



Lauren O'Malley and Jake Woodward married last October after both were diagnosed with cancer.

Planning their future

Newlyweds take steps to preserve parenthood before treatment

By Katrina Burton

When Lauren O'Malley and Jake Woodward met in law school six years ago, they knew they were destined to be together. What they didn't know was that their journey would take them through individual cancer diagnoses, an aggressive autoimmune disease and a race to preserve their future.

Lauren was the first to be diagnosed. While she and Jake were still in law school at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., she was rushed to the emergency room in early 2016 with severe abdominal pain. The couple received devastating news.

"They told me I had a large mass on my ovary that had likely spread to other organs," Lauren recalls. "Essentially, they said I had advanced ovarian cancer."

A Houston native, Lauren was familiar with MD Anderson, where she and her family sought a second opinion.

"I've had family members treated at MD Anderson, so I know it's the best cancer center in the country," says Lauren. "If I was going to be fighting for my life and future, it was going to be at MD Anderson."

After she took an emergency flight from Washington, D.C., to Houston, MD Anderson doctors determined Lauren had a serous borderline tumor – a less aggressive mass that had not spread beyond the ovary. Kathleen Schmeler, M.D., professor of Gynecologic Oncology and Reproductive Medicine, performed surgery to remove Lauren's left ovary and fallopian tube, leaving her cancer-free.

Preparing for a future family

Knowing this type of tumor increases the risk of developing a tumor on the other ovary, Schmeler referred Lauren to advanced nurse practitioner Deborah Holman, who counseled

Lauren and her family. After that, Lauren and Jake met with fertility specialist Terri Woodard, M.D., an associate professor of Gynecologic Oncology and Reproductive Medicine. Woodard discussed fertility preservation options with the couple.

"Jake was very supportive during this process," Lauren says. "He participated in the conversations as an advocate for me and my future."

Lauren decided to move forward with oocyte cryopreservation, a process where a woman's eggs are extracted, frozen and stored for later use. The entire process took 12 days, with Lauren taking daily injections of gonadotropin, a hormone that stimulates the ovaries to recruit multiple follicles that contain eggs. She underwent frequent monitoring, including transvaginal ultrasounds and blood tests to check hormone levels. Once tests confirmed that multiple large follicles were present, Woodard performed a procedure to retrieve the eggs and freeze them.

"Technological advancements over the years have improved fertility preservation success rates," says Woodard. "It also helped that Lauren was so young when she underwent the procedure."

An unexpected setback

With cancer behind them and renewed hope for a future family, Lauren and Jake graduated from law school in 2017, and moved to Houston. They both passed the Texas Bar Exam on the first try. That fall, Jake orchestrated an elaborate and romantic marriage proposal with help from Lauren's family.

The couple set a spring wedding date and jumped into wedding plans and their careers. But they soon faced another life-threatening medical setback.

In December 2018, four months before their wedding,



The couple exchanged vows under a majestic oak tree at a ranch owned by the bride's family in Round Top, Texas.



Photo: Wyatt McSpadden

After a honeymoon at Disney World, newlyweds Lauren and Jake are at home in Houston with their cat Samson.

Jake's speech began to slur, and he had difficulty chewing. Fearing her fiancé was having a stroke, Lauren rushed him to a local emergency room. Doctors there diagnosed Jake with myasthenia gravis, a rare autoimmune neuromuscular disease that causes extreme muscle weakness and swallowing problems. Scans also revealed a large tumor called a thymoma on his thymus gland. Thymomas are associated with autoimmune diseases, especially myasthenia gravis. Ten to 15% of patients with myasthenia gravis have a thymoma, and conversely, 30% to 45% of patients with a thymoma have myasthenia gravis.

"When I learned Jake had a tumor, my No. 1 priority was getting him to MD Anderson," Lauren says. "Within days, we were there."

Neuro-oncologist Sudhakar Tummala, M.D., immediately recognized the signs of a myasthenic crisis, a life-threatening medical emergency requiring respiratory support. Jake was admitted to the intensive care unit where he received breathing assistance and daily plasma treatments to strengthen his body and prepare it for surgery to remove the tumor.

Jake's MD Anderson care team cautioned that he might need chemotherapy after surgery, which could negatively impact his fertility. Lauren contacted Woodward for guidance.

"I was shocked when I received the call about Jake," recalls Woodward. "I'd kept in touch with the family over the years, and was saddened by the news of Jake's medical struggles."

Woodard helped Jake arrange to have his sperm frozen



Wedding photos: Josh & Dana Fernandez Photography

Fertility specialist Terri Woodward, M.D., right, helped the couple preserve their fertility before cancer treatment.

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Jake Woodward
Survivor

before treatment, with the hope that one day he and Lauren could have children through in vitro fertilization.

Cardiothoracic surgeon Reza Mehran, M.D., then surgically removed Jake's tumor, and he's now cancer-free.

"Fertility preservation gave us great peace of mind," Jake says. "It's nice to know that when we're ready, we can pursue parenthood."

With Jake still suffering from the debilitating effects of

myasthenia gravis after surgery, the couple postponed their wedding to give him time to grow stronger.

"We leaned on our faith and love for one another to get through the tough times," says Lauren. "After Jake's surgery, there was no question that his health was the priority."

A fairytale moment

On Oct. 19, 2019, the couple finally married under a majestic oak tree at a ranch owned by the bride's family in Round Top, Texas. Both Woodward and Holman attended the fairytale event.

"Having the opportunity to attend the wedding was very special," says Woodward. "Knowing that my work offers couples like Jake and Lauren hope gives me the sense that I'm living my purpose."

After a honeymoon at Disney World, Jake and Lauren are taking life one day at a time as Jake continues his autoimmune disease treatment. For now, the couple's two cats, Samson and Juniper, and their dog, Annabel, keep them busy.

"I got my wish," says Jake. "I was able to stand at my wedding and dance with my bride. Now, it's just a matter of me getting healthier and us growing old together. There's so much in store for our future." ♦