

Spirits soar under African skies

A grieving mother finds hope and happiness at the school her dying daughter helped to build



SHELLEY PAGE

Wednesday on CBC. Sharon doesn't want to give too much away.

But she told me last week about the day the television cameras burst into her home to take her and Derek to the airport. "I screamed and screamed," she says. "And then I cried."

It wasn't completely a surprise. Elliot had contacted Sharon to urge her to apply. She told the grieving mother to pack a bag and get the proper shots. As it turns out, Sharon didn't need many because she'd already been to Tanzania to climb Mount Kilimanjaro to raise funds and awareness for ALS in honour of her husband.

Then she waited. Summer slipped by. Sharon was always looking over her shoulder, waiting for an ambush.

"I was afraid to hope too much."

Then the camera crews snatched her away, not before making a brief stop at the Gate of Heaven cemetery in Burlington so she could visit her daughter's grave.

Being in Kenya was magical, Sharon says. "How I could not feel pride as her mother after seeing the looks on those kids' faces?"

I first met Sharon last March, as her daughter huddled in an Ottawa hospital room, overcome by an unforgiving round of chemotherapy. That day, Sharon talked about their years living in Ottawa, and how Maddie would sit on her father's lap as he motored around Sandy Hill in his wheelchair.

When Maddie was born, Stephen, who worked in robotics at Nortel, already had ALS. The family moved to Hamilton because Sharon wanted to be closer to her family. When Stephen died in 1998, he'd lived nine years after his diagnosis. Not two, as had been predicted.

Sharon learned, upon returning from climbing Kilimanjaro, that Maddie, 12 at the time, was sick. Her daughter endured 11 months of chemotherapy, seven weeks of daily radiation and extensive surgery that removed two of her ribs and part of one lung. In July 2006, she received a stem cell transplant. In October, she was fitted with a prosthetic shoulder and partial prosthetic limb. The cancer kept coming back.

Maddie didn't dwell on herself. She started selling jewelry out of her hospital room to friends, family and hospital staff. And she created The M.A.D. Project — M.A.D. for Making A Difference. Friends, family and strangers helped her raise money for teachers' salaries and school supplies.

With Maddie gone, the schools she attended are all holding ongoing fundraisers to make Maddie's wish everlasting, says Sharon. And plans are in the works for "Run like you're M.A.D." — a walk-and-run-a-thon to be held next spring.

Since Sharon returned from Kenya, she has been trying to make sense of her life. When her husband had ALS, she devoted her energy to supporting him and then, after he died, to helping others with the illness. Then she dedicated herself to her daughter.

"I feel like I've lost my identity," she says. "Although I know I shouldn't just live on through Maddie and her wishes, it's truthfully the only thing I have any passion for right now."

Perhaps she will go on a speaking tour about her daughter, or write a book.

Sharon is haunted by something Maddie said before she died.

"I'm not worried about me," she told her



NOW CANADA PRODUCTIONS

Sharon Babineau is haunted by something Maddie said before she died. 'I'm not worried about me,' she told her mom. 'I'm worried about you guys. Please just try to be happy. For me.' The words bring Sharon back to wondering what she should do with her life — beyond spreading Maddie's message

mom. "I'm worried about you guys. Please just try to be happy. For me."

The words bring Sharon back to wondering what she should do with her life — beyond spreading Maddie's message.

She thought she might like to play hockey. Sharon, Alex and Maddie were huge hockey fans. Derek plays. The last time Maddie was in Ottawa, it was after Sharon drove her through a snowstorm to attend a Senators game. So Sharon got up the courage, bought hockey gear and joined a women's hockey team.

"For an hour every week, I have real fun." Happiness, even.

Last month in Hamilton, she was invited

to watch a fundraiser hockey game involving retired NHL players. Sharon got it in her head that she wanted to play. The retired hockey greats worked hard to feed Sharon the puck. During a shoot out, she finally put it in the net.

For a little while, she felt on top of the world. "I scored for my daughter, but you know what, I also scored for me."

No Opportunity Wasted appears on Wednesday, Nov. 21, at 8.30 p.m. on CBC. Learn more about Maddie's legacy at www.maddieswishproject.com

