

# Cancer shatters 'charmed life'

## Offers of help flood in after illness strikes young Waterloo mother

BY COLIN HUNTER  
RECORD STAFF

### WATERLOO

The caption beneath her picture in her last high school yearbook reads: "Live every day as if it were your last."

Now, 17 years after she wrote that caption, 35-year-old Marci Gray is heeding her own advice. She has little choice — brain cancer is threatening to make each successive day her last.

If, six months ago, someone had asked Gray how things were going, she would likely have replied that they were going just perfectly.

She and her husband, Kevin, were working jobs that kept them both busy, happy and fi-

nancially secure — she at Home Depot, he as a software manager at Research In Motion. More importantly, they had time to devote to their three young, active children.

"I think we were living a charmed life," she said. "I felt like we were one of the lucky families."

In November, their luck took a turn for the worse, when Kevin lost his job during a period of layoffs at RIM.

But he was educated and employable so he optimistically embarked on a new job search and started a few belated projects around their Waterloo house.

It was during one such project last month, when he and Marci were cleaning out some

kitchen cupboards, that Marci started feeling strange.

She had experienced mild dizzy spells before but her doctor assured her they were the result of an otherwise harmless inner-ear disorder.

This time was different. She saw shapes floating in front of her eyes — colourful prisms that weren't really there.

She choked on the foul stench of burning plastic: although Kevin could smell nothing.

Her eyes rolled back in her head, her body tensed and, with what little strength she had left, she screamed to her husband for help.

Her body was overcome by seizure. Her brain was misfiring under the pressure of a tumour that had finally grown too big to sit unnoticed within her skull.

Kevin called 911, and Marci was rushed to St. Mary's Hospi-

tal where doctors determined that if the tumour were not treated quickly, it would surely kill her.

The same day, an ambulance sped her to the cancer centre at London's University Hospital. She had six more seizures on the way.

"There's only one word for an experience like that: terrifying," said Kevin, who watched helplessly as his wife of eight years was run through a barrage of tests.

Four days later, she was under the knife.

Although she doesn't remember having done so, Marci jokingly told the surgeon just before the operation that she would rather not have a lobotomy.

"If you don't have your sense of humour at a time like that, what the hell do you have?" she said.

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## Compassion: First came offers of food, help, now a fundraiser

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Today, straight black hair flows from most of Marci's head, save for a stubbled and scarred patch of scalp above her right ear — the patch surgeons opened to remove the malignant tumour, the size of a tennis ball that was crushing her brain.

The doctors got most of it but not all.

"It's now re-establishing itself in my brain. It's a monster living in my head."

She now takes a batch of six pills several times a day. One reduces swelling, one relieves the pain, one combats the nausea, and so on.

She is no longer able to work and her husband, as her full-time caregiver, has little time to look for a new job. Their savings are dwindling fast.

"When I think about the cards we've been dealt, I sometimes want to cry, but I can't," she said. "It's not fear or sadness I feel — it's disbelief I wonder why this happened to me and my family. I wonder if I'll ever just wake up and everything will be better."

When their situation looked its most desperate, the Grays started getting help from unexpected sources.

At first it was friends who stopped by with food, or money, or offers to drive the kids to and from school and sports practices.

Then it was friends of friends who started chipping in. Then it was total strangers.

"All these people have been showing up with groceries and other things," she said. "Even churches we don't belong to are helping us. It's overwhelming to think that all these people care about me."

She sees the outpouring of support as the one speck of goodness that has come out of her and her family's suffering.

### SENSE OF COMMUNITY

"I think everything happens for a reason. My illness has brought a lot of people together in the community. We moved to Waterloo from Toronto to have a close-knit fabric of a community and we're really finding that."

Since so many people wanted to help Marci, a group of her friends and former co-workers began planning a fundraising event — something that could help Marci and her family during the exhausting radiation treatment and chemotherapy she must soon undergo.

Kevin dismissed the idea of the benefit at first, unwilling to let his family become a charity case. His friends insisted and he eventually conceded.

"Sometimes you have to put your pride in your back pocket and do what's best for your family," he said.

Friends, coworkers and even strangers helped co-ordinate the fundraiser, which is being held at The Turret at Wilfrid Laurier University

Feb. 22.

The event will include a buffet dinner, children's entertainment, a concert by two local bands, a dance and a silent auction. It is open to the public and all proceeds will go to the Gray family.

Marci says she is overwhelmed that people are going to such lengths to improve the quality of her life.

"Saying thank you just seems so inadequate. I haven't asked anyone for help but they're helping anyways and it's extremely uplifting."

Marci's prognosis isn't good. Her form of cancer, level 4 Glioblastoma Multiforme, is one of the most deadly. Statistically, the likelihood of survival past a year or two with the disease is slim.

But she is not planning to go without a fight. She speaks of things she will do when she recovers, not if. She's determined to take the kids to Disney World in Florida within the next year.

And she's already envisioned the T-shirt she's going to have made about a year from now. It will read: "I survived."

Tickets to the fundraising dinner and concert are \$20 or \$10 for the concert alone. To buy a ticket or to make a donation to the Gray family, call 897-1100, or email getwellmarci@yahoo.ca. Individuals or companies wishing to donate items for the silent auction are asked to call 888-1781.

chunter@therecord.com