

# Prom Date

For Hilary Cole and Christopher LeBlanc, high school graduation was a very special landmark, indeed.

It was a Thursday in late June when I first met Hilary Cole and her boyfriend, Christopher LeBlanc, at his Gunningsville home. It had been a busy week for them — with prom and safe grad on Monday, and graduation ceremonies at their school, Bernice MacNaughton, on Wednesday.

Hilary Cole and Chris LeBlanc have been an item for a couple of years now. They were introduced by a mutual friend in the summer of 2004, back when they both had part time jobs with the Wildcats. The early days of their friendship mostly involved chatting on MSN. In fact, they say they got to know one another really well before they even had their first date.

Four months before that first date, Hilary had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. An astrocytoma on the left temporal lobe, to be specific.

“There was really no warning,” Hilary recalls. “I woke up from a dream and there was this really gross smell. I ran to the bathroom because I was going to be sick.”

When her mother, Beth Cole, heard the banging from the bathroom she rushed to her daughter. A nurse, Beth realized that Hilary was having a seizure. At Moncton City Hospital, a CT scan revealed the teen’s tumor and surgery was performed. Doctors were able to remove most of the tumor, and believed it to be benign. It had probably been there for Hilary’s entire life, but had grown very slowly.

The left temporal lobe is the part of the brain that controls speech. Hilary, a singer and aspiring actress, emerged from surgery completely intact. In fact, about a month later, she performed in her high school’s production of *The Sound of Music*.

Diagnostic samples sent to Washington revealed the tumor was, in fact,

malignant; Hilary was scheduled for radiation and chemotherapy.

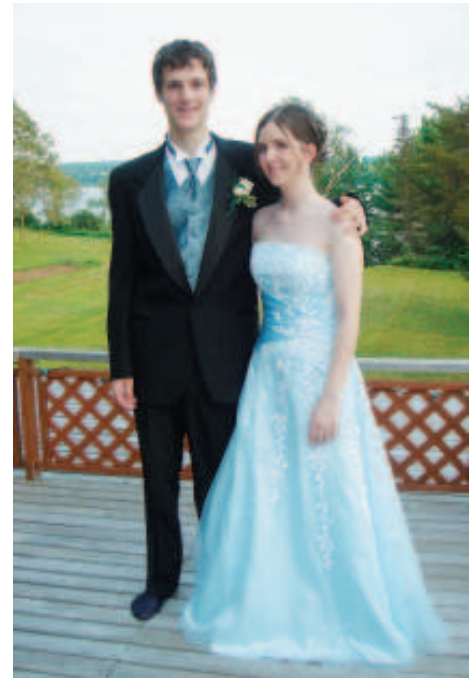
Hilary says that chatting with Chris during the early days of her health crisis was very important, in many ways. Chris, you see, was born with a life threatening heart defect, so their conversations were quite different from those she had with her other friends. “There were times, during those days (and since) when he told me exactly what I needed to hear,” Hilary told me.

The radiation that Hilary underwent was a new type of treatment, one that more specifically targets the cancerous region than older types of treatments. “I had the radiation at IWK in the summer of 2004. The chemo began in the Fall. Seven days a month, once a month. The radiation wasn’t that bad, but I had extreme nausea with the chemo.” Chris was on hand during the chemo, to sit with Hilary, to hold her hand.

Hilary adds that the cancer hasn’t really frightened her. “I’m not that type of person,” she says. In fact, Hilary and Christopher are both equipped with strong personal faiths; their religious convictions, and the support of their churches have helped the Coles and the LeBlancs deal with the challenges posed by Hilary and Christopher’s medical conditions.

For Chris, the medical condition has been a fact of life from the very beginning. He was rushed to IWK within 24 hours of his birth. His parents were told he had four congenital heart defects, including transposition of the great vessels. A shunt was implanted at 14 days and during his childhood, there were 14 more surgeries.

... Yet Chris could hardly be described as “frail”. Although contact



sports were prohibited, as a kid he played basketball, baseball, and street hockey. His mom notes that Chris has always been big for his age. “The doctors didn’t expect me to grow this tall,” Chris (who is more than 6’) adds.

Chris ponders the possibility that at least one miracle may well have occurred in his young life. When he was in Grade 7, a procedure that should have taken place two years later was scheduled because his heart surgeon, Dr. Ross, was moving away. Pre-surgery tests revealed that Chris’ heart rate was abnormal. The tests also revealed a blood clot near his lungs – a clot that could have killed him, had it not been detected at that time. Chris was put on potent medication and his heart now beats to the rhythm of a pacemaker.

Though family and friends describe both Hilary and Chris as “mature beyond their years”, for now, like most people their age, they are excitedly planning their future. Chris plans to become a teacher and is studying at ABU in Moncton. Hilary, the aspiring actress, chose Mount Allison. Those choices, of course, mean that they can see their families -- and each other -- on a regular basis.

– Jeanne Whitehead