

Former ovarian cancer patient Nancy O'Brien will be part of the Reliving Old Hollywood Gala to raise money for ovarian cancer research.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen , Ottawa Citizen

Nancy O'Brien considers herself "one of the very lucky ones."

After doctors discovered a cancerous tumour on her right ovary six years ago, she managed to avoid the devastating statistics the majority of ovarian cancer patients face - 1,750 deaths per 2,600 diagnoses in Canada. That's more than 67 per cent, compared to the 21 per cent death rate for female breast cancer patients.

"My story, unfortunately, isn't the most common story in the world when it comes to ovarian cancer," the 39-year-old says.

O'Brien's tumour was found in 2006 under the most unexpected of circumstances. She was trying to get pregnant at the time and thought she had miscarried. When she went to confirm the miscarriage at the hospital, she learned she had indeed lost the baby. However, the doctors were more concerned with the mysterious mass on her right ovary.

After undergoing surgery to remove the mass and ovary, she was forced to wait nine months before she learned the tumour was malignant. Fortunately, the cancer had been caught in the early stages and she did not require radiation or chemotherapy.

"The nine-month wait to find out if it was malignant or not was the toughest part of the whole process. That was traumatic," says O'Brien.

What disturbed O'Brien most, however, was the fact that she had no idea she had a tumour. There is no early detection tool for ovarian cancer. The symptoms of the disease are often ambiguous - abdominal pain, changes in urinary or bowel habits, swelling, and back pain. In O'Brien's case, she associated her symptoms with the miscarriage.

"The symptoms were so vague. I had no idea," says O'Brien. "I was shocked to find out I had this tumour I wasn't aware of."

Despite losing her baby, O'Brien tried to view the situation as fate.

"If it had not been for that little soul that sacrificed itself, I probably would have not known (about the cancer) until, God knows, maybe it was too late. That's why I'm so grate-ful. There's always a silver lining."

After two miscarriages, an ectopic pregnancy and having one of her ovaries removed, O'Brien thought she would never be able to have children. However, as she and her husband prepared to adopt, she became pregnant and they now have a healthy three-year-old daughter.

Within months of learning about her tumour, O'Brien says she felt obligated to raise awareness about the disease. She combined her passion for jazz music and the Old Hollywood era to host the first Reliving Old Hollywood Gala just one year after her diagnosis.

For the past four years, O'Brien has chaired the event, with all proceeds going to Ovarian Cancer Canada. This year, the fundraising goal is \$50,000. The proceeds specifically go to finding an early detection tool.

Dr. Barbara Vanderhyden, chair in Ovarian Cancer Research at the University of Ottawa, says early detection is key to saving lives.

"Unfortunately, there's no screening test," says Vanderhyden. "Most newly diagnosed women are quite advanced. While most women do respond initially to treatment, the problem will often have a reoccurrence within three years."

Vanderhyden adds that it is survivors like O'Brien who are critical to raising awareness.

"Ovarian cancer patients are the bravest set of women on the planet," says O'Brien. "They will bend over backwards to do

something helpful for women who might be affected down the road."

Until a detection tool is found, O'Brien has a message for Canadian women, "You have to request the test (for ovarian cancer). You have to be really adamant that if you feel you have symptoms - don't take no for an answer. The biggest thing that I learned going through that year was to take charge. There are doctors that will definitely hear you and support you."

The Reliving Old Hollywood Gala will be held April 14 at the Royal Ottawa Golf Club. Tickets, \$90, can be bought online at [www.capital tickets.ca](http://www.capitaltickets.ca).

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