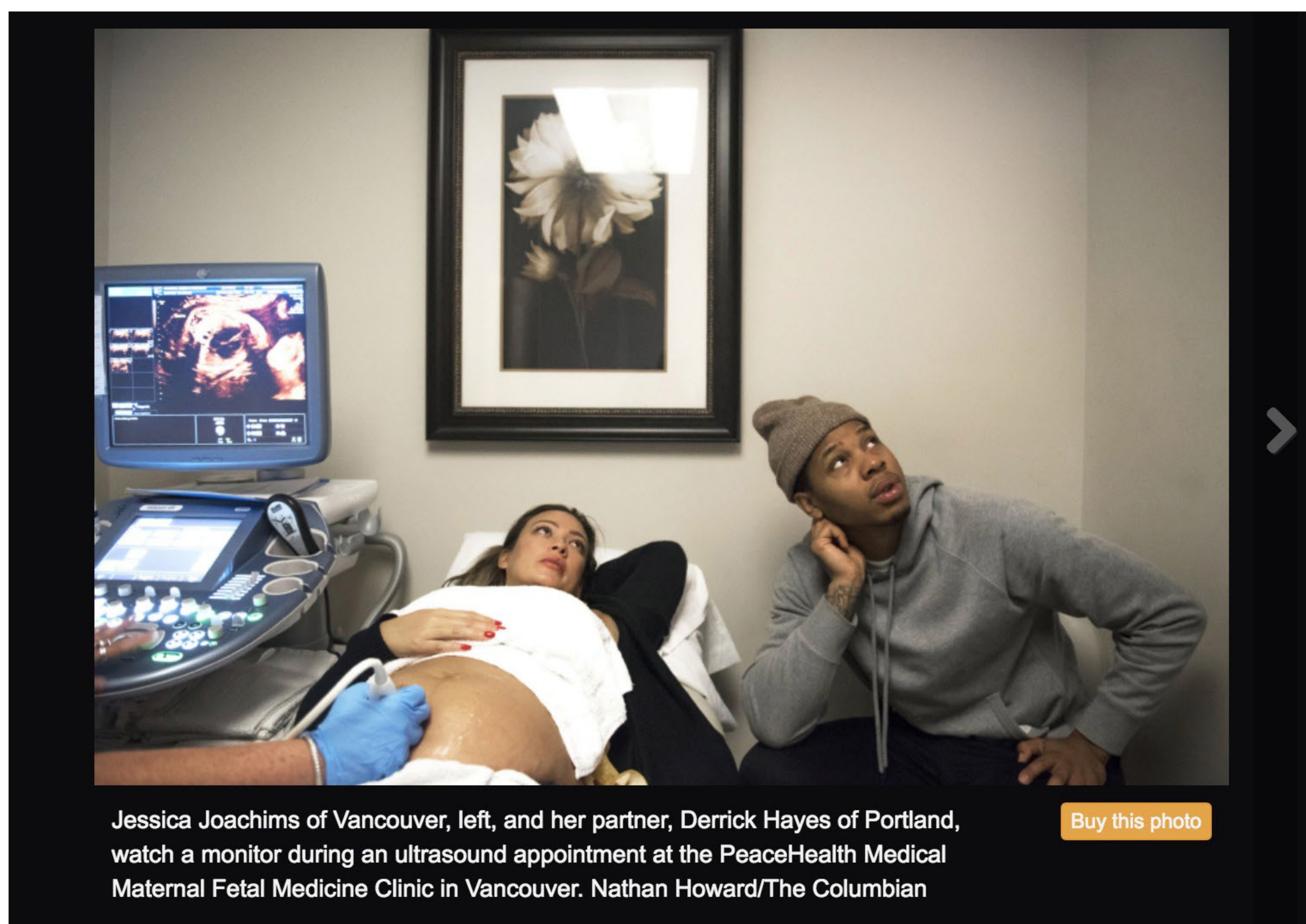


# Wonder Babies: Mixed emotions when pregnancy, cancer diagnosis coincide



Jessica Joachims of Vancouver, left, and her partner, Derrick Hayes of Portland, watch a monitor during an ultrasound appointment at the PeaceHealth Medical Maternal Fetal Medicine Clinic in Vancouver. Nathan Howard/The Columbian

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By **Wyatt Stayner**, Columbian staff writer  
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## Breast Cancer Awareness

Each year, more than 200,000 women in the U.S. are diagnosed with breast cancer, including thousands of women in Washington. In honor of their fight — and as part of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month — The Columbian published this collection of stories about the women who have received breast cancer diagnoses, the science and technological advances for treating them and the community that supports them.

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When Naomi Allen and Jessica Joachims found out they were pregnant, it wasn't accompanied by complete elation.

That's because they were still finishing their fights against breast cancer. Allen, a 35-year-old Gresham, Ore. resident who works in Vancouver, was undergoing herceptin treatment after doing rounds of chemotherapy and having a double mastectomy. The plan was to continue the herceptin treatment for another year, but on a day Allen was scheduled to get treatment, she started to feel nauseous.

She decided to take a home pregnancy test, and it came back positive. She called her oncologist four times that day.

"I don't know if I was happy at the moment," Allen said. Instead, she was surprised and scared about what it might mean for her health and the health of the baby.

Joachims, a 33-year-old Vancouver resident, had a similar experience. She underwent a double mastectomy, but skipped chemo and radiation and took a pill called tamoxifen.

One day she started to feel sick. She went to urgent care with her partner Derrick Hayes. A nurse informed the couple Joachims was pregnant. A wave of nervousness washed over her. Joachims said she was afraid she might have to choose between this "new life and my own life."

"I had such mixed emotions going into this, talking to my OB-GYN at first and her explaining, 'Don't make any mixed decisions. It's not something to celebrate right now because who knows what this drug is doing to this embryo,'" Joachims recalled. "I couldn't really celebrate. I couldn't really speak about it at all. That was definitely hard."

Both women now have healthy, developing babies. They both had to stop their drug cancer treatments, but they said that shouldn't greatly increase the odds the cancer will return. Neither will be able to breastfeed.

Joachims, who already has a 10-year-old daughter, is expecting her child in mid-December — she's chosen to be surprised by the gender. Allen, who has two other kids and didn't breastfeed either of them, is expecting a boy on Nov. 19.

Both women had their mastectomies performed by PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center's Dr. Toni Storm-Dickerson, and reconstructions done by Dr. Allen Gabriel, who said it can be unusual for women to get pregnant after treatment.

"It must be something in Dr. Gabriel's cocktail," Allen joked. "It has to be something. He has two patients now. Something is up."

Allen now refers to her boy as a "miracle baby," and Joachims said being able to fight cancer and still have a child has made her believe even more in her potential. When Joachims was diagnosed with cancer she felt like she had no control over things. Now, while pregnant, she's continued working at a hair salon in Portland, and has goals of opening her own salon.

"If I can beat this and still be pregnant, there's so much more out there for me to do," Joachims said. "I'm so determined to just keep going because I feel like when I found out and I was diagnosed I had to stop everything. I had to stop work. This time around, I can at least control when I am doing what I love to do."

Allen has had quite an adventure since discovering she was pregnant. After undergoing breast reconstruction surgery, Allen had a blister develop on top of a breast. That blister became a scab that wouldn't go away. Then one night, the scab fell off, and opened up a hole so she could see into her breast.

"The next morning I was in the hospital being prepped for surgery and being pregnant," Allen said.

She currently has an expander in, and will have final reconstructive surgery two days after her baby's birth, which she refers to as the "topping on the sundae" of a packed month that also includes black belt martial art tests for her other kids.

Allen initially struggled with her cancer diagnosis, and encountered feelings of insecurity. But she learned to persevere through those emotions. When she shaved her head for treatment, she wore a rotating cast of fun scarves. Support from friends, co-workers at the Vancouver collections agency where she works, and her family, which includes breast cancer survivor and sister-in-law [Adrienne San Nicolas](#), helped her on the journey.

"There were definitely moments where you don't want to look in the mirror," Allen said. "I wouldn't say that's technically wrong. My husband wasn't going to let me absorb in those emotions, with the 'I'll never look in the mirror again,' but I felt them and he let me feel them, and work past it, and see that no matter what it did to your chest you're still you inside."



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