

A HAPPY FAMILY FROZEN IN TIME

Construction labourer is struck and killed by dump truck

by **Erin Pitruzzella**



Erin and Leo

I first met Leo in the spring of 1994. After a business dinner in Toronto one of my coworkers suggested we stop at a dance club we passed on our way home. I told her I wanted to call it a night but she persuaded me anyway. When I entered the bar I lost my friend to the dance floor. I turned around to find a deeply tanned, Italian man wearing a suit smiling at me. He asked me to dance. I said no thank you and started to look for my friend. The man followed me and asked to buy me a drink. Hmmmm – persistent! It paid off. Five months later we were engaged to be married.

Over the next few years we would relocate from Ontario to Nova Scotia for Leo's work. Leo was close with his family and missed them terribly. Having his own family meant everything to him. I had family in Nova Scotia who quickly loved Leo like their own. Our daughter Marleen

was born in April of 1998. Leo called my family in the middle of the night to meet us at the hospital. Leo was so excited when the nurse handed the baby to him, he walked out of the delivery room! "Sir, sir, Mr. Pitruzzella, where are you going? You can't take the baby," the nurse yelled after him. In true Leo fashion he yelled back "the baby wants to meet her family. They are waiting for her in the hallway!" That was Leo. Always proud of his family.

Our son Michael was born two years later. Leo was working in Ontario while we stayed in Nova Scotia. The baby came a week early and Leo flew to Halifax the next day. He was telling everyone in the hospital he had a million dollar family...without the million dollars!

Leo's family was his world. He would play peekaboo on the floor with Marleen, take to the swings at the park, or prop her up on the sofa to watch his favourite

football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers. He bought Michael a little yellow construction hat and what looked like safety boots. When he took Michael to construction sites, Michael was eager to climb on the machines. Leo would insist he could look but not touch; the machines were dangerous and he did not want his boy to get hurt.

Leo bought a home for us in Ontario. We enrolled the children in the local school. Leo and I never missed a school recital, pageant, or competition. We went everywhere as a foursome, whether it was to the mall, weekend outings, birthday parties, visiting family or friends. We were always together.

July 13, 2009 seemed like any other beautiful sunny summer day. Every day started the same way: Leo got up at 4:00 am, put on his work pants and his orange safety work shirt with the distinctive yellow 'x' on it, grabbed his lunch bucket, wallet, phone, a quick kiss for a good day and left for work. No matter what the job, Leo always began with a smile. I admired that he had no worries ... he just took every day in stride. As the son of immigrant Italian parents, hard work was part of his heritage. I dropped off our eight-year-old son Michael and our 11-year-old daughter Marleen at their summer camp, wished them a good day and headed to work. My workload was demanding and when I was interrupted to take a phone call from Leo in the morning it was a welcome break. Hearing his voice made my day. He told me he loved me and was looking forward to a quiet evening. Not too long after that Leo called me again. This time he told me not to forget to pick up the children and buy meats and buns at the deli for his lunch. I was very rushed during this call, laughed that I would never forget the children but I did not have time to talk, I had to get back to work and would talk to him that night. Words I came to regret later.

By dinner time Leo had not come home from work. Instead two York Regional police officers banged on my door. With them were two women from Victim Services holding teddy bears. I thought

they were looking for someone else's house but the police officer asked if I was Leonardo Pitruzzella's wife. I answered I was. He said they were sorry to inform me that my husband was involved in an accident with a truck at his place of work and he died. I stared in disbelief. Numb and unable to make a sound. Marleen burst into tears and screamed "my Daddy is dead? My Daddy is dead?" I held her tight and rocked her, trying to comfort her. The strangers at my door asked if they could come inside. The world spun and my legs gave way. I thought I was going to pass out. The strangers helped me up the stairs to the living room. I had to tell my little boy why his daddy would never be coming home again. While the police spoke to me the women sat down and handed their teddy bears to the children. In a rage my daughter flung the bear at them and yelled she did not want it – she wanted her daddy. I insisted the police take us to Leo so we could help him. I was told that I could not see him, I could not help him and I could not be with him. I had a million questions, but no one would answer me – just that it was being investigated and they left the coroner's business card on my coffee table.

As family and friends heard the news, they came to the house. Some were playing with the children, others making phone calls, some were watching TV. And there on CP24 was Leo! The reporter announced that a construction worker had been struck by a dump truck, dragged and killed in Vaughan. The image was unforgettable. The company's red dump truck with yellow police caution tape cordoning off the site where the accident took place. And in front of the truck was a tarp held down with orange safety cones. Under the tarp was Leo. The people in the room yelled "turn it off! She can't watch that!" It was surreal. Our real life drama was public news.

Funeral arrangements were made quickly. At the coroner's request, the casket was closed. The immediate family was ushered into the funeral parlour first to pay respects. Our past, present and future was in a wooden box that was screwed shut. A family photo on top of the casket was of a happy family frozen in time.

Our families were devastated, but did all they could to support us. Days ran into

nights without my husband. I missed his touch, his love, his laughter, his support, his company. Life seemed without meaning for my family – we were just going through the motions. Three days after we buried Leo's ashes, we were driving when another car crashed into us. We were loaded into separate ambulances. I kept asking where the children were. A police officer told me he was having someone call their father to come and meet them at the hospital. I burst into tears and yelled 'no, stop, you can't. He asked why not? I told him because we buried their father three days ago.

I went back to work. Bills kept coming in and taxes were due. Now I was a single parent caring for our two young children. Dealing with the Ministry of Labour and WSIB became my new world. I waited anxiously for phone calls and emails to update me on their investigations. Court dates were set, cancelled and rescheduled. A couple of years later in a courtroom I finally heard the details leading up to and surrounding Leo's death. It was like a kick in the stomach. At approximately 4:30 pm July 13, 2009, the company was working on paving driveways for homes. That afternoon he was doing the job that he so passionately loved, when one of the company's dump trucks, laden with asphalt, reversed without a flagperson present. The vehicle hit Leo and backed over him, dragging him several feet. He was crushed and dismembered under the weight of the truck. Leo had a loud voice. How could so many people be around and no one heard him yell? It was an emotional afternoon. I presented three victim impact statements, two on behalf of Marleen and Michael and one from myself. There was not a dry eye in the courtroom by the time I finished reading the statements. Even the judge excused herself. The company was fined the maximum amount according to precedence, as well as an additional 25 per cent for a victim's fund. How can you put a price on someone's life? Life to me is precious and priceless.

More time passed and we coped. Our co-ordinator from the WSIB was a true comfort to us. She mentioned an organization to me called Threads of Life and there I found the support I needed. My Volunteer Family Guide, also a widow

with young children, listened to me as I cried and got my frustration out for the endless battles I was up against. I attended the Threads of Life Family Forum. There I met men and women who all carried with them their unique stories of workplace injury, illness or fatality. It was a safe environment to share my story. The workshops were informative and gave me the tools to gather strength. There was hope.

Finally I received a call from the Ministry of Labour that the coroner's inquest would take place in Aurora, ON. I sat there for two days holding Leo's photo for all to see. Pictures on the giant screen in the courtroom showed the interior and exterior of the red truck, police tape, safety cones, tarps, diagrams. We heard audio tape of the witness, and investigators said the music in the truck was so loud when they re-created the scene, they could not hear the other investigator yell from behind the truck. After countless cross examinations, the jury deemed Leo's death an accident. They recommended clear signage on job sites requiring a flagperson, a backup camera visible to the driver, and that the radio should be silenced when the vehicles are put in reverse. Was this finally closure? No, just another part of the journey that is our life.

It has been a long journey since the death of my husband. Each day is a gift to us and we remember Leo every day. After years of counselling, support from family for myself and the children, and finding Threads of Life we have been able to live a new normal.



Leo and Erin with their children Marleen and Michael