

# Black Friday

By Jim and Heather Dahmer

Friday, June 4, 2004 – we'll never forget the date our lives were changed forever. My husband Jim was diagnosed with pleural mesothelioma, an incurable cancer caused by asbestos fibres in the lining of the lungs, and he was given six months to live.

The youngest of six, Jim grew up in Waterloo, Ontario. A former semi-pro hockey player, coach, golfer and active member of the community, his flamboyant, outgoing personality and outrageous sense of humour made him a joy to those around him. Jim, single with two grown children and grandchildren and myself, a single mother of two young girls, dated for four years and married in 1996.

A plumber/steamfitter/heating designer by trade and for the last 22 years a Maintenance Supervisor for Trillium Lakelands District School Board, Jim began working with asbestos pipe wrap, ending pipe and boiler removal in his late teens (protective gear was unheard of in the late 1950s/early 1960s during the early years of Jim's career). He had started to investigate post-retirement plans as a college instructor in the trades when he began feeling unwell, experiencing shortness of breath, tightness in the chest and an extreme decrease in energy. Residual pneumonia was diagnosed, more tests, including a CT scan, were done, another specialist seen. When we were told that he was going to die, we were in shock. From pneumonia? Surgery for a biopsy and talc poudrage (sealing the pleura to the



*Heather and Jim*

heart wall with talcum powder) was scheduled right away. Mesothelioma was diagnosed – a disease, that can lay dormant for 40 years or more before becoming active.

Anger and frustration became my closest friends. Why did it take so long? What didn't they do? Why was asbestos exposure not investigated after the initial CT scan? All these questions, shouted in anger to a world at large, were answered with silence. How do you tell your children – especially Jim's who had lost their mother at an early age – such devastating news? After surgery and recovery, we went west to visit Jim's son, Paul and daughter, Connie and their families. My daughters, Marie and Amy, are also close to the man they have come to think of as dad. My parents think of him as a son. We spent time together, all of us trying hard to come to grips with our new reality.

Acceptance took a long time, but the sense of profound loss will never go. Jim, with his amazingly forthright approach said, "It can't be helped, no one knew the dangers and I've had a good life." Lending their support, our Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB) team, Oncology and Angio staff in Peterborough and Oshawa, local healthcare service providers and our family physician have all become our new extended family.

When faced with the unthinkable, it becomes urgent to put life in order. Visits to our lawyer, accountant, and funeral director put our minds at ease, more able to face what was to come. Some days were harder than others and pity parties were scheduled every Friday, half an hour or less. Scheduling our grief was one way to keep it from taking over. I returned to work but soon realized I could no longer commit the time or energy required.

Time together with friends and as a family has become the most important priority. We rented Camp Big Canoe in Bracebridge where we have volunteered many summers. Our families joined together for a weekend of fun and to give thanks for each other.

Our friends came to our house and built a deck so Jim could rest outside, and they finished our basement so all the kids have a place to stay when they come home. We are truly blessed. We have also been fortunate that Jim's health has allowed us to travel: the Dominican Republic, several trips west, most recently to Florida and again Alberta this June for our grandson's graduation. We also decided early on that it was important that I continue to do things for myself so I get my hair done, golf, have time with friends and a women's get-away each September.



As Jim's cancer did not progress too quickly after two years, I worked part-time for a year, giving that up when radiation was scheduled this past June. Still able to golf, although not as often, we enjoy our friends

and spend time each week at the golf club. Earlier this June, Jim got a hole-in-one! With his frank sense of humour, Jim asked them not to put him on the Long-Term Planning Committee! He has faced each new challenge and the progression of this insidious disease with a wonderful positive attitude that still has him beating the odds. As time has progressed and he is still with us, our pity parties have become gratitude parties – Fridays at 4:00 p.m., Happy Hour included!

This past winter, our WSIB nurse introduced us to Threads of Life, the latest member of our extended family. At first, we felt we didn't belong as we had not suffered the devastating loss of a child that most of those involved had experienced. However, through support and perseverance, the Threads of Life staff and families made us realize that no loss is greater or less than any another and that each worker lost, whether through fatality or disease, matters. We have also been fortunate to meet others who have suffered the loss of a loved one due to mesothelioma and their support has been invaluable. Threads of Life offered us the hand of welcome and the shoulder of support and, through sharing our journey, we hope we are able to help others.

Our family now has a 'call to action' for all workers: the need for protection when exposed to asbestos is now known – wear it if you're working with it. If you have been exposed, get tested – an airborne fibre may have reached you, it only takes one. Be sure test information is followed-up (e.g. note 'exposure to asbestos' on the CT form you complete prior to your scan). Ask, ask, ask, then demand. Stop unnecessary workplace tragedy before it happens.



*Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support*

## **MISSION**

Our mission is to help families heal through a community of support and to promote the elimination of life-altering workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths.

## **VISION**

Threads of Life will lead and inspire a culture shift, as a result of which, work-related injuries and illnesses are morally, socially and economically unacceptable.

## **VALUES**

We believe that:

**Caring:** Caring helps and heals.

**Listening:** Listening can ease pain and suffering.

**Sharing:** Sharing our personal losses will lead to healing and preventing future devastating work-related losses.

**Respect:** Personal experiences of loss and grief need to be honoured and respected.

**Health:** Health and safety begin in our heads, hearts and hands, in everyday actions.

**Passion:** Passionate individuals can change the world.

## **HOW TO REACH US**

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