

# NUMBER ONE DAD

Death due to occupational cancer brings family's world crashing down

by **Shantelle Harris**

**At** a jewellery store on Father's Day back in 2001 I picked out a gold "#1 dad" necklace. I remember crying so hard the jeweller practically gave it to me for free. My first thought when buying it was, I wish I could've given this to him earlier.

My dad was a hard worker and had to be, raising four kids. When he wasn't at work, he would be watching TV, reading a crime novel, or at one of my brothers' hockey games. He was someone who was brutally honest and told it like it was. I admired him for that. I remember one saying he told us kids was, "As long as you didn't start it, you can finish it." I guess he never thought that at seven years old, I would take that advice literally. One day when I was walking home from school a girl from my class was shoving me, wanting to fight. I could hear my dad's voice saying those words ... I finished it. After having enough I used my hockey skills, put the girl into a headlock and shoved her face in the snow, told her to leave me alone and walked away.

When I got home, I was so upset and told my dad what happened. I thought I'd be in serious trouble but my dad smiled and said, "Did you start it?" ... "well, no" and that was the end of the conversation.

Over the years, my dad had many jobs, but after writing to get his welder's ticket he worked at one company for the last 15 years of his life. This company made nuclear and coal boilers to be used in the power generation



Shantelle and her dad Darcy

market. He started his career there in the welding department and moved over to the tube-bending department. He did this because there was less pressure to be laid off during slow times in the industry.

The last few years leading up to his death my dad tried to work as much as he could. My mom had been the victim of a severe rear end collision on her way home from work and hasn't worked since. She spent most of the time in bed, fighting with the insurance companies, or at doctor's appointments. This changed the dynamic in my family and left my mom very dependent on my dad. If he was in severe pain he hardly showed it, probably to stay strong for my mom who was dealing with her own world of pain at the time.

June 13th, 2001 is the day I will never forget. I was 16 and out babysitting at the time I got the call. This was before I had a cell phone so my mom called the parents where I was babysitting to ask them to send me home right away. On my arrival home I saw the front door opened with one paramedic in the doorway and two kneeling by the couch.

My dad was holding an air mask on his face

and looked quite out of it. As my mom and I followed the ambulance to the hospital, I was scared. I didn't comprehend the magnitude or severity of my dad's illness. My dad and I had actually gone hiking weeks before at Dundas peak in the Hamilton area and he seemed okay. It was only in the start of June he showed signs of being sick. My dad had taken time off work and gone to the doctors to see what was wrong. He had a pinched nerve in his leg six months back that merited a wide range of tests that had ruled out cancer or leukaemia. Our family doctor assumed he must be suffering from mono or strep and sent him home with antibiotics. Little did we know that sped up his illness and instead of having months to live he had weeks or days.

When we arrived at the hospital we were never told that paramedics had administered CPR twice on my dad because his heart stopped. My family was still under the assumption that he was having complications to mono or strep throat. My brother had come to the hospital to take me home since I had an exam the next morning. After a few hours my dad was transferred to another hospital

and finally my mom was given the diagnosis: acute myeloid leukaemia and he only had a 50/50 chance of making it through the night.

I was asleep when I was told and couldn't wrap my thoughts around this catastrophic news. My brothers and I rushed to get to the hospital. By the time we got there my dad had already passed, at the age of 42. My world had come crashing down that night.

The funeral was on Father's Day and the "#1 dad" necklace I bought was buried with him. The weeks after were a blur and it took almost a year to receive my father's autopsy report. It finally gave us some answers. He died from a type of leukaemia that is caused by benzene. Benzene is a carcinogenic chemical found in industrial cleaners, gasoline, cigarettes, and automobile exhaust, just to name a few. After speaking with a few of my father's co-workers we determined that an industrial cleaner they use to clean the tubes before they are bent contains benzene. What was also mentioned: improper personal protective equipment used and the frequency they used this cleaner. My dad along with the other employees would use rags soaked with this chemical cleaner, applying it liberally to the tubes with cotton gloves, which would be wet with this cleaner for a third of their day.

After getting the answers to why my dad had died we started our long and hard fight with WSIB, the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. After 13 years of court and appeals, WSIB finally approved our claim that his cancer was an occupational fatality. Thankfully for others who work there, the company has also since changed cleaners and the one they use now no longer contain benzene.

For a long time after my dad's passing, I was angry and stopped caring about school; subsequently my grades slipped and I was lucky if I was actually passing. My mom was in such a deep depression that she didn't seem to notice what I was doing.

There have been countless times my mom has called an ambulance or called me to call one for her when she gets severely sick and her symptoms seem to replicate my father's last days. Almost every time she thinks 'this is it', I relive June 13th all over again. June 13th all over again. It breaks my heart every time and as much as I want to tell her no, I go. It's so hard because the person she replaced her dependence on was me. Ever since my dad's death it has been a role reversal and I have been the parent, always on call and trying to pick up the pieces when they fall. Now, I'm always thinking of

the glass as half full.

Father's Day seems to be a cruel reminder of what I've lost. I have an amazing husband and two beautiful children my dad will never meet. I have missed out on so much with my dad—having him at my high school and college graduations, being able to call him if I needed help or advice. When I am really missing him, I put on one of his vinyl records of AC/DC or Pink Floyd and imagine the times he told me to listen closely to how they changed the sound from speaker to speaker.

“ The years have brought a new sense of peace with my pain and I can share the stories of my dad without crying. I relish the times I get to pass on some advice to my children that my dad had taught me.

The Canadian government's WHMIS program, implemented in 1988, includes cautionary labeling and material safety data sheets (MSDSs). The label on the cleaner was not enough to save my dad's life. It takes accountability for your own health and that of your co-workers to make sure the proper precautions are taken with things we use at work. Don't assume the way you are shown how to use a chemical is the safe way. Be curious and read the label, request the MSD for any chemicals you come in contact with before you use them. You can be exposed to

dangerous chemicals in various ways and you should care about your life enough to want to know what you come in contact with. Wearing the proper PPE and refusing unsafe work could save your life.

As years go by, there is still not a day that a memory of my dad does not come floating through my thoughts. The years have brought a new sense of peace with my pain and I can share the stories of my dad without crying. I relish the times I get to pass on some advice to my children that my dad had

taught me... including "it's okay to finish it, as long as you didn't start it" guidance. The stories I tell about my dad to my kids or husband usually end with, "I wish you could've met him", or "He would've really liked you".

Nowadays, I feel my dad would be happy with

the way my life has turned out and the people I surround myself with. Part of moving forward was setting goals in my life, one of which was going back to school. I had recently finished college and while doing a class project I had come across the Threads of Life website.

After reading what the organization stood for and all the resources they had, I wish I knew about it sooner. Having such an amazing support network has helped me move forward in my life and I finally felt I was at a place where I could tell my dad's story.



Shantelle's father worked hard to raise four kids