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Dying at age 6

By Susan Nolan



Serena Beauchesne comforts her sleeping daughter, Cameo, 6, on Sunday. Cameo was diagnosed Feb. 4 at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center with a terminal brain stem tumor. Specialists at the hospital gave Cameo a life expectancy of three weeks to three months.

Photo by Rich Beauchesne

Dying at age 6

By Susan Nolan
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LEE -- Rob Beauchesne is afraid to sleep at night.

He can't go to work. He doesn't want to leave the

house. He's afraid each time he is with his 6-year-old daughter, Cameo, that it will be the last moment he will be able to touch her sweet little face or look into her soft brown eyes.

Three weeks ago, doctors at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center told Rob and his wife, Serena, the horrific news: Cameo has an inoperable brain tumor. The brain stem glioma is an aggressive, fast-moving growth that has wrapped itself around her brain stem and will take her life within weeks -- months at the most.

A hundred children a year die from it. It is 100 percent fatal. No child has ever recovered. Neither radiation nor chemotherapy can save her.



Cameo Beausnesne, 6, poses with her family, parents Serena and Robert and her brother, Riley, 2½. Cameo has been diagnosed with a terminal brain stem tumor. This family photo was taken on Feb. 9, only a few days after her diagnosis. Today Cameo is unable to walk and sleeps frequently throughout the day.

Photo by Rich Beausnesne

The young couple brought their little girl home to Lee the next day. She can no longer walk or talk, and each day seems a little worse than the day before.

Three weeks ago, Cameo Beausnesne was singing and running around. Today, she sleeps most of the time -- slowly slipping away.

Her parents are in shock, and nighttime is the worst.

"When the quiet sets in, Serena and I look around," said Rob, 38. "We try to figure out, what does this night hold for us? What is going to happen tonight? I don't like the nighttime anymore."

Rob and Serena try to take care of household chores during the day while Cameo is sleeping. At night, they climb in bed with Cameo and snuggle her.

"Sadness. It's always here," Rob said. "It just weighs on you so hard."

Serena has telltale dark circles beneath eyes that fill with tears when she tells their story.

"I'm afraid of waking up and having her be gone because it could be our last moment with her," she said.

Rob and Serena, lifelong Newmarket residents, bought their first home last spring -- the little blue Cape Cod house.



In the arms of her father Rob, Cameo Beausnesne 6, of Lee, reaches to pet Philippe, a Shetland pony from Personal Ponies Ltd, as part of the Make-A-Wish Foundation Sunday February 11, outside the family's

home. Cameo's Disney wish is currently not possible because of failing physical health.

Photo by Rich Beauchesne

They had agreed when Cameo was born that Serena would be a stay-at-home mom. Their son, Riley, was born in 2005.

Rob, a self-employed carpenter, has worked six days a week since then to keep Serena home with the kids. With a big mortgage, like many young families just starting out, the Beauchesnes have lived paycheck to paycheck.



Riley Beauchesne 2 1/2, stands over his sister Cameo 6, as she rests on her bean bag Monday February 12. Cameo was diagnosed with a terminal brain stem tumor at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center on February 3. Specialists at the hospital gave Cameo a life expectancy of 3 weeks to 3 months.

Photo by Rich Beauchesne

Even so, Rob has chosen to stay home now that Cameo is sick, with no paycheck whatsoever, for however many days or weeks he has left with his only daughter.

"I need to help Serena take care of Cameo," Rob said. "My family needs me here."

When Rob had to spend two hours away from Cameo while clearing the snow from the family driveway on Valentine's Day, he was distraught.

"I basically cried the whole time," he said.

Family and friends set up a fund to help pay the mortgage and other expenses

while Rob has no paycheck coming in.

It was staff members at Moharimet School who first noticed that Cameo, a kindergartner, might have a problem. The school called Serena to say Cameo seemed a little off balance at times.

Serena took Cameo to a doctor, who thought it might be an ear problem, and he sent her to an eye, ear nose and throat specialist. That appointment was for Monday, Feb. 6.

On the Friday before the appointment, everything changed.

That day, the school called Serena for a second time and said staff members had noticed the symptoms again. The Beauchesnes took their daughter to their Exeter doctor that day, and after doing a CAT scan, he discovered the growth and sent the family to Dartmouth-Hitchcock that very night.

In shock, Rob and Serena called Rob's oldest sister, Jeannette Beauchesne, of Newmarket, to accompany them. With just enough time to go home and throw some things in a suitcase, the family — Rob, Serena, Cameo and baby brother Riley — piled into the Ford Explorer with Aunt Jeannette and headed to Dartmouth-Hitchcock.

They left at 9:30 p.m. in the middle of a snowstorm.

"It was a horrifying ride," Rob said. "Twenty-five miles per hour was the top speed the whole way up."

Cameo was singing and finally fell asleep. Her little brother slept also.

They arrived at 1:30 a.m. Saturday, and Cameo was immediately admitted to Pediatric Intensive Care.

By Saturday afternoon, Rob's brother, Rich Beauchesne, and his wife, Lynn, and their two other sisters – Jackie Filion and Janine Parsons – had arrived at the hospital.

They were all there with Cameo when the oncology expert and lead doctor arrived Saturday afternoon. After checking out the little girl, the doctor told Rob and Serena she wanted to meet with them in another room to discuss Cameo's condition.

"I saw her grab the box of Kleenex as we left the room," Rob said. "I just knew."

The doctor was straightforward with the family.

"She said she may have three weeks. She may have three months," Rob said.

She told the couple Cameo would not have more than a few months. The doctor asked to contact the Make-A-Wish Foundation on their behalf.

"I kept thinking, □What are you talking about? No. No. No. No. No," Rob said. "We cried and cried and cried."

Rob and Serena could hardly take it in.

"Serena and I were both bawling our eyes out. It was hard to breathe. It was hard to stay upright," Rob said.

All they wanted was to get their little girl home.

They went home the next day. That week, the Beauchesnes returned to Dartmouth-Hitchcock for a final consultation with Cameo's medical team.

The doctors explained how they had contacted a consortium of hospitals across the country. Only one hospital replied that it had any treatment whatsoever. It was an experimental treatment, and while it could not save Cameo's life, it might give her a few extra weeks of life, and perhaps even a few months.

But it would involve putting Cameo through chemotherapy and strapping her arms and head to a board five days a week for six weeks while they radiated the enormous tumor, whose tentacles are intertwined with her brain stem.

"It was almost like shackles," Rich Beauchesne said. "It would literally be like Medieval torture."

And all for what? The experimental therapy could not save her life. Period.

"I'm all for science. I'm all for medical advancement," Serena said, "but she's not an experiment."

Rob said there was no choice at all. "To me, it was about quality of life," he said.

Serena agreed. "If there was a cure, (we) would have hopped on board for the treatment."

So they are determined to make their daughter comfortable. Cameo is terrified of

needles.

"There are no more needles," Serena said. "They have pain patches. There's no more needles; we have promised her, and we are going to give her her wish. No more needles."

Since reading of Cameo's plight, well-meaning people have called the Beauchesnes to offer medical advice and to recommend doctors and alternative cures. The first few times they called, Rob would call the doctors at Dartmouth-Hitchcock to ask about those suggestions.

"I think they're just trying to be helpful," Rob said, "but some of those calls have gotten Serena and I all shook up again. They're really well wishers, but they're not doing us any favors."

On the other hand, strangers have sent gifts. Neighbors have brought food. Others sent money to the family fund.

"It's just amazing to see how many nice people there are," Rob said.

The prescribed steroids and the tumor have taken their toll on Cameo. She has mood swings and terrible headaches, and she sleeps all day, waking up in the middle of the night.

"The only thing we've told Cameo is that she has a lump in her brain and that she's very, very sick," Rob said.

Rob wishes he himself were able to make a wish. If he could, he said, choking back tears, his would be easy.

"My wish would be to wake up from this nightmare and have my precious little girl be Cameo again. That would be my wish."

"I feel like it's hard to breathe," Serena said. "It's still really hard to actually accept the fact that I can touch her and I can kiss her and I can feel her."

"I just want to stop time. I just can't imagine our lives without her."

HOW TO HELP

Family and friends have set up the Cameo Beauchesne Fund. Donations may be made at any Ocean National Bank, or can be sent to Ocean National Bank/Cameo Beauchesne Fund, P.O. Box 294, Stratham, NH 03885.