



Donna Douglas, diagnosed with incurable cancer, prepares to hit the road in her Peterbilt truck in Halifax on Thursday. Douglas retrained as a trucker through a job program offered by a local women's group and says she is enjoying her life to the fullest. (ANDREW VAUGHAN / The Canadian Press)

By Michael Tutton

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HALIFAX _ Rolling over a Halifax harbour bridge at the wheel of a 13-speed Peterbilt tractor-trailer, Donna Douglas 's diagnosis of cancer is set aside amid her raw joy at being a trucker.

"I'm living the dream, baby," she exclaims as the diesel motor makes a throaty rumble and engine exhaust valves hiss.

"I consider myself lucky to have been afflicted with cancer, because it's made me appreciate my life ... I live with cancer everyday but look at me. I'm working, I'm driving my truck," she said.

In 2006, oncologists told the 45-year-old woman that the breast cancer she was diagnosed with in 1999 had spread through her body, and that she had a two-to-three-year life expectancy.

For over two years she obsessed over her mortality, writing her obituary and planning an elaborate funeral service, while a "death trunk" filled up with journals and memorabilia dampened by her tears.

When told the cancer was dormant, Douglas viewed the improved diagnosis as a second chance and in 2009 she sought retraining as a trucker through a job program offered by a Halifax women's group.

Radiation oncologist Dr. Rob Rutledge, the author of "The Healing Circle: Integrating Science, Wisdom and Compassion in Reclaiming the Wholeness of the Cancer Journey," approves of Douglas's approach _ and he adds it's becoming more common.

In an era when treatment of those with terminal cancer often means years of radiation and chemotherapy, Rutledge teaches a philosophy of holistic healing that includes pursuing your life's passions.

He has become a pioneer of weekend retreats and evenings that encourage cancer survivors to work on their spiritual life and go beyond raw fear in the time they have left.

"People who do incredibly well after incurable diagnosis don't necessarily focus on how long they will live. They no longer see their cancer and even death as a failure," he said at his office at the Nova Scotia Cancer Centre in Halifax.

"Instead, they focus their attention on things they can control. You can control your attitude ... and be authentic to yourself, which Donna expresses perfectly."

Rutledge, who has co-founded the Healing and Cancer Foundation, notes Canadian Cancer Society statistics that say about 170,000 people a year are diagnosed with cancer, with close to 40 per cent being "incurable" forms of the disease.

"People who have incurable cancer have a wide range of abilities. But more and more cancer is turning into a chronic illness because there are medications that can keep people relatively well and they can function ... they have that opportunity to live their lives fully," he said.

Douglas has been driving for Scotian Distribution Services in Halifax for seven months amidst a mostly male community that lavishes her with affection and unsparingly unleashes curse words at her for rookie errors.

She says her experience is similar to the 2007 movie, "The Bucket List," in which two men with terminal cancer set off to fulfil final wishes and rediscover the joys still present in their lives.

"When I'm in my truck, I don't think about my cancer. I think about my truck and what's around me," she said. "When I'm in my truck, I'm free. It's like I'm cancer-free for a little while."

She is also sustained by the big men with scruffy beards and huge arms who hug her and wave to her on the road.

"I respect them and they respect me and from that I get that they care about me, they watch over me and they ask about my health ... They say, 'I'm thinking about you, I'm praying for you,'" she said.

At the end of her day, co-worker Earl Coolen comes by to tease and give her shoulders a squeeze.

"She's right down to earth. She doesn't go around pretending she's Mrs. Big Shoes. She doesn't mind being told what to do," he said.

And then, speaking about her cancer, he adds the ultimate trucker's compliment: "She's tough."

Emma Lee Stewart, a 53-year-old woman with metastatic breast cancer in New Glasgow, N.S., says she's meeting women like Douglas with increasing frequency.

Since her own diagnosis in May as having an incurable cancer, Stewart is carrying on her singing and has continued her fundraising for her charity, Reason for Hope Society.

She's planning to raise money for a cancer-related initiative, though the precise details are still to be worked out.

When possible, the pursuit of passions assists the body and soul, she says.

"There are ways and things we can do to calm our mind, to enjoy the moment, to do the things we love," she said. "We have to calm the fear and step into the world as long as we can."

Yet, a hard truth remains.

Douglas is aware that the illness that's brought her to a happy life may also remove that pleasure.

A recent test showed some cancer in her neck will require treatment in the months ahead and possibly time away from her growing list of ambitions.

Stewart agrees that facing limits to new pursuits is the difficult part. "I'm trying not to think about that. Just do it," she said.