



Hayley Mezei with Nick Gamble and their son, Elliot, during Mezei's treatment for breast cancer in 2005.

Cancer's forgotten faces

Young moms, urban hipsters, women at the starts of their careers. A Canadian charity is saying loud and clear, "These people get breast cancer, too."

BY CYNTHIA BROUSE

You're going to need to be a patient little person." Hayley Mezei spoke these words to the baby inside her as she was wheeled into surgery in Toronto's Women's College Hospital. In the most reassuring voice she could muster, Mezei promised her unborn son – whom she and her partner, Nick Gamble, would name Elliot – that everything would be okay. But this hospital trip was not for the ordeal of birth; that was still a few months down the road. This one was to remove a cancerous lump from Mezei's right breast, which she'd found while putting on her bra one day in her fourth month of pregnancy.

Elliot was born on July 6, 2005, three days after Mezei's 39th birthday. After she had two lumpectomies, radiation and chemotherapy, the most notable

feature of his baby photos was the fact that he had more hair than his mom did. Mezei says, "You don't see images like that. The general impression is that it's an older woman's disease."

That impression is largely based on fact, which is why pamphlets and posters about breast cancer have traditionally displayed pictures of elderly women in sensible shoes, and clinical-looking diagrams of headless chests. When I got the disease myself, I was nearly menopausal, single and childless, and all of the women I know who've had it are my age or older, with no offspring at home. But where does that leave the 4,500 women under 50 who will be diagnosed with breast cancer in Canada this year, and the nearly 600 who will die of it? Club-going singles and young marrieds >

carrying briefcases haven't found themselves reflected in campaigns for research and education, and neither have new moms like Mezei. She and her peers face a different set of challenges than those in my age group, not the least of which is that the disease tends to be more aggressive in younger women.

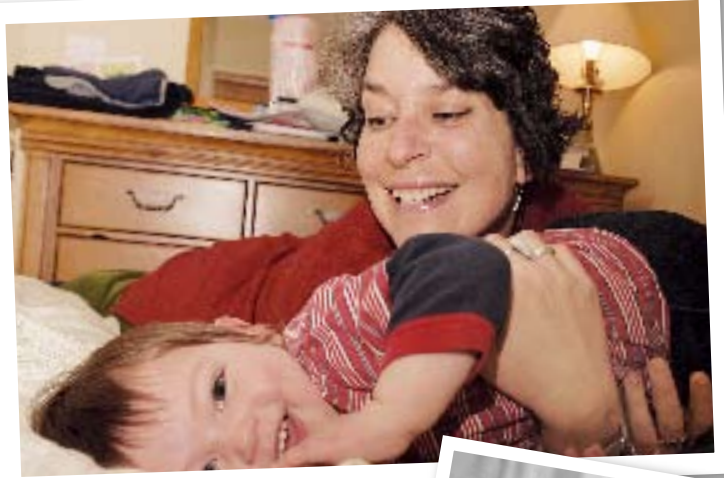
That makes them a target of Rethink Breast Cancer, a charity that uses high doses of hip marketing to educate and harness the philanthropy of young people, fund younger scientists and provide support to those who've been afflicted at a time when illness and death should be a little more theoretical. In the words of Rethink's founder MJ DeCoteau, 37, who lost her mother to breast cancer (and whose grandmother survived it), "Women with breast cancer in their late twenties or early thirties are at the hospital hanging out with women in their fifties and sixties." Because many of their concerns are specific to their life stage, "they feel alienated not only from their peers but from the other patients." Cool graphics, a strong Internet presence and fashionable fundraisers set Rethink apart. "I was into alternative music and film," says DeCoteau, "and just because I wanted to support the cause, I wasn't going to put on an angel pin or have pink teddy bears and pink sweatshirts with pink bows. That wasn't my sensibility."

Mezei fits the Rethink profile in some ways, though you'd be more likely to find her hiking in sturdy boots than wearing Manolo Blahniks to Rethink's balls or even attending its heavy-metal/punk karaoke night. The matter-of-fact, chatty program manager for Canada World Youth, who met Gamble when both played in a samba band, is, she says, neither pink nor

Her "sisters" helped Mezei cope with a paralyzing fear: that she would leave her son without a mother.

fluffy: "I'm a little too cynical for that kind of stuff."

But not too cynical to try to time her pushing so that Elliot would be delivered at the waxing of a new moon ("I thought it would be an auspicious sign, and he would thrive") or to long for a sisterhood of women who understood her isolating circumstances. There were emotions and questions Mezei didn't always want to share with Gamble, her mother or even her best girlfriends, as caring and helpful as they were. She could find no local support group for women who were



Mezei (above with Elliot today; and in 2005, right) is a founder of Support Saturdays, a group for young moms with cancer.



coping with cancer and new motherhood at once.

Through work contacts, she learned about Rethink and met DeCoteau, and Support Saturdays were born. A group of eight women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer either during pregnancy or shortly after giving birth began meeting last fall on Saturday mornings for an eight-week program and have continued to meet monthly since then, while their kids are cared for by the staff at the early-childhood development centre Mothercraft. They've helped each other deal with the fallout from one of life's crueller double whammies.

Karen Fergus, a psychologist who has counselled other breast-cancer survivors at Toronto's Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, points to the "huge extremes" that women like Mezei are dragged through. "There's the joy of new life and then having to confront their own mortality. It's all happening simultaneously." The day Mezei breastfed her week-old son for the last time in order to begin chemo was, she says, the worst day of her life. "It was a huge loss for me, and for Elliot."

Ranging in age from early thirties to mid-forties, the Support Saturdays group shares concerns common to all women who've been treated for breast cancer, such as coping strategies for nausea, finding a surgeon for breast reconstruction, or whether to pay for a private PET scan. But the younger a woman is, the more keenly other issues weigh on her: Do I need my breasts to feel attractive? (Some in the group were surprised to find themselves less eager to part with their breasts than their partners were.) Or, I've only been with my partner a short time. Will this drive us apart? >

Fergus says the early menopause that's often induced by ovary removal and chemotherapy (both common treatments) leaves women wondering whether they can still consider themselves young. "One client told me, 'I feel like a 30-year-old woman in a 60-year-old woman's body.'" They ask, Will I get osteoporosis sooner? Where did my libido disappear to, not to mention my memory? Will the hot flashes and weight gain go away? Some questions don't have satisfactory answers, but sharing helps.

Young women with cancer may be less settled in their lives than women like me; they may worry more about the impact of illness on their jobs and finances. Some have just begun their careers, taken on big mortgages, have no health benefits. For Mezei, who did receive salary and benefits during her recovery, meeting with her "sisters" helped her cope with the most paralyzing fear of all: that she would die and leave her now nearly two-year-old son without a mother. "Being in the group gave me a strategy and a safe space for dealing with fear," she says. "I could hold it till Saturday. That way I could compartmentalize it."

Rethink's original plan was to set up a session for the dads, too, but it didn't fly. The women's partners

seemed happier to spend Saturday mornings alone or with their kids. At the same time, Mezei's relationship needed private tending: She and Gamble sought couples' counselling through Princess Margaret Hospital, which helped them deal with the fact that Elliot will be their last child. The three-to-five-year wait after chemotherapy that's recommended before attempting to conceive would mean she'd give birth again in her forties. And they feared the surge of hormones associated with pregnancy could bring the cancer back.

Despite the gravity of their reason for coming together, the Support Saturdays women also try to have a good time. Evidence that drinking alcohol can raise susceptibility to cancer was tossed out the window when one woman brought in some rum punch to toast the New Year. "They're very generous women," says Mezei, "and we've got lots of other things in common," like canoeing, and the collective search for a daycare that serves organic food. Their kids are friends now, too, and discussions about how to talk to them about their moms' illness have been a boon. "The kids find it normal," says Mezei. "You know, 'Mommy had two boobs, and then she had only one, but now she has two again.'"

Still, there's ambivalence about spending time talking about cancer with others who've had the disease when you'd rather put it behind you. "From day one, it was heavy," admits Mezei. "We immediately started telling really painful and raw stories." One woman who came to the first session chose not to return. Mezei herself needs to limit the amount of time and energy she gives to the topic, refusing to let cancer define her identity, or drag her spirits down.

The Support Saturdays group learned about this double-edged sword the hard way. After our first interview, I ask Mezei if I can come to her home and meet Gamble and Elliot. In the sunny kitchen of their Victorian house, the couple serves peppermint tea and homemade chocolate-chip cookies while attempting to keep Elliot's little hands off them. When I ask Gamble what he fears most, I follow his glum gaze to the front page of that day's *Toronto Star*, which lies on the table amid the flash cards and storybooks. Staring up at us is a huge photo of a young woman holding a blissful baby, to accompany a story consisting of the last e-mails the woman sent to her friends. Mezei had mentioned to me that the youngest of the Support Saturdays group members died before the eight weeks were up, leaving

behind a husband and a little boy and girl. I realize with a start that she's the woman in the photo.

Mezei and I feel lucky to be "survivors," but the *Toronto Star* photo is a constant reminder that it's a club we'd really rather not belong to. She and Gamble have graciously agreed to talk to me about their experience – as catharsis, as a way to help others – and I want to talk to them. But I can tell we also share an unspoken contradictory desire simply to run away. As Gamble says of cancer support: "On the one hand, it's support, but on the other hand, it's more cancer."

Nevertheless, despite my own urge to pull the covers over my head, I remember that I found a support group helpful, too, and I know that when Rethink starts Support Saturdays again, as it plans to do in the fall, Mezei will encourage other young moms with cancer to join. "I'm very aware of how privileged I am," says Mezei, "but I've still had to learn to navigate the system. I think of women who, for example, don't speak English as a first language who can't get access to resources." Groups like Support Saturdays are a start. The idea behind this kind of therapy, adds psychologist Karen Fergus, is "to confront your own helplessness – and, together, find constructive ways to cope." •