To Your Health

Former cancer patient finds humour in her illness

By CYNTHIA GASNER
Special to The CJN

Marla Lukofsky, a Toronto stand-up comedian, writer, TV and radio veteran and cancer survivor, uses her comedic talents to help those with cancer and their families face their journey through darkness and despair.

Her inspirational presentation is titled I'm Still Here and So is My Hair. Lukofsky is featured at many meetings and conferences, speaking candidly and with optimism about her own personal experiences.

Lukofsky was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998. "I hope that my story will help others."

By adding some humour to her discussion of life-threatening challenges and referring to her own experience and her five-foot body, she transcends the negative side of life's stumbling blocks.

Speaking of her nose, she says, "I was born with my father's eyes, my mother's mouth and both my parents' noses."

The veteran entertainer of 30 years makes audiences laugh in Canada and the United States, and she speaks openly about the trials in her life: her battle with cancer, the unexpected death of her father, Lou, in 2004 followed by the diagnosis of leukemia for her mother Ruth, who died in 2006, eight months after her diagnosis.

She was also once knocked down by two dogs and broke two bones in her leg, which kept her house-bound for more than three months.

"There are funny things and sad things in my story – people laugh and people cry."

But Lukofsky looks for the positive in every situation.

While convalescing with her broken leg, she rewrote her memoir, wrote poems and prepared her speaking presentation.

"If I can touch even one person and have them feel that they're not alone, then I've succeeded."

She told The CJN that her sense of humour is an innate part of her personality. "It's not a coping mechanism. I want to share laughter and tears with whomever wants to experience them with me."

Lukofsky attended Bathurst Heights Collegiate and took the paralegal course at Seneca College while working as a stand-up comedian at night.

Marla Lukofsky

She was a member of Second City for a month, "until they realized that I wasn't Andrea Martin and they asked me to leave." (She's strongly resembles the former SCTV star.)

She represented Canada at international comedy festivals in Scotland and England. Her voice can also be heard as the Good Luck Bear on Care Bear cartoons.

Lukofsky started doing stand-up comedy in 1973 and decided after almost two decades that she wanted to be based in one city. In 1990, she moved to Los Angeles, where she continued working in stand-up comedy and as an actor.

It was in Los Angeles that she discovered the lump in her breast 10 years ago. After two mammograms that were negative, a mammography technician suggested that she have an ultrasound.

The procedure detected a small, but fast-growing tumour, and the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes. Lukofsky says she learned from this experience that if you don't feel comfortable with a diagnosis, insist on further tests.

After surgery, she had an aggressive course of chemotherapy and daily radiation.

"One night, while I lay in bed feeling extremely sick after hours of receiving chemo, a mosquito flew into my bedroom, bit me and sucked up my toxic blood. I watched it fall to the ground, lose its little black hairs and die."

With a smile she adds, "Now that's what I call sweet revenge.

A year after her surgery and treatments, Lukofsky returned to Toronto.

Recently, she has given her motivational speech at Willow Breast Cancer Support Canada, L'Chaim Cancer Support Group for Jewish Women, National Council of Jewish Women, Gilda's Club, the Saskatoon Cancer Conference and many other hospitals, fundraisers and organizations.

After each presentation, Lukofsky receives numerous letters and e-mails from cancer patients, their family members and organizers thanking her for both the educational component and the entertainment that takes her audience through a range of emotions.

She advises people to own up to their emotions. "If you feel bad and need to cry, then cry. When it's funny, laugh. And tell people what you need and what you don't need."

She stresses that it's important to listen to people with cancer. "Having a witness to your struggle is very healing."

She adds, "I'm a realist. People have a saying that a glass is half empty or half full. I see that there is a glass and there is water in it. And it's as simple as all that."

Lukofsky says she loves what she is doing. "With my speeches, I am combining my God-given talents – my stand-up, animated voices, my acting and my ability to tell stories.

"I look forward to more speaking engagements, because I want to get my message out," she says. "I also hope to publish my memoirs."

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