

Cancer patient wants to make some 'magic'

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SAINT JOHN • As the powerful Bay of Fundy winds blow warnings of winter up the hilly uptown streets, a storm roars in the head of Louise Rough, manifesting in a 25-pack of king-size Next Blue cigarettes.

It's time to pass on some "magic."

She takes the full pack and hands it to a young woman in front of the Delta Saint John on King Street.

"Oh, awesome," the woman says, taking the pack in her hand.

"Actually, it's not," replies Rough. "I have terminal cancer and I'm dying of it because of smoking. So you enjoy those cigarettes my dear, but you look me right in the eye right now and tell me one thing: one day, you'll give it up. Because my little eight-year-old boy is going to be losing his mom over it."

Rough, 45, was diagnosed with Stage 4 throat cancer in 2017. She had 37 radiation treatments, three rounds of chemotherapy and lost 35 lbs. She was declared cancer-free in Sept. 2017, and was transitioned to routine checkups every three months.

But the cancer returned.

It has now spread from her head and neck to both lungs. Her cancer is aggressive. But then again, so is Rough.

"I've chosen to not filter and I'm not soft. This is life. I'm 45 and I have a will and I'm dying and everyone's got today. So, get on with it. I don't want to hear your whining or complaining. Make the best of what you got."

And so she is. It's why the fast-talking, no-nonsense mom created Team Rough, a unique way of chronicling a mother and son's journey with cancer.

Team Rough heads east

Rough grew up in Aurora, Ont., and attended the prestigious Toronto all-girls school, Havergal College, before finishing her last year in the public system. She's a trained journalist, but spent much of her career working in the restaurant industry.

After moving west and spending 16 years in Calgary, Rough said she was looking for something else for her eight-year-old son, Walker. She wanted the "country, neighbourhood feel" of the city she grew up in, but said the Aurora she knew was long gone.

So she started to look into St. Andrews, N.B., the town where her grandfather lived. She researched the schools, did a cost comparison, and then looked up real estate prices.

"That's when I did an, 'oh.' "

Rough had also been having some medical issues, and it was just before they were about to leave that the cancer diagnosis came in. After making all the necessary arrangements, she jumped on a plane from Calgary to New Brunswick, and started treatment at the Saint John Regional Hospital.

That's also around the time she created Team Rough – the practice of living for today, experiencing everything, and finding joy in the relationships around her.

"Hey, I just got nailed with the biggest scare of my life, and it could happen to anybody," she said. "I'm a very practical, smart woman. But I'm going against my childhood and believing in magic."

It means documenting every thought, saying yes to experiences both weird and strange, and making memories with Walker. From quick notes to poems, stories and videos, Team Rough is a look inside the life of the Rough family, through the lens of Louise.

Believing in magic

In confronting the possibility of death, Rough has developed a strategy for living.

"Maximize your minimum."

"Enjoy your today."

"Be a cheerleader."

It's a contagious outlook, and one shared by the owner of the old Dorchester Jail, Bill Steele. It was just over a year ago that Steele's 25-year-old son died after receiving a heart transplant, and he packed up his life in Ontario and moved to New Brunswick to turn the jail into a bed and breakfast.

Here, Steele came across a story about Rough's son Walker, who was having an issue in St. Andrews over his ability to sell lemonade on the street.

Not knowing anything about Team Rough, or Louise's goal to have as many new experiences as possible, he invited Walker to spend a night in jail for his "crimes."

"He is such a cool kid, man," said Steele. "The winter is a tough time for me, so I'm just trying to keep focused on doing things. I'm always up to something."

Rough wasn't able to join her son in "jail," but laughs about the whole experience – "you gotta love people like Bill."

Welcoming cheerleaders

Rough isn't looking for handouts, but she welcomes cheerleaders, and she has a number of friends who are joining the ranks.

She asks them to grab pom-poms and join her celebration. On the [Team Rough Facebook](#) page, friends and family from around the world follow along. They recount stories and share their support.

In a journey that Rough is not afraid to admit she's terrified of, it's the support of the people around her she said keeps her on her path.

"Magic is just happening around me," she said. It's just a matter of where you look.

So with Christmas around the corner, and "a little boy who's just about too old to believe in Santa," the two co-wrote a letter to the North Pole.

"Santa, we have cancer in our little family. And it is not a good one. We call it 'fancy cancer,'" the letter reads. "We are OK living with cancer for a long time...we just want to live together. But even if in the sky – Walker tells me he's going to be OK. He knows I'll still be his Mommy."

Santa responded: "Christmas is a magical time of year, and the Rough family needs some."