

The News & Observer

News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)

October 14, 2004

Children feel the effects of treatment

Author: Vicki Cheng; Staff Writer

Sept. 11, 2001, was an especially memorable day for Amelia Frahm.

She was trying hard to market her self-published children's book, "Tickles Tabitha's Cancer-tankerous Mommy." Finally, her big break came: Rosie O'Donnell had invited her to appear on her talk show. But then someone attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And O'Donnell's studio was shut down thanks to an anthrax scare.

Frahm's segment was canceled, but O'Donnell mentioned the book in October. And that started to open some doors. Soon, Frahm was being invited to speak about breast cancer and motherhood on national panels. She was interviewed on a local news program in Minnesota, where the family was living, and the book was mentioned in several newspapers.

Tabitha, now a 14-year-old ninth-grader at Middle Creek High School in Apex, got used to certain things. She learned to count change when her mother sold "Tickles Tabitha" at book-signing events. Though she hated being the center of attention, she knew that TV camera crews wanted footage of her reading the book with her mother. She grew accustomed to kids at school knowing that her mom was a breast cancer survivor.

The book is about Tabitha at 4, trying to understand why her sick mother is so cranky after taking the pills she needs to cure her cancer. But the real Tabitha doesn't recognize the little blond cartoon girl in the book. All she remembers about her mother's frequent trips to the hospital is "a cold white building that smelled like old people." Reading "Tickles Tabitha" for the first time was like "reading something about someone you don't know," she said.

For Frahm, the memory of cancer still stings enough to bring tears, especially when she thinks of friends who helped her through her dark days, only to succumb themselves. Frahm dedicated her publishing company to a friend who died of leukemia, leaving two young children behind. That's why she still aggressively markets the book: She hopes it will help young families struggling now with cancer. Frahm wrote "Tickles Tabitha" because she knows how hard it can be to hide how you're feeling from a 4-year-old who's by your side, night and day.

For Tabitha and her brother, 12-year-old Jordan, the echoes of their mother's successful fight against cancer hang about like wallpaper: always in the background but rarely discussed.

"I just always think that I will get breast cancer," Tabitha said recently. That surprised her mother. Still, to a 14-year-old, the problem seems really far away. "I don't really have a plan," Tabitha added.

As Tabitha gets older, Frahm wants to make a point of discussing cancer prevention. For now, they'll settle for mother-daughter craft night after school. It's October. It doesn't seem odd to Tabitha to put little pink bows on everything.

Copyright 2004 by The News & Observer Pub. Co.