

HOPE LIVE

The power of hope

BY MARTHA ILBOUDO

On a warm summer afternoon, set against the picturesque backdrop of tall palm trees, fringed lawns and the plush gardens of the Parker Palm Springs, in Palm Springs, Calif., Heidi Bonnell and her husband Joe Galimberti sit in a white hammock holding their newborn twin sons; both parents beaming with joy as a photographer captures every moment—including a moment that almost didn't happen.

For many women, the road to motherhood is a choice. But what if that choice was not yours to make? What if that choice was made by something else? What if that something else was cancer?

When Ms. Bonnell, vice-president of federal government relations with Rogers Communications, was diagnosed with melanoma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2008, she didn't know that the journey she was about to embark on would lead her to help other young cancer patients realize their dreams of having children through a gala event she created called Hope Live, in support of Ottawa charity Fertile Future.

"My involvement with Fertile Future and ultimately the creation of Hope Live came out of my own cancer journey. I was newly engaged and planning a wedding when I was diagnosed with cancer. My primary concern, I guess I can say my bucket list singular—I always wanted to have children," Ms. Bonnell tells *P&I*. "I was fortunate enough to be able to delay my chemo while we went through a cycle with the fertility clinic and we were able to successfully freeze embryos."



◀ Jann Arden performed at last year's Hope Live gala. *P&I photograph by Jake Wright*

Since 2009, Hope Live has brought the issue of fertility preservation to the forefront. Now in its seventh year, the annual star-studded event is a favourite amongst Ottawa's elite, bringing out the who's who in the world of politics, entertainment and media.

After undergoing a cycle with a fertility clinic, Ms. Bonnell and Mr. Galimberti were able to welcome into the world their now three-and-a-half-year-old twin sons, Jonah and Bennett, via surrogate.

"Having those embryos was, in fact, our miracle."

Ms. Bonnell says after her experience she wanted to give back.

Since it was first introduced in 2009, the Hope Live gala has been instrumental in bringing the issue of fertility preservation to the forefront. Now entering its seventh year, the annual star-studded event which takes place at the Great Canadian Theatre Company west of downtown Ottawa is a favourite amongst Ottawa's elite, bringing out the who's who in the world of politics, entertainment, media and the like.

CBC comedian Rick Mercer, host of *The Rick Mercer Report* and a close friend of Ms. Bonnell's, says Hope Live is "purely a wonderful night of entertainment" that allows guests to be treated to an intimate and interactive living room concert with some of the biggest talents the Canadian entertainment industry has to offer.

"What's great about this night is that it is an intimate evening with incredible entertainment, with fantastic wine with amazing food," says Mr. Mercer, who's hosted the event in past years. "To see the calibre of artists that we put on that stage in a room as intimate as that, is truly one of those—every single year—one of those

incredibly special experiences that you cannot believe that you are so fortunate to be that close to Gordon Downie singing Tragically Hip songs, or Randy Bachman while he's singing, or Alan Doyle singing. The list just goes on: Jann Arden. It's just so tremendous."

In an interview with *P&I*, Mr. Mercer says the laid-back feeling and camaraderie among political foes is exactly how Ottawa should be. "Everyone is there for similar reasons. There is no partisanship—there's Liberals, Conservatives, there's the NDP, there's Greens, they're all there in the room. There's people from labour, business, there are people from journalism. They're all there together—there's no agenda other than to support a worthwhile cause and it's a wonderful feeling to see that happen," he says.

"For me personally, I just have so much fun because my audience is the people in that very small intimate room and I can be completely inside the bubble when I'm addressing that crowd and addressing people in that crowd, I don't have to worry, unlike on television. I don't have to worry about my audience in Northern Ontario, or Vancouver or Newfoundland. It's entirely for people who operate and function inside that bubble of Ottawa for a portion of their lives, so it's great, great fun for me."

Since its inception, Hope Live has assisted 351 men and women through Fertile Future, a Canadian national non-profit organization that provides fertility preservation information and support services to cancer patients and oncology professionals.

Through their work, Fertile Future has helped educate young cancer patients, as well as the community and medical professionals about the effects of cancer treatments on fertility.

Money raised through ticket sales and sponsors from Hope Live helps fund the Power of Hope Cost Reduction Program, a charitable subsidy aimed at providing financial assistance to young couples in

need. To date, according to Ms. Bonnell, Hope Live has raised almost \$800,000, a goal she hopes to bring to \$1-million at the next gala. Usually a must-attend fall event, Hope Live has been postponed until the spring of 2016 when Parliamentarians are back in Ottawa following the October election campaign.

According to Fertile Future president Aaron Jackson, because of the time sensitivity of treatment, patients can only preserve their fertility before they've had their cancer treatments and that usually happens very quickly after the diagnosis. If, says Ms. Jackson, patients are not aware of treatment options or do not get the opportunity to learn about fertility beforehand, once treatment starts, it's too late and as such expenses are not covered.

On average, according to the charity, the cost of donor sperm varies from bank to bank and can cost from \$500 to \$1,000. The price of sperm freezing can range between \$350 to \$500 for the initial collection with an additional \$200 per year for storing. With the addition of fertility drugs, egg freezing and in vitro fertilization, the cost of a complete cycle can go well above \$10,000, says Ms. Bonnell.

Despite enduring three operations, eight rounds of chemotherapy and a cardiac



Rogers Communications lobbyist Heidi Bonnell, pictured right at last year's Hope Live gala at the Great Canadian Theatre Company with Burton Cummings, Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau, Sophie Grégoire and CBC comedian Rick Mercer. *P&I photograph by Jake Wright*

issue, Ms. Bonnell remains strong and steadfast in her quest to assist those in need. "Motherhood is everything they say it is and more. I think your heart grows exponentially the moment that they're handed to you. Quite frankly, your obligation to make the world a better place grows exponentially too. They [Jonah and Bennett] serve as the ultimate inspiration for everything that I do," Ms. Bonnell says. **P&I**