

# The story of my father

Asbestos exposure leads to death of stationary engineer

by Renee Guay



John Guay

## My father was an

incredible father. As a young child I remember him reading me story books such as *The Never-ending Story* and singing me French lullabies to help me sleep. He would always spend time with my brothers and me that he called personal days – days with each of his children just one on one. He was the kind of father who was always there for me when I needed someone to talk to about anything. He didn't judge me, he just listened and wanted to hear my opinion.

He was always so funny yet could be so serious when trying to guide me in the right direction. I felt that his perspective was that he may not like every decision I make and I will make mistakes but he will be there to hear all about it.

My father loved to work out and he did so every day, whether it was push-ups, sit-ups, roller-skating, biking or chin-ups. This was his passion, aside from his work.

My father became a stationary engineer and worked with boilers and compressors. He loved his job and could tell you the

specs on a boiler or compressor in much detail, and he was an inspiration for me to pursue the career field I'm in. He created charts and diagrams and logs for these machines he loved and appreciated so much. If only he knew the asbestos within the elbows of the pipes and wrapping around the boilers and compressors would be the death of him.

He called me when I was at a friend's house and said that he was diagnosed with mesothelioma, which is a cancer directly related to exposure to asbestos. This was in April of 2011. He said "I just knew it." There had been signs at his workplace for years and years saying "Caution, Asbestos". My uncle was hired for over 20 years to remediate the broken asbestos from the machinery. My uncle recalls not wearing a mask or properly removing it according to the regulations. He was later diagnosed in 2014 with asbestos-related cancer called asbestosis.

Although my father did not directly work with asbestos, he was exposed to it at his workplace from the machines and from breaching pipes that had airborne asbestos. A company is required to have a documented asbestos management program to record all the locations and conditions of the asbestos at the work site. Although my father was on the Joint Health and Safety Committee, he was unaware of such a document. The company he worked for did not take confirmatory air samples to ensure its employees were not exposed to hazardous levels of asbestos. This is a requirement when asbestos is removed in buildings where employees are still working.

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There is no cure for mesothelioma. It is a death sentence of eight months to two years, with a two per cent survival rate. During this time, you are guaranteed to experience the most excruciating pain you have ever felt.

## During the Illness

Even when times were tough, my father still managed to crack a joke. And yet when times were bad, they were really bad. There was a time that he pleaded with me asking, "why is it okay to put animals down and yet when I'm in excruciating pain with every breath I take, it's considered inhumane for us?" I refused to accept the fact that my father was dying. There was no way! I didn't know how to cope and began drinking and smoking excessively, I didn't know how else to numb the pain because I didn't want to deal with the situation. This man who worked out every day, never smoked a cigarette, only drank socially, had 13 per cent body fat; this man that I looked up to and I'm so proud of, I was watching him diminish away. I couldn't stop thinking that this isn't happening, this is just a really, really bad dream and he's going to make it.

I remember the day when my mother and father were sitting on the couch and my father reaches over to my mother and says "you know Dorothy, I love you, you are an amazing wife, mother and caregiver". That moment is still so fresh in my mind.

I recall the day when my brother and I took him to a clinic in Toronto as he wanted to try an alternative therapy called Photodynamic Therapy. Once we left and he couldn't manage to walk to the car because of the pain, I saw in his face, his every hope, his every dream just diminish and fade away. This is the moment he had given up. The cancer was just too painful and excruciating.

He was in and out of the hospital

throughout his illness. He had unbearable pain from breathing and it seemed as though it didn't matter how much pain medication he was taking, it wouldn't control his pain for very long. There were

endless visits to see him at the Juravinski cancer hospital in Hamilton.

I recall being at my parents' house and my father was trying to coordinate a brothers weekend, his last brothers weekend as he loved to do every year. I left to go home

overwhelmed: my mother is not here to help greet people; where is my dad? and for a split second, I looked around – and it hit me like nothing before – this was it – this was it – it happened, he passed away. Even still at that time I didn't want to accept it.

next time you experience this, consider: is it not worth it to speak up for yourself and others? Employees in Ontario have three basic rights at their work place: the right to know, the right to participate and the right to refuse.

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and about 20 minutes later, I received a call from my uncle that an ambulance was picking up my father. I immediately turned around the car and proceeded to the hospital. When I saw my dad, I could see despair and lost hope and dreams. What we found out was that he had tried overdosing on morphine because of his pain.

### WSIB and Lawyers

My father had decided to not utilize WSIB, which would cover his medical costs. He had requested me to find a lawyer so we could access funds from asbestos manufacturing companies related to my father's exposure. I did so and during one time he was in the hospital, I had to review paperwork with my father in the hospital bed. We wrote out when he was exposed to what kind of boiler and compressor and also had to look at pictures from the lawyers to see if my father recognized what he may have been exposed to. This was an emotionally draining task to ask my father this information when he was so ill.

Since the asbestos companies hid this cancer from asbestos since the 1920s, many are in receivership. What I found out from this experience was that you can't sue a company in Ontario for negligence, because of the no-fault coverage through the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board.

### At the wake

Eight months after his diagnosis my father passed away November 6, 2011. He was 59 years old.

It was astounding to me how many people were able to make it to my father's wake and funeral. At this time, my mother had a significant amount of pain in her neck from a slipped disk. At the evening wake, my mother left to rest about half-way through, and more and more people kept coming in whom my brothers and I were greeting. All of a sudden I became

### The Aftermath

The death of my father really changed my values and perspectives on what was important to me. For example, I was very money-driven and focused on what I want, the next new shiny car or other shiny materialist thing. I really had to take a step back and re-evaluate what was truly important and where should I be directing my energy. I am blessed for having this insight and change of perspective.

Do you remember a time you've been in a circumstance at work when something wasn't right and you haven't spoken up? This may be from the fear of reprimand, fear of speaking up or any other fear. The

I would also like you to consider your own self-worth and value and how that connects with the experiences that you've had whether beneficial or non-beneficial. My father and I had a conversation once that he didn't always feel his self-value. I believe had he felt more of this, he may have been more inclined to question what was going on around him.

You have the power to create a legacy for yourself and those around you with your voice. Had my father spoken up; had his co-workers spoken up – maybe, just maybe we could have had my father around for a little longer and prevented exposure for others.



Renee with her father