

Local children's author deals with cancer and bullying

By Bill Rea

A cancer diagnosis is scary, especially when it involves a child.

Valleywood area resident Mary Fam ought to know, as she has received two such diagnoses in her life, but has used the experiences to aid others, through her teaching and writings.

A teacher in the Peel District School Board, Fam is cancer-free today, after getting her last diagnosis about three years ago. When at 30, she was told she had thyroid cancer. At the age of 15, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Yet she has penned two children's books – one entitled *The Idea Tree*, is aimed at combatting bullying. The other is *The Stars Twinkle Brightly – A Children's Story about Cancer*.

Fam said she did *The Idea Tree* about three years ago, with the underlying theme of bullying.

"Bullying has always been a prevalent topic that anyone in the school system deals with," she observed.

The story is told from the point of view of a tree, that overcomes its fears to be different from others.

"Dedicated to all the children of the world, know that it is a magical thing to be different, and that you are beautiful and special," reads the dedication at the beginning of the work. "Never be afraid to follow your dreams and remember that they can become reality with one single idea."

The tree in the story gets the "thrilling idea" to wonder what it would look like to have one of its leaves turn yellow, overcoming the fear of being laughed at by the other trees. All of the leaves eventually turn yellow, then red. They all fall off for winter and return as green in the spring, with all the other trees following suit.

"I was glad for my ideas and I was glad that I was different," the tree reflected. "Differences make us all beautiful, inside and out."

The Stars Twinkle Brightly is more serious, as it reflects on a child dealing with a cancer diagnosis.

Fam opened the story with a note to parents relating some of her own experiences of being diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma when she was in her teens, remembering the support she received from her parents, not realizing at the time how terrified they really were.

"If your child or a child you know is dealing with cancer, the best thing you can do for them is just be there – be their rock," she wrote.

The story is told through the eyes of an eight-year-old boy with an interest in astronomy. He had just learned of the constellation Cancer around the time he was diagnosed. And he was told by his doctor how his body was made up of many cells, just as a constellation is made up of many stars.

The treatment involved chemotherapy every other day.

"I hated it! It made me sick to my stomach and I lost all my hair," the boy said in the story, as he also told of his dealing with the oncologist, Dr. Tucker, and his endless supply of knock-knock jokes. In the end, he was declared cancer-free, and one night looked in his telescope.

"The big dipper was bigger than ever before and I couldn't see Cancer any more. The stars were twinkling brightly again."

Fam said she always had the idea of writing children's books.

"I got a spark of creativity," she said. "I just got the urge to go ahead and do it."

She added a colleague helped her find a site where she could self-publish her work.

Fam acknowledged her writings were based largely on her own experiences, going through her treatments in her teens at Sunnybrook hospital, and dealing with bullying. She said she believes every child, in one way or another, experiences some kind of bullying. They are at a time in their lives when they are developing their self-esteem, and bullying can injure their potential.

That was the notion behind *The Idea Tree*.

"I wanted to write this to say ideas are great," she said. "If you have an idea and it's different, don't hide it."

"This is me," is part of the message. "I'm fine with who I am. I love who I am."

Fam agreed bullying is recognized more these days, with efforts to head it off before it creates isolation.

"Because of the awareness, I think less cases are going to the serious point," she observed.

Fam said future books are likely.

"They're there," she said, adding she carries a pad with her to jot down ideas that could come together in a book.

For more on Fam works, go to www.kidsbookgroup.com/apple-pie-authors/mary-fam-teacher-author-mentor/ or go to www.facebook.com/AuthorMaryFam



Mary Fam