

PART ONE OF SEVEN

CANCER

A CODE RED PROJECT

Camps continued from // BA7

It operates campgrounds at Waterford and Picton.

Over the past two decades, the 44 year-old has seen plenty of stories with happy endings and plenty that have ended with tears and heartache.

On a cold January night in 2011, however, the tables were turned on her.

Shea-Perry was snuggled up in bed reading a story to her daughter when she noticed a lump in her right breast.

She went to her family doctor, who reassured her it was likely “no big deal” and sent her for a mammogram just to be sure.

“After my mammogram, the technician said ‘You need to have a biopsy today,’ and I said, well, I can’t, my son has to go to the orthodontist, so sorry,” Shea-Perry recalled. “And she said, ‘You need to have a biopsy done today. Can you come back?’

“At that point I thought, OK this isn’t just ‘no big deal.’”

A week later, her family doctor called her at work and told her she needed to come to the office.

“I said, ‘Listen, I don’t have time for that, just tell me over the phone what’s going on,’” said Shea-Perry. “So she told me over the phone that it was breast cancer.

“You don’t really think those words are for you,” she added. “I’m the one who’s here to help people with cancer, I’m not the one who gets cancer.”

She texted the news — “Yeah, I know, texting, crazy eh?” she laughed — to her husband, Chris Perry, and then they prepared to deliver the news to daughter Mackenzie, then 11, and son Aidan, then 9.

“If you ask the kids, they’d tell you they thought we were going to say we were having a baby,” Shea-Perry said. “So we told them and their initial reaction was ‘Are you going to die?’ and that’s a natural thought, especially for kids.”

Within a few weeks, she had a lumpectomy and was informed that the tumour was triple positive — meaning it produced a certain protein and attracted the hormones estrogen and progesterone — and was somewhat aggressive.

“And I said, OK, kind of sounds like me — triple positive and a little bit aggressive,” Shea-Perry laughed.



Camp Trillium’s Marci Shea-Perry: first noticed lump on her breast snuggling and reading with her daughter.

PHOTOS BY GARY YOKOMAMA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

“I thought maybe it’s like dogs and how they become like their owners.

“Maybe cancer is the same way.”

When her hair started falling out from the chemotherapy treatments, she told her hairdresser to just shave her head bald and be done with it.

“For me, losing my hair wasn’t as big a deal as it is for some women,” said Shea-Perry. “I’m a pretty natural person anyway. I didn’t wear a wig at all.

“But I think it was hard for my mom to see me with a bald head,” she added. “I made a conscious effort to always have a scarf on when I was visiting my parents.”

Shea-Perry is a eucharistic minister and reader at her Stony Creek church, so she asked the priest — bald himself — if it would be uncomfortable for anyone if she continued performing her duties when she was bald.

“And he said, ‘Well, if I can do it, you can do it,’” she said.

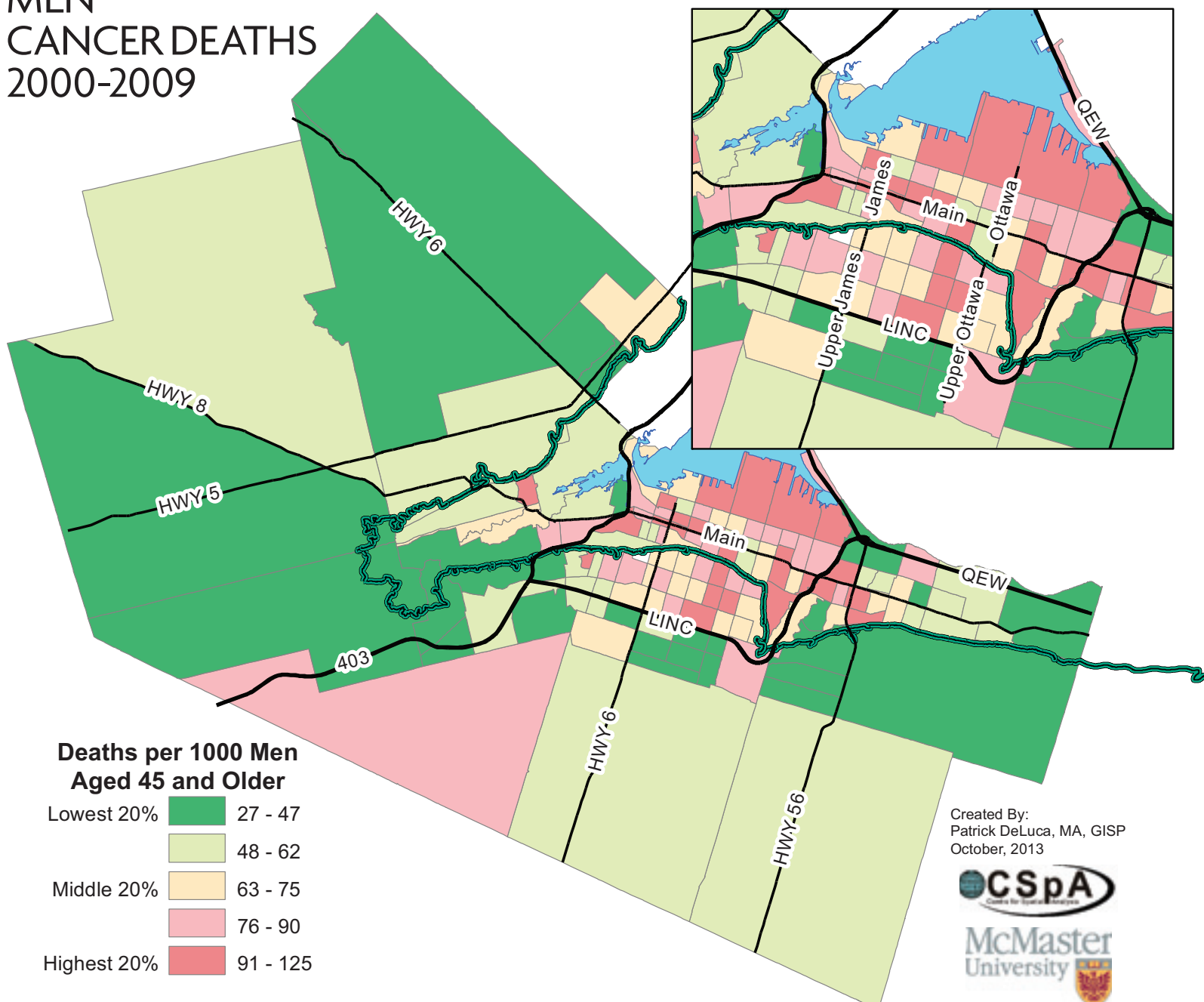
A chance meeting with her surgeon led Shea-Perry to opt for a double mastectomy.

“She said ‘Your cancer is very aggressive. I see way too many women who do what you’ve done and I’m going to see them



Lung cancer patient Ken Ormerod: cancer free for almost five years.

MEN CANCER DEATHS 2000-2009



EARLY DETECTION

But next to smoking, one of the biggest factors separating the inner city from the suburbs is **THE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE THAT EXISTS IN CANCER SCREENING RATES** across the city.

again in three to five years because it’s going to come back in the breast tissue for sure,” Shea-Perry recalled. “She said it’s really sad to have to go through this again.”

She decided to have reconstructive surgery using her own body tissue.

“I didn’t want to be defined by my breasts,” said Shea-Perry. “That’s not who I am.

“But for my family’s point of view, aesthetically, just to look normal is probably helpful for them.

“I’d already put them through a time when I was a bald person of their family.

“Do I really want that concave look?”

“So they did a tummy tuck and took the tissue from my stomach and made breasts with them, so you know ... win, win, win,” she joked.

It’s been a little over two years since she finished her treatments.

Shea-Perry realizes she’s reached the same stage she’s seen with the families that pass through Camp Trillium.

“It’s the uncertainty of ‘Holy crap, is it going to come back?’” said Shea-Perry. “Am I strong enough to go through this again?”

“I don’t want to say it’s in the forefront of my mind but it’s something I think about often,” she added.

“I’ve always been self-aware but I monitor myself like crazy now.”

Having cancer has given Shea-Perry a greater appreciation and understanding for the kids and families that pass through Camp Trillium every year.

“It’s kind of like that common bond,” she said. “This was the master plan.

“It was meant to be for me to understand at a different level.”

WHILE SURVIVAL RATES are improving for many types of cancer, any cancer specialist who deals with patients must be prepared to deliver bad news and accept that not all outcomes will be happy ones.

Yet there are some cases that are too painful to shake off.

“There are some situations where there’s so much misery in a person’s life — and often it isn’t just around the cancer, it’s around their social issues or family issues and those are things I can’t change. Honestly, those are the cases that bother me the most,” said Juravinski’s Strang.

“Dealing with a woman who has breast cancer and is also suffering spousal abuse and I can’t do anything to fix that — that makes me sad. That’s the kind of stuff that leaves me sleepless at night.

“I’ve had women who can’t get through their treatment because of their mental illness. Or a woman who has a bunch of kids and her husband’s just left her and she has a cancer and we know she’s going to die from it and she’s worried about what’s going to happen to her kids. That’s the worst.

“I can cope with the cancer part.”

Cope continues // BA10