

FERTILITY CENTER DELIVERS HOPE TO CANCER PATIENTS

by Tina Smith

Hope comes in many shapes and sizes. For **Wendy Coultry**, it has taken the form of tiny eggs stored in the Fertility Center's cryopreservation tank – her sole chance for a genetic link to a baby in the future.

Last year, Wendy learned that an immediate and complete hysterectomy would give her the best odds for beating ovarian cancer but also put an end to her fertility. Still “in a daze and too shocked to think” but with no time to waste, Wendy was referred to Reproductive Endocrinologists **Joey Bird** and **Barry Donesky** at the Fertility Center.

“Everybody [at the Fertility Center] is just so awesome,” says Wendy, who lives in Dayton, Tennessee. “From the time I walk in the door until I leave, I’m treated like more than just another patient. And I’ve had some experience over the past year with medical personnel! The staff at the Center laugh and joke with me, and I give them a hard time – that’s the way I deal with things. One of the doctors even drew my blood during an appointment, which surprised me. He’s really good at it, too.

“Understanding my options and knowing I could do something about my future made my hysterectomy much less traumatic.”

Wendy credits her gynecologist for listening to her concerns and making an early diagnosis. Known as the “cancer that whispers,” ovarian malignancy is rare in thirty-something females and typically presents only subtle indicators such as weight gain and bloating. Abnormal urges to urinate, extreme pain and a rapidly changing cyst-turned-tumor-turned-mass set Wendy’s case apart. The pathology report following her first surgery to remove her right ovary confirmed a Stage 1-C condition. She’s at least 20 years younger than every other member of the ovarian cancer support group she attends.

For a gal who was typically only sick about once a year, four surgeries under anesthesia in less than 12 months was a radical change. The second was for an egg retrieval at the Fertility Center following several days of ovarian stimulation injections. “I didn’t like having to give myself shots,

and I was really nervous about the procedure but happy that I could just sleep through it,” says Wendy. “It actually was much simpler than I expected.”

Fourteen eggs were removed by passing a needle through the wall of the vagina and into Wendy’s remaining ovary. The eggs were frozen immediately, using a newly proven technology offered at the Fertility Center through an exclusive partnership with one of the nation’s most successful cryopreservation programs (see sidebar).

Two weeks after her egg retrieval and cryopreservation, Wendy’s oncologist removed her remaining ovary as well as her uterus during a second laparoscopy. This third surgery was soon followed by a fourth, which allowed a vein port to be placed just under the surface of her skin near the collarbone. She’s undergone two of four prescribed chemotherapy treatments spaced three weeks apart.

When she’s not recovering from the side effects of treatment, Wendy takes on do-it-yourself projects at home, such as her most recent installation of a laminate floor. She is an avid reader as well as a genealogist. She’s currently on medical leave from her job as a manufacturing planner for a sock factory in Niota. Her fiancé is headed back to Iraq for a third term with the Army, so Wendy will continue to find support and comfort with her friends and family as well as her canine pals.

“My brother calls me the crazy dog lady,” says Wendy, owner of Mila, Miley and Max along with Australian Shepherd Molly, who’s nearly four and just completed a 25-week chemotherapy protocol for Stage 4 lymphoma. On Wendy’s toughest days, Molly, who currently is in remission, won’t leave her side.

What advice does Wendy share with other women? “Know your body, get your annual exam, do your research and ask questions.” Conclusive tests for early detection of ovarian cancer still have not been developed, so an on-going relationship with a trusted healthcare provider is essential.

And while she still mourns the loss of being able to carry her own child and knows she’ll face challenges in finding a surrogate and continuing down an unconventional path to motherhood, Wendy remains hopeful about becoming a parent one day. “I’m one of the lucky ones,” she admits, content to take one day at a time and feeling thankful that her dreams – albeit frozen – are secure.

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FACTS ABOUT EGG FREEZING

In addition to cancer victims like Wendy who need to preserve their fertility, women who have not yet found a life partner or are otherwise not ready to conceive but are concerned about their decreasing chances for pregnancy after age 35 can benefit from egg freezing options.

Cryopreservation suspends the biological clock for eggs, so to speak, and keeps the quality of those eggs from diminishing while in frozen storage.

Sperm has been successfully cryopreserved for decades and embryo freezing has generated pregnancies for 25 years, but freezing unfertilized eggs has met with only sporadic success until recently. The human egg is a delicate, comparatively large cell. In the past, attempts to freeze a retrieved female gamete turned the egg into a fragile, glass-like state. Most did not survive the thawing process. Those that did often suffered damage to the machinery responsible for distributing chromosomes equally during cell division, so very few pregnancies resulted.

Due to recent breakthrough research in reproductive science, eggs retrieved from a woman's body can now be cryogenically preserved **before** fertilization and result in healthy pregnancies down the road. Fine-tuning the method for freezing eggs has led to pregnancy rates that compare very favorably to success rates with frozen embryos.

Egg freezing offers several advantages with a limited number of eggs being thawed and fertilized as needed for pregnancy attempts while the others remain frozen. This option eliminates the ethical dilemmas related to discarding unused embryos. Frozen, unfertilized eggs can be disposed of without the moral issues surrounding fertilized embryos.

For more information, visit **My FertilityCenter.com**.