

“ALL THE CONVERSATIONS WE NEVER GOT TO HAVE”

Asbestos exposure at a client's site led to mesothelioma

Interview by **Maryanne Pope**



Dolli and Tony Schneider.

Tony Schneider died of mesothelioma on January 14, 1997, at the age of 63. Tony was exposed to asbestos during his career as a salesman in Calgary, Alberta. Dolli is Tony's widow. Kristin is one of Tony's daughters. This interview took place on Jan 10th, 2017.

Q: Tell me about Tony.

DOLLI: Tony was very dynamic, very much a personality. When you met him, you knew you had met someone you would remember. He was a very loving husband and good father. Because Tony was nine years older than me (when we married I was 21, he was 30), I think he sometimes felt more like a dad than a husband! But as the years went on, the relationship became more equal. We were married for 33 years.

I knew he was “the one” for me right from the start. In fact, after our first date, I went home and told my Mom that. We were married in less than a year.

Family was very important to Tony. It

meant everything. He was always very grateful that he was able to have a family of his own because growing up, he didn't have the greatest home life.

Q: Tell me about your dad.

KRISTIN: He loved us dearly. As a dad, he could be strict. He expected us to respect him. He was a good provider and was always willing to give us what we needed. He had a serious side but he also had a goofy, fun side to him.

His role in raising us kids was to provide for us and make sure we were doing the right thing and had good values and morals. But his goofy side came out on weekends and we had lots of fun.

Q: Tell me about Tony's death.

DOLLI: Tony died in 1997. He was 63. I had just turned 55. Tony died from mesothelioma, which is when the cancerous tumors are outside of the lung. They are in the fluid that surrounds the lung. At the time he was diagnosed, we knew nothing about mesothelioma...never heard of it. But the Tom Baker Cancer Centre was very good about giving us information. There was very little research being done at that time. All we knew was that it was caused by exposure to asbestos – and that there was a zero percent survival rate.

Tony was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. He survived 18 months. The doctors felt the cancer had been dormant for about 10 years.

Q: How do you think Tony was exposed to asbestos?

DOLLI: After Tony's death, I got a call from WCB. They wanted to interview me about where he may have been exposed to asbestos. So we went back through Tony's work history and figured out that when Tony had gone from sales to management, he had given his sales contacts to someone else in the company – and WCB was able to follow-up with that person. And they determined that one of Tony's best customers – a fertilizer company – had had all their boilers encased in asbestos.

So if that casing had ever been slashed or got a hole in it or had been disturbed in some way, the crystals would've gone into the air – and he'd breathed them in. Because that workplace fit the 10-year timeframe, WCB suspects that is likely where Tony was exposed to asbestos.

As a salesman going into all sorts of different workplaces on a regular basis, Tony was told to wear steel toed boots and hardhats when necessary. But they never thought to tell him to wear something over his mouth to prevent what might be going into his lungs.

Q: What was it like caring for Tony when he was sick?

DOLLI: Actually, Tony was easy to care for. But he had great difficulty eating and everything tasted weird to him. I made him Cream of Wheat every morning, as he seemed to like that. He lost an awful lot of weight. The food issue was tough because he loved his food! At the end it was very difficult to feed him.

But his spirits were really quite good. He wanted me to keep working, so I did. He would get dressed and sit in the living room and wait for me to come home in the

afternoon. It was only towards the very end that he got more lethargic. He loved the visits from his kids. Kristin and her sister, Ali, would bring donuts. Our son, Tony Jr, would take him for car rides.

Personality-wise, Tony was easy to look after. He didn't complain. He said to me once that he wasn't afraid to die. He just didn't want to. He had a lot to live for. Kristin was expecting her first child. Ali was expecting her second. Tony was hurt that he knew he was going to die. He wanted to be there for his kids and grandkids.

Q: What was it like for you when Tony was sick?

KRISTIN: It was really hard to watch him lose the weight and not do all the things he enjoyed doing. He stopped driving. He stopped golfing and that was a real enjoyment that he'd had. Seeing all that happen was tough. He actually had surgery to remove a lung but when they went in, they found the cancer was too far along.

He sat and thought a lot. He would sit in the same spot on the couch in the living room and think. We talked a lot and he told me he had no regrets in his life except not going to university. He really enjoyed learning. He was also a professional hockey player at one point. He could have played for a college or played pro – and that was a bit of a regret that he didn't.

My dad was actually very calm about his illness. He never lashed out and never said "Why me?" He kind of accepted what was happening and went along with it. It was hard to see him change but I also think he made it easier on us because he didn't have any self-pity about the situation. He accepted his fate. He didn't like it but he accepted it.

As things started to go downhill at the very end, nine times out of ten he would be in bed. But he had a tough time sitting up on his own. That's when we knew things were starting to go downhill.

Q: What age were you when your Dad died?

Kristin: I was 28. My daughter, Harleigh, was born two months later.

Q: What do you remember the most about Tony?

DOLLI: How handsome he was and how lucky I was to have met him.

Kristin's first son, Sam, looks very much like Tony, so that's really nice. As a child, Kristin actually looked quite a bit like Tony. And she understood her dad very well. Tony had a bit of a temper. When he got mad, he got mad. He didn't lash out at me or the kids

but we knew when he was angry. To calm him down, we would send Kristin in!

Q: What do you miss the most?

DOLLI: What I miss the most about Tony is his affection. He was a very affectionate person...loved to give me a big hug and put his arm around me. I miss his presence. He was a big presence in all our lives and I really miss that. We all do.

I relied on him for everything. After he died, I had to learn how to make the decisions. But I miss him as a sounding board. Tony was very sensible and I miss that.

On Saturdays, the two of us used to sit in the living room, drinking coffee and chatting

“ I miss his presence. He was a big presence in all our lives and I really miss that. We all do.

for hours on end...about all sorts of things. Sometimes three hours would go by and we would still be sitting in our housecoats, talking away.

What I miss the most is the fact that Tony never got to be a grandpa. My biggest regret is that he never got to meet all eight grandchildren. He only got to meet the first as a very young child.

But my kids have done an amazing job of letting their kids know who their grandfather was – and I am very thankful for that.

Q: What do you remember the most about your dad?

KRISTIN: I would say the memories I think of the most are the summertime ones. My dad

loved to work outside in the yard all day on the weekend. He would always wait until 5 p.m. to have a beer. Then that was his time to relax and BBQ dinner. We would all sit around and talk and he would drink his beer. He loved that. We all did. Those were really happy times. Oh, and the milk chute was right near the BBQ, so when my dad wanted another beer, he would tap on the milk chute and one of us kids would put a cold beer in the chute – and he would reach in and get it!

DOLLI: And Tony loved it when the kids were older and he could have some beers with them. He loved to chat with them as he cooked the burgers.

KRISTIN: I miss chatting with him. I miss all the conversations we never got to have when I was old enough to appreciate his wisdom as a parent. I miss the friendship that I think I could have had with him as I got older. I also feel that my kids missed out on the opportunity to have their Grandpa Tony in their lives.

Maryanne Pope is a close family friend of Kristin and Dolli. Maryanne's police officer husband died in the line of duty as the result of a preventable fall at an unsafe workplace. Maryanne is the author of A Widow's Awakening, Chair of the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund (www.jpmpf.ca) and a member of the Threads of Life speakers bureau.



The family has tried to ensure Tony's grandchildren know who their grandfather was.