

ARTS

Laughter proves to be best medicine for mom

Tippetts wrote funny children's poems to help sleep during illness. First story now published

By **Stephanie Hounsell**
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Feeling like the weight of the world was on her shoulders, Claire Tippetts couldn't sleep.

Having been diagnosed with breast cancer, she lay in bed each night and wrestled with fear and worry, struggling to come to terms with her illness.

Her mind would drift into dangerous territory as she wondered if the treatment would work and if she'd be around to see her six-month-old son grow up.

An advocate of natural remedies, Tippetts didn't want to take the sleeping pills her doctor had prescribed if she didn't have to.

So she came up with her own nightly technique.

Surrounded by darkness, Tippetts would compose humorous children's poems. Line by line, rhyme by rhyme, she'd come up with imaginative, laugh-out-loud stories about a host of forest critters facing dilemmas, including a skunk named Samuel who'd lost his stink.

"If I took my mind off (the dis-

ease) and focused on something else, I was able to sleep," said Tippetts, 36.

That was a couple of years ago. Today, Tippetts doesn't have to recite the story of Samuel from memory; she can hold it in her hands and read it. Samuel the Skunk was recently published and is now available on amazon.com.

Inadvertently, Tippetts has learned that sometimes laughter — mixed with a healthy dose of creativity and a pinch of distraction — is, indeed, the best medicine.

But the journey to published author — and two-year cancer survivor — wasn't a quick or easy one. Far from it.

Tippetts received the devastating diagnosis in October, 2007. It came as a huge shock, particularly since she was only 34, watched what she ate, worked out at the gym and had no family history of breast cancer.

Being a mother of a young child, Ethan, came with a whole new set of challenges, Tippetts said, including worrying about his future.

But Ethan was also a great source of strength.

"Some days I don't know what I would have done (without him)," she said.

When Tippetts began writing poems, she had no intention of doing anything much with them. But when friends and family told her she should get them published, she took the suggestion to heart.

Soon it wasn't just the nights that Tippetts was consumed with furry



GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

STORY TIME: Claire Tippetts reads one of her funny children's poems to three-year-old son Ethan.

little creatures, but the days too as she navigated the world of self-publishing.

"It gave me purpose and a focus. When you're diagnosed, it com-

pletely consumes your life. It's like an elephant in the room," she said.

She enlisted an illustrator, Jennifer Arena, to bring Samuel to life. That, she said, was a challeng-

ing process in itself.

"I can't draw, so to try to get my picture in my head into her head was difficult," Tippetts said.

Fortunately, one of the 25 skunks Arena came up with was just what Tippetts had in mind and pages were filled with vibrant, fun drawings.

The book sells for \$12.99, with a portion of the proceeds going to the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation.

Today, Tippetts continues to write poems as a way to relax, particularly before follow-up medical appointments. She hopes to publish more of her stories, including 'Betty the Bat Who Indulged in Mosquitoes and Grew Too Fat.'

Her son thinks the stories are great, as do nieces and nephews.

Hers is a "lemonade from lemons" story, Tippetts said. She hopes other women going through the same thing will see it's possible to come out on the other side.

"Sometimes good things come from bad things."

She's learned to live in the moment, one page at a time.

"As soon as someone tells you you have cancer, you stop looking at the long term. You take it day by day," she said, adding had it not been for the cancer, she probably would have been a workaholic who seldom saw her family. Not now.

"Life's too short."

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