

LITTLE LUCY'S COURAGEOUS CANCER COMEBACK



Four-year-old Lucy Laws and father Michael play at their Wanganui home last week, and, right, how the Sunday Star-Times covered Lucy's illness in February when doctors gave her a 10% chance of survival.

Photo: Gary Rodgers/Magnum Images



TEN MONTHS ago Lucy Laws was lying in a hospital bed in Auckland's Starship children's oncology ward being subjected to a succession of lumbar punctures, CT scans, platelet infusions, blood tests, chest X-rays and biopsies. Her chances of survival were estimated at 10%. A doctor told her parents divine intervention was about all that could save her.

Her father, Wanganui Mayor and

Sunday Star-Times columnist Michael Laws, wrote despairingly: "My golden girl is beset by one of the rarest malignant combinations on this earth."

But today Lucy, who has just turned four, is thriving.

She's back at pre-school three times a week, loves helping look after her new baby brother Theo and each day her parents gain confidence that

everything will turn out fine.

However, there is still the huge cocktail of drugs that Lucy needs to take for the next two years and the regular trips to hospital that remind the family just how precarious life can be.

Today Laws and partner Leonie Brookhammer speak about their turbulent year and what "normal" now means for their family.

LOVING LUCY
FULL STORY / News,

Loving Lucy: her family's fears and faith

Michael Laws and Leonie Brookhammer talk to Susan Pepperell about life after facing death.

WHEN LUCY Laws' hair started growing back it came out curly and copper-coloured.

Before she was sick it was blonde and straight, but the curls have delighted her father – Wanganui Mayor Michael Laws – who was similarly adorned at one stage.

Lucy, however, just wants her curls to grow quicker.

It is 10 months since four-year-old Lucy first got sick. One day she was fine, the next she was running a fever so high she had to be flown from Wanganui to Auckland's Starship by Lifeflight, an emergency medical plane.

Then came the devastating diagnosis: not only did Lucy have leukemia, she had also contracted a rare fungal infection in her lungs and had acute pneumonia.

Her odds of survival were put at 10%; one doctor told her parents divine intervention was the only thing they could count on.

Lucy lived. Her dad says there were three things that saved her: prayer, the skill of Starship's clinicians and Lucy herself.

"I remember her sitting bolt upright in her hospital bed when she was so sick and saying 'I'm not going to die Daddy'. Then she lay down again and went straight back to sleep. It was a remarkable occurrence."

Lucy turned four the week before Christmas – her dad had promised her a trip to New York to see the musical *The Little Mermaid* but a baby named Theo put paid to that.

He was born three months ago; the latest addition to a busy household which includes Laws, his partner



'You are seeing the person you most love in the world in such pain and it makes you feel so helpless.'

Leonie Brookhammer, Ella, 16, Noah, 11, Lucy and Zoe, two.

Laws says it was fair to say another child was "not something we joyously contemplated" and that last year the couple decided they would simply "batten down the hatches and get to the end".

Not long after Theo's birth came a new sadness. Oliver, a child Lucy had become friendly with during her initial stay at Starship's oncology ward, died.

He and Lucy were the same age and even looked alike with the same big eyes and facial features, says Laws. Lucy now talks of him as "being with the angels".

It was Oliver's death that brought Laws to tears for the first time since Lucy was first diagnosed.

"It's just so unfair. That's the thing about these kiddies, there's nothing you can do about it. You are simply there as an observer. You are seeing the person you most love in the world in such pain and it makes you feel so helpless."

Laws says the experience has



Michael Laws playing with daughter Lucy at their Wanganui home, 10 months after her sudden leukemia diagnosis left her near death at Auckland's Starship hospital (far left).

Main photo: Gary Rodgers, inset: David White.

enabled him to rediscover his faith. "I don't expect to understand how it works but we are lucky."

Lucy's recovery has brought a new kind of normality to the household. Her drug regime is substantial. Every day she takes three chemotherapy drugs administered orally by syringe. The medication is so potent her parents must use rubber gloves and discard the syringe after use. One of the doses must be given about 1am.

Once a month she goes to Wanganui Hospital for an injection into a small port implanted under her skin at the bottom of her rib cage. The port

has already been shifted once when it became infected. This is the most painful procedure for Lucy. On top of that, every six weeks she returns to Starship for a lumbar puncture, carried out under general anaesthetic.

This will continue for two years. It means her immunity is compromised so her temperature must be monitored constantly. Too high and she must go to hospital. That happened on Christmas Eve. And just last week younger sister Zoe was diagnosed with glandular fever so the watchful eye is now that bit more intense.

Ask Brookhammer how she feels

about the future and she admits to simply being very tired.

"I was hoping to wake up on January 1 reinvigorated but to be honest I'm just tired.

"I'm hopeful things are going to be OK. Despite everything last year being so bad we did come through, Lucy did get better. It wasn't as bad as I imagined it could be."

She reserves a special thanks for the people who sent cards and gifts for Lucy, most of whom they have never met.

"I'll never forget it. I'll keep that in my heart forever."