

West Vancouver woman moves forward

Brain tumour survivor shares personal story in new book to help others

Erin McPhee / North Shore News

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Five years ago, West Vancouver's Claire Snyman was diagnosed with a rare benign brain tumour and three years ago underwent successful emergency brain surgery to have it removed. This week she's releasing *Two Steps Forward — Embracing Life with a Brain Tumor*, a work of non-fiction chronicling her journey. PHOTO PAUL MCGRATH

Lying in an intensive care unit bed at Baltimore, Md.'s Johns Hopkins Hospital in the wake of surgery to remove a brain tumour, Claire Snyman recalls the moment she realized she had survived.

"I knew that when I was able to, I would do something to pay it forward and to give back," says the West Vancouver woman.

Today, three years later, Snyman, 39, is grateful for her health, her latest MRI clean, and this week is releasing a work of nonfiction sharing her story of diagnosis, surgery and recovery, as well as how she learned to stand up and become her own advocate. The book is intended to help others as well as raise funds for brain tumour and brain cancer research.

Originally from South Africa, Snyman has called the North Shore home for almost 10 years, along with her husband and their nine-year-old son. She works as a marketing and business development consultant and is president and CEO of Synapse Consulting Inc.

The first-time author titled her book *Two Steps Forward - Embracing Life with a Brain Tumor* as a play on the phrase "one step forward, two steps back." In her case, her recovery was more about "two steps forward, one step back," which she adopted as a personal mantra, helping to propel her forward despite the challenges she faced along the way.

Snyman hopes *Two Steps Forward* serves as a source of inspiration for those similarly diagnosed with a brain tumour or injury, those facing other life-changing situations, caregivers and medical professionals interested in learning more about a patient's perspective, as well as people simply in search of something positive to read.

Having previously led a healthy life, everything changed for Snyman one morning in May 2010 when she woke up with vertigo.

"Everything was spinning around me. I couldn't figure out what was going on. I got out of bed very slowly and I felt like I was on a merry-go-round," she says.

Attributing the dizziness to a bug of some sort in light of burning the candle at both ends in her busy professional career and role as a wife and mother (to a then four-year-old), she figured a day or two of rest was all she needed.

The next day, after experiencing what she believed to be her first migraine, Snyman sought medical attention.

"I remember lying there in the CT scan room wondering, 'Goodness, I hope there's nothing in my brain that's not supposed to be here,' but I didn't really give it a second thought. Then I was back in the emergency room waiting for everything to come back and I remember hearing the doctors talking down the hallway about some scan that had come back about someone who had a brain tumour... .. And I remember thinking, 'Gosh that's really sad. That poor person with a brain tumour,'" she says.

Snyman was shocked then when doctors told her they had in fact discovered she had a rare benign brain tumor, a colloid cyst, approximately one-centimetre in size. She was also diagnosed with viral meningitis, which she fully recovered from over the next week at home.

Her brain tumour, however, was another story.

"I joined what they call the watch and wait group of brain tumour patients, which is basically where they get monitored with MRIs or CT scans, and I was monitored with MRIs... .. They watch and look at the brain tumour to see if it's growing and if it's having any impact on the brain and the tissues around it," she says.

Snyman also sought second opinions both in Vancouver and the United States.

Her condition seemed relatively stable until August 2012 when she became sick with another vertigo attack and a more intense migraine than the ones she had been experiencing on a regular basis since her initial diagnosis. An MRI revealed Snyman's tumour had suddenly grown, doubling in size, and was obstructing the flow of fluid in her brain, causing swelling.

"My memory was starting to go, my lower limbs were starting to feel weak. My brain, it was strange, I felt like I was in a fog," she says.

Snyman ended up undergoing emergency brain surgery for removal of the tumour in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

"That was the beginning of the next journey really," she says. While the surgery was successful, her recovery was arduous. "It took me a good 18 months to two years to recover from my surgery," she says.

Further slowing her recovery was that she experienced aseptic meningitis after her surgery, resulting in readmission to hospital.

While today Snyman's stamina is markedly improved, she still works to manage her condition (which still exhibits at times through lesser migraines and vertigo), through daily medication and her diet, as well as by maintaining balance in her life.

That said, Snyman is pleased to be back at work and has an enjoyable busy, home life.

"I've been very, very lucky and very fortunate to come this far and not to come off with a lot of hindrances and side effects from my surgery. I'm not 100 per cent, I can't say that, and I've had steps backwards for sure, but I would say I'm in a really good place as long as I listen to my body and my brain," she says.

Two Steps Forward - Embracing Life with a Brain Tumor has its roots in a journal Snyman started keeping following her brain surgery, a means of helping her deal with her emotions. She eventually came to realize her thoughts may well serve others and spent the last two years on the project.

She also launched a corresponding website, Twesteps.ca, intended to offer fellow brain tumour survivors information on available resources.

Proceeds from the sale of each book will support the Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada (which Snyman is involved in through her work with its BrainWAVE program, a support program for families with a child with a brain tumour), as well as Johns Hopkins University.

Two Steps Forward - Embracing Life with a Brain Tumor will be launched Sept. 10 with an event at the West Vancouver Memorial Library, however, due to the level of interest, it has already reached capacity.

Copies are available at Chapters Indigo, Amazon.ca and Edgemont Village's 32 Books Gallery.

For more information, visit twosteps.ca or clairesnyman.com.

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