

Transformed, but not beaten, by cancer

Documentary celebrates local woman's journey

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Phyllis Sevigny was my friend. But three months after her death, I'm surprised and saddened to find out I didn't know her as well as I thought I did.

Phyllis and I met five years ago as parent volunteers when our kids were in the same Grade 2 class. At the end of that school year, Phyllis—a dynamic 36-year-old wife and mother of Jordan, 8, and April, 6—was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was given six months to live.

She took that prognosis and rewrote it with her customary iron will, drawing out the fight for four years.

I remember her exuberance when her cancer went into remission shortly after she started chemotherapy treatment. She called it a miracle.

High on life and eager to celebrate it, Phyllis convinced four of us to leave our kids behind and marshalled us off for a whirlwind moms' getaway at a hotel in Red Deer. Her joy that weekend was intoxicating.

Ten months later, the cancer was back. She fought it with a never-say-die attitude and an unforgettable smile that lit up her beautiful face.

Phyllis was my hero. I admired her strength; drew inspiration from her upbeat attitude in the face of a deadly foe.

Last week, I previewed *Phyllis' Miracle: Transformed by Cancer*, a documentary of her struggle, which airs tonight on CFRN. I saw my friend attending a retreat for breast cancer patients and was reduced to tears at the sight of the woman who had always been cheery, always upbeat, drop her head and cry, thanking God for giving her one more day. I wanted to reach out and comfort her, but it was too late.

Phyllis died June 26, eight days after her 40th birthday; two days before her son Jordan's graduation from Grade 6.

Ray, her husband of 18 years, says Phyllis wouldn't let family and friends see her pain and despair. She didn't want them to be upset and worried. Her face was her mask.

Ray sits in the dining room of the wheel-



This is the mask of her face Phyllis created at a retreat.



FILE PHOTO

Phyllis was able to share a trip to Disneyland with her family before she died.

chair-accessible home he planned to bring her to after she was released from hospital. She didn't live long enough to move in. Hanging on the wall over his left shoulder is a smiling sunny yellow mask. Phyllis made it while she was on retreat and in the

PHYLLIS' MIRACLE

► *Phyllis' Miracle: Transformed by Cancer*, airs tonight at 6:30 p.m. on CFRN (channel 2).
► The 30-minute documentary, timed to run in October, which is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, will be shown to a national audience on Tues., Oct. 17 at 9 p.m. on Vision TV (channel 55 on Video; channel 54 on Shaw).
► For more information about the documentary or breast cancer or to link to other sites, look up www.lornathomasprouductions.com.

documentary, she admits her own surprise at the face she created because "this isn't the way I feel.

"It reminds me of a sun goddess with so much courage, so much strength, even though she's scared to death," she says in the documentary.

It was Phyllis' face and *joie de vivre* that drew filmmaker Lorna Thomas to her and made her decide to document what would turn out to be the last two years of Phyllis' life. Thomas, herself a breast cancer survivor, says Phyllis was like a lot of cancer patients who mask their true feelings for the sake of those they love and care about.

Early in the film, Phyllis talks of how she handled her initial diagnosis. "I put up giant walls not to let myself cry, not to let myself become negative. I said 'I can do this.' Be positive. Put on a happy face. This isn't the end of the world. Rah! Rah! Rah!"

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Documentary shows the trauma

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"And really, I found that's not the best way to deal with it at all."

Phyllis began counselling about two years ago.

"I couldn't even bring myself to think of death," she says. "After talking about it, I realized (death) wasn't so bad. ... I saw it as a celebration, a time when (like a butterfly), I could fly."

Phyllis eventually voiced her fear of death and talked about it with her children. Thomas says it was the second of three miracles in Phyllis' struggle. The third was her release from the Grey Nun's Hospital palliative care. She thought she had gone into the hospital to die but she came out to live another 18 months.

The filmmaker hopes people who watch the documentary come to understand the emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma that accompanies a life-threatening illness.

Already, the documentary is being used by two of Phyllis' palliative-care doctors who teach other physicians, to help them understand the dying process. "Doctors need to attend to the emotional needs as well or at least to do what they can to find other people to support their patients," says Thomas.

"I think that it's really not so much a film about cancer, as it is a film about the need to be authentic. The need to be really who you are, no matter what that means for others," she says. "We've kind of all got masks we wear for different people for different reasons. Cancer was the impetus for Phyllis to find out more about who she was."

"You won't know from the documentary that Phyllis died.

"She was alive when we finished the film. And she was so proud that she had lived to see it," says Thomas.

Phyllis' family is carrying on her legacy. Ray, Jordan and April are finding different ways to express themselves. All are in support groups. Like her mother, April is showing an interest in photography. Jordan wants to write a book about his experience.

In one of the last scenes of the documentary, Phyllis talks about the need for people to be real and honest about their thoughts and feelings. "Don't shut down those negative feelings. Don't feel you have to be positive all the time. It's not healthy."

But to the end, Phyllis was unable to pull off her mask for friends, says Ray.

I wish she could have.