JOELLE PAUPORTE, 35, embraces her 3-year-old daughter, Halle, at their West Hartford home. Pauporte, a psychiatrist, has advanced breast cancer and sometimes can do no more with her daughter than sit and read with her. She has started a program to collect children's books for others in her position.

A MOTHER'S LOVE ABIDES

Ailing Woman Seeks To Help Stricken Parents, Children Connect Through Books

By DANIELA ALTIMARI
COURANT STAFF WRITER

WEST HARTFORD — Sometimes, 35-year-old Joelle Pauporte is just too tired to be the kind of mom she wants to be:

The kind of mom who dances with her daughter in the living room, performs spirited re-enactments of "Beauty and the Beast," and plays endless games of Candyland.

Some days, Pauporte, weakened by radiation, nauseated from chemotherapy or scared about the future, can't do much more than gather 3-year-old Halle on her lap and read her a story.

"The one thing I can always do is sit and cuddle and read," Pauporte said.

Pauporte realizes even that could end soon. She remains in treatment, but has advanced breast cancer and knows the day might come when her only child may not have any memory of her or of the many books they've shared.

"If I die within the year, my daughter won't remember me," said Pauporte, a slender woman with expressive brown eyes. "I'm trying to ensure that she does."

To make sure the precocious preschooler with the brilliant smile understands how much her mother loved her, Pauporte is leaving reminders.

She has written out enough birthday cards to last Halle many years. She has bought a slew of silver charms to mark life's big milestones: going to the senior prom, graduating from college, getting engaged.

And she has launched a national campaign to collect children's books for hospital cancer units, so parents undergoing treatment can get lost in a story with their children.

Hospital libraries have plenty of volumes on coping with serious illnesses and dealing with losing a parent, but Pauporte wants to stock them with silly stories such as "Hello, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle," and poignant stories such as "The Runaway Bunny."

When Pauporte and her daughter are huddled together over a book, "we're both in the same place at the same time," she said. "It's an escape."

She calls the effort "Light One Little Candle," borrowing a line from a lullaby she has sung to Halle since she was born.

The book drive has become a way for Pauporte to gain back some of her old life. A psychiatrist who counseled HIV-positive prostitutes and patients with spinal cord injuries, she was used to helping people. Now, frail and sometimes in pain, Pauporte often has to rely on others to help with routine chores.

"It is very distressing to be in this role of being so incredibly needy," she said. "The book drive has put me back in the position of making decisions and being in charge again."

Pauporte was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2003, the day after her 34th birthday and two weeks after moving from New York to Connecticut. She had just been appointed chief resident in psychiatry at the Institute of Living. Her husband, urologist Joseph Wagner, took a job at Hartford Hospital.

She underwent a radical mastectomy, 16 weeks of chemotherapy and radiation, but the cancer metastasized and she said it is now considered terminal.

Throughout it all, though, Pauporte has kept up the nightly ritual of reading to Halle.

"It's one way I can be her mommy instead of this patient."

New books can be donated to Hartford Hospital, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, CancerCare for Kids or Dana Farber Cancer Institute through amazon.com or Barnes and Noble books in Bishops Corner, West Hartford.

Pauporte's organization will hold a party at the Bishops Corner library from 6:30 to 8 p.m. on Tues. There will be games for children, refreshments and books that can be purchased and donated. For more information on the events or how to donate, see the group's website, www.lightonelittlecandle.org.