

Keeping My Son's Memory Alive

By Geraldine Wheeler



When the phone rang at 5:30 a.m. on July 18, 2001, the message was brief and to the point. After identifying himself as a union representative, the caller said simply, "I'm calling with tragic news of Greg. Greg was killed last night." These words have haunted me ever since.

Greg was the older of my two boys. He was born on August 23, 1973 and as he grew, he was a typical child and teenager. He was a good student and an avid sportsman, loving softball and hockey. In his senior year, he played on his high school softball team and played with the recreational community league for several years. Greg enjoyed snowmobiling, skiing, hunting, and fishing, and was a certified scuba diver. He also loved to play guitar and sing, something he and his younger brother, Jason, would do for hours. Before Greg moved away, he recorded, *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* on his karaoke machine. I

later had it transferred from cassette to CD. I listen to it sometimes just to hear Greg's voice, other times I can't bear to even look at the cover.

Greg's dad is a journeyman ironworker and in the summer of 1993, after Greg had completed his second year of college, his father got him a job as an apprentice ironworker. What was supposed to be a summer position turned into a passion. Greg loved working the steel and never wanted to do anything else. Try as I might, I could not persuade him to return to school. In 1997, work was scarce in our region so Greg and his girlfriend, Jackie, left Newfoundland and went west to Edmonton, Alberta where they both found work in a steel fabrication plant. But Greg missed working the high steel, and when Jackie moved on to a less physically demanding line of work, Greg quit the plant and went back out in the field. He worked various sites in and around Edmonton until July 12, 2001 when

he accepted a position at a diamond mine in the Northwest Territories. On the sixth day on the job, Greg and his partner, Gerhard Bender of Edmonton, were working high on the side of the processing plant. According to newspaper articles and court transcripts, without warning, the manlift they were in started to sway and toppled over backwards, bringing them to the rocks below. They were strapped in the manlift and could do nothing to escape.

Now when I awake in the morning, everything seems normal, until I reach under my pillow and find Greg's picture. Then the same old pain strikes me in the stomach as the sick realization hits me. Greg is gone. I will never attend his wedding, or ever hold his little son or daughter in my arms. Instead of visiting Greg at the new house he and Jackie built, I visit the cemetery. I chat with Greg and my heart breaks every time I have to walk away. The pain remains fresh, my heart remains broken.



Geraldine's nephew and Greg's namesake, Robert Gregory, sits among the toys collected at 'Greg's Spirit Lives on Toy Drive'.

Since I lost Greg, I've found that I need to be able to talk about him. I need to share my memories and my feelings. At home, we all grieve separately. Whereas I need to talk and laugh and cry, Greg's father and brother hide their feelings. However, I have extended family members to whom I turn for support, and about three years ago, a group of bereaved mothers got together and we formed a bereaved parents' support group. Some fathers have come on board and in addition to regular support meetings, we have a picnic and balloon release in the summer and on the second Sunday in December, we have a candlelight vigil and social. I also find writing very therapeutic. I keep a journal of my struggling journey and I write poems in Greg's memory. He is always with me.

Last year, at the suggestion of Greg's cousin, Tina, we started the

'Greg's Spirit Lives on Toy Drive' where donated toys are passed on to less fortunate families. Last year was the first year since I lost Greg that I looked forward to December. Just knowing that we were making Christmas bright for some little children and keeping Greg's memory alive by doing so helped me look forward to Christmas again. We intend to make the toy drive an annual event and from the feedback we've received, we expect it to keep growing.

My life will never be like it used to be. I've accepted that. A part of my heart is missing – a part that I can't regain. This is not an illness from which I can recover. I will always be a bereaved mother who misses her son more than words can say. But I survive. I do my best to help others who are grieving and I also commit to being a voice in promoting workplace safety.

National Day of Mourning



Geraldine lays a wreath in Greg's memory

This year at the National Day of Mourning ceremony in Corner Brook, the District Labour Council honored Greg's memory by having his name inscribed in the monument honoring workers who paid the ultimate price and lost their lives while doing their jobs.

Christmas Memories

— By Geraldine Wheeler

*Twenty-eight special Christmases
Festive seasons spent with you.
I have such precious memories
Of the things you'd say and do.*

*Your very first at four months old
Your eyes they shone with glee.
As you waved your arms and kicked
your feet
When you saw the lights on the tree.*

*Throughout your childhood and
teenage years
Your excitement and spirit grew.
In the wee morning you'd wake up Jason
Hours of sleep for me were few.*

*My most precious Christmas memories
Are of those we shared your last year.
You came home to spend some time
with us
It seemed we didn't have a care.*

*You and I shopped and decorated
We had such fun, in everything we'd do.
I was content, I had the world
Because I had Jason and I had you.*

*But now Christmas is so difficult
And time is hard to bear.
The lights and music make me sad
Because you're no longer here.
I go on because I have to
But today all I'd like to do.
Is to be able to call and say, "luvs ya"
And hear you say, "luvs ya too".*

Love, Mom