my stomach

and thought it was a hernia," said Kathryn. "We went to our family doctor and got sent to SickKids by ambulance."

After extensive testing, she was diagnosed with stage 4 neuroblastoma, a childhood cancer of the nervous system.

What came in the months that followed was a flurry of medical procedures that Kathryn fortunately can't remember much of due to her young age and heavy pain medications:

Five rounds of chemotherapy, an 8.5-hour surgery, a stem cell harvest and transplants, and 14 rounds of radiation.

It was almost too much to believe for Heather and husband Greg, whose emotions ranged from shock, to anger, to denial.

"She (Kathryn) was so

healthy. She was riding her bicycle the night before her diagnosis," said Heather. "I remember sitting there watching her get her first round of chemo, and I thought the doctor was going to burst through doors any moment and say, 'We've made a mistake.' There were lots of tears, and still are lots of tears."

During this time, the family made the difficult decision to send toddler son, Geoff, to live with his grandparents as they worked to cope with their new reality.

Following the treatments, Kathryn was then declared cancer-free, but the celebration was short-lived for the Stewart family as the disease returned a mere 16 months later.

The diagnosis brought with it another 24 rounds of chemo, radiation to her

abdomen - where the cancer had come back - and six rounds of immunotherapy.

Since then, Kathryn has relapsed three more times and endured countless traditional and trial treatments, with cancer still being a part of her story today.

Sporting partially white hair - a side effect from the most recent experimental treatment she was on - she acknowledges that she sometimes wrestles with thoughts of "Why me?"

But the resilient teen refuses to let the disease be something that defines her.

"I try not to think about it too much because you can become engulfed," she said.

"People tell me that I'm strong, that I'm tough. But at the end of the day, it's my

life. You either learn to deal with it or you don't. You have to learn to laugh."

Heather said the family has received tremendous support from friends and the community at large over the years, with their church families at St. John's and Maple Avenue churches providing meals, and even homeschooling support when Kathryn couldn't attend school.

As she gears up to enter grade 11 at Georgetown District High School, Kathryn is optimistic that she won't miss too many classes this year for cancer treatments.

The local high school is also where the family will be hosting its third annual scrapbooking fundraiser for childhood cancer, Kathryn's Krop 4 a Kure.

The event is set to take place Sept. 28 from 9 a.m. to

6 p.m., with proceeds going to benefit neuroblastoma research at SickKids. Donations are being sought for silent auction and raffle prizes.

"We're doing this because it's the only way we know how to give back," said Heather. "Childhood cancer research is severely underfunded."

Based on what's known about neuroblastoma, doctors can't determine why Kathryn developed it in the first place as she doesn't have the genetic mutations associated with the disease, and they're unsure of why the cancer keeps coming back.

"We just have to put our trust in God," said Heather. "Faith has helped carry us through. Every time a treatment stops working, more treatments become available. Every single time."

For more on Kathryn's journey and the Krop 4 a Kure visit kathryn-skrop4akure.ca.



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