

# The 'gift' of survival

Beating colorectal cancer let broadcast journalist Pamela Wallin bring a hidden subject into the open

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BY DEE GIBNEY

A week before Pamela Wallin was scheduled for colorectal surgery, a group of her closest friends held a cancer shower for her. Her mother was horrified.

"For her, it was a very sombre occasion," says the 48-year-old media icon. "And I think a lot of people might find it morbid. But it was their show of support – it was a night filled with hilarity, a wonderful meal and great conversation.

"I mean, what are you going to do – you're not going to sit around and say, 'Omigod, this is horrible.'"

It's an attitude that has characterized her battle with cancer from day one. A cancer that had begun its insidious work months before she became aware of any symptoms – except for the blood in her stools, which she mentioned to her father on a visit back to her hometown of Wadena, Sask. last summer.

A retired X-ray technician, he minced no words. "It sounds to me like it could be cancer. Get to your doctor," he told her.

And thus began a chain of events that would have a major impact on the veteran journalist.

Acting immediately on her father's advice, Wallin went to her doctor and was amazed at how difficult it was to get an appointment for a colonoscopy.

"If I wanted a Pap test or a mammogram, no one would question me. They would say, 'Right, you're a woman in your 40s and of course we are going to do it.'"

Only because of her doctor's persistence was she able to get an appointment in a matter of weeks rather than the usual months.

A self-admitted control freak, Wallin insisted on immediate answers.

"If I have cancer, I need to be certain, because certain things then need to happen in order for me to manage it. That was my approach – is this something I can manage? I'm writing a book, I'm starting a book tour, I have a shoot in two weeks – I can't wait two weeks for the results."

She told her doctor, "When I'm lying on that table, tell me what you see." So as she underwent her colonoscopy last August, she watched on a TV screen above her.

"He said, 'Well, the bad news is that you have a tumour and the good news is that you have an ulcer on your tumour and that is what is bleeding and giving you the symptoms. Without it, by the time we found this, you probably would have been dead'."

Wallin, the articulate television interviewer and master of the meticulously couched question, finds it hard to define her reaction. Eventually, her search for words yields "terrified."

"I think, at one level, I was quite matter of fact. What does this mean? Am I going to die? Is it treatable? Will I need chemotherapy? How long? If I need a colostomy bag, what will that mean? Would it be visible? Would I be able to do TV shows?"

"There are so many emotions going through your head. I mean, I have work to do. I have a company. I have a family. What am I going to say? What am I going to do? It's not like I am an employee and I can phone and take some sick leave. If I don't work, my company doesn't exist. So you see your life flashing in front of you in that sense."

She's grateful for the straightforward approach of her surgeon, Dr. Andy Smith, in whom she had great confidence.

And she has no doubt she benefited from being an aggressive patient, who had done her homework and was armed with questions.

"You have to break it down into manageable bits so you can control it. I had no idea what was going to happen. I needed a focus."

It's in the middle of the night when the worst-case scenarios play themselves out, she admits.

"I mean, if it's too far gone, I'm not going to spend my life on chemo trying to drag everything out to the last.

"But at the same time, if I give in to those thoughts at two in the morning, that I'm going to die, you set yourself down a different road.

"I believe the psychology is as important as the medicine," she says. "I think to assist the medical profession, I have to want to live."

An event that would break, as Wallin puts it, "the psychological grip that cancer puts on your brain."

Her parents arrived the night of Sept. 10 to be at her side for the surgery four days later. They awoke to the horror of the World Trade Center attacks.

"Those people got up and went to work in the morning and now they're dead and gone. Their loved ones might not even see their body ever again. They may never have any closure. In my situation, I knew I had a really good chance of coming out the other end.

"It helped me get outside myself – I had been very self-absorbed, focused on the cancer.

"So Sept. 11 was amazingly helpful to me. I think a very special bonding went on with the world at that time. I think a lot of good came out of that and I think people began to re-evaluate their lives and look at what is important to them, to focus on what matters in life."

Now, six months after having "every organ in your body tossed up in the air and let land again," Wallin says the fact she came through intact is a gift. She calls it her second "wap on the head."

The first was a broken leg and ankle that kept her in bed with her leg elevated for six weeks in January 2001. Her mother pointed out that perhaps there was a lesson to be learned in this, and that lesson was patience.

"It was really about slowing down," says Wallin. "You know, you get in fast-forward mode and, all of a sudden, wap! You pledge all these things to yourself about how you are going to change your life because suddenly you realize how vulnerable you are."

"But I slipped too easily back into the old mode, so obviously I had not learned the message. So I got a second wap."

But the driving force behind working 24 hours a day, seven days a week doesn't just disappear. "It's not like I woke up post surgery and the workaholicism had evaporated. It wasn't removed along with the tumour."

What did change dramatically, she says, was her thinking. That meant learning to say no – "not something that comes easily" – and to be less controlling and to take time out to rest.

But most importantly, it was to "go out there and say this stuff out loud." To stand on a stage, she says, and talk about colorectal cancer.

"This is not something that is on the Richter scale. The other cancers have movie stars and sexy causes associated with them. But nobody wants to stand up and say 'colorectal cancer.'"

"I think I can do something with that, so maybe that's why I got lucky."

Television, she explains, "is a very intimate medium. People feel they know me because I am in their homes." (Her show, Pamela Wallin's Talk TV, airs on CTV, Saturdays at 4 p.m.)

On the post-surgery tour for her book, *Speaking of Success* (Key Porter, \$31.95), in October, she invited questions from the public. "I always said I will talk about absolutely anything, including cancer, so don't be afraid to ask. So people opened up and, of course, that's what they wanted to ask about."

Her mission now is an impassioned campaign for colonoscopies.

"Let's make this a standard part of our testing. You have to beg and plead and hope your doctor can work the system, and it takes six months most of the time. Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death and it's the most treatable, so if we spend money on screening and testing, it would be a whole lot less than we spend on cancer surgery and chemotherapy."

"There will be doctors who tell you it's not necessary. Find another doctor. If someone had told me this is not necessary..." She doesn't finish the sentence. "Go in and get your test. Yeah, it's not fun, but the two days of laxatives you take before is way worse than the test."

To further spread the word, she's also co-produced and hosted an educational video that will be available in pharmacies and doctors' offices.

One of the options for Wallin was chemotherapy and, as she weighed the odds as to whether it was worth the toll, she again turned to her father for advice.

"Dad,' I said, 'I've really been struggling with this one and you are my last call.' And he listened, then he said, 'Sweetheart, how badly do you want to live?'

"I said, 'Dad, that's a really stupid thing to say. I mean, I've just gone through surgery. Of course I want to live. What are you talking about?'

"He said, 'No, listen. Do you want to live so badly that you never cross the street because you might get hit by a car? Or are you never going to get on a plane because you might crash? Or are you going to take every drug that comes along to prevent some disease you might not even have yet?'

"I said, 'Okay, okay, I get the point.'

"Then he said, 'What did you tell me when you came out of the hospital?'" Wallin continues, her eyes filling with tears.

"I said, 'I think they've got it.'

"Then,' he said, 'Get the hell on with your life,'" Wallin concludes, her voice breaking.

"And that's what I am doing."