

# This is the story of Thomas Harroun

His wife and  
daughters made up  
Tommy's "Core-4"

by **Shawna Harroun**



Shawna and Tommy Harroun

**T**ommy and I met in November of 1993. Within a few months of meeting Tommy, I knew this was the man I was going to spend my life with. We had our first daughter, Hope, in April 1995 and our second, Haley, July 1998. Tommy and I married August 2008.

We had worked together at the same company for 15 years. People would ask, 'how do you spend that much time together?' and I would say it was easy. I could not imagine not working with him. We were best friends. There are not many couples who could spend as much time as we did together. I used to not be able to bear the thought of living without him.

Tommy was a huge family man and hard worker. He would do anything for his family. He enjoyed spending time with his kids while he was not working. We had season's tickets to the Oil Kings. He loved watching junior hockey and he loved our vacations in British Columbia. He loved the mountains. Tommy always made me laugh and his 'Core 4' as he liked to call the four of us, was his number one priority in life.

Tommy started working for a PVC plastic factory January 8, 1991 at the age of 21. He first started having shortness of breath in the beginning of 1998. After a few visits to the emergency room they decided to look further into the issue and do a biopsy of his lymph nodes/lung. They diagnosed Tommy with sarcoidosis. He was 27 years old.

Tommy had been working as a blender, where he was exposed to a lot of dust and chemicals. Safety back then was not a priority as it is today. There were no masks, respirators or good ventilation. He was told by the occupational doctor reviewing his medical history

that it was not work-related, so Tommy continued working at the same company. Tommy stayed stable until June 2010, when he started getting real short of breath on exertion. He had lost a lot of weight and was very fatigued, and Tommy explained it was like a switch went off. We made an appointment with the doctor he had seen in 1998, and he was referred to a pulmonologist, who ordered more tests and determined that one day Tommy would need a lung transplant as his lungs were damaged and would continue to deteriorate. He was seen by this doctor every three months for the next seven years.

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During this time Tommy was also referred to another occupational doctor who looked further into his medical history and his place of employment. They deemed Tommy's illness was actually work related. His place of employment put Tommy on modified duties, doing administrative and office work. Tommy was a huge asset to the company as he knew how to run that department inside and out. Tommy continued to work full time until he physically couldn't.

In May 2012 oxygen was first introduced. Tommy felt very self conscious when he wore

oxygen as he was still young – he was only 42 and he always felt people would stare at him. With lung disease there is always that stigma with smoking and Tommy did smoke when he was younger. The pathologist who studied Tommy's lungs let us know smoking did not play a part in his lung disease.

From 2014 till May 2017 Tommy's lung disease was stable, however it was getting harder on him by the day. He continued working full time and never complained about his struggles every day to breathe. Tommy's day consisted of working eight hours or more, then coming home to bed as he was exhausted. There were a lot of things he missed on the weekends as he was tired from his busy week of work.

In May 2017, Tommy's pulmonologist decided a lung volume reduction surgery may help with his struggles to breathe. After the operation Tommy no longer needed oxygen and he had a little more energy. He finally took some time off work to recover.

Unbeknownst to us, January 8, 2018 was his last day of work. His oxygen saturation levels were very low. Tommy spent five days in hospital where they figured he had picked up an infection. He was now on full time oxygen again and spent the next couple of weeks at home trying to recover. However, on January 28 he was admitted once again and by January 30, 2018 Tommy was in ICU. The doctors let me know it did not look good. Tommy was sent by ambulance to the university hospital ICU unit on January 31 to be seen by the transplant doctors. We were told he was at the end stage of his lung disease and he would be starting the workup for the

transplant. February 2 was overwhelming. Tommy went for several tests (ultrasounds, blood work, angiogram of his heart). Social workers came to talk to us. It was a very scary time not knowing what was going to happen. But the very next day, February 3, our prayers were answered. Tommy received a new set of lungs!

### **Tommy always had so much anxiety about losing his job and not being able to take care of us, that he worked literally 'til he could no longer.**

Tommy was in surgery for eight hours and he did amazing. Twenty-four hours later I watched my husband take his first breath with his new lungs. Tommy was so grateful for this second chance, as we all were. He spent 18 days in hospital after the transplant and I remember after he was woken up, one of the first things he said was he would now be able to see his girls get married and meet his grandbabies. He was so grateful to be alive. Tommy and I spent the next three months going back and forth to the hospital doing twice a week meetings with the transplant team, twice a week blood work, five days a week of physio and a lot of medication daily. Through it all he never complained once. Tommy was excited about the future he was now going to have. He amazed me every day with the strong will he had to live. Thirty-three days after the transplant Tommy and I got the opportunity to see his old lungs. It put a lot in perspective. The pathologist was amazed he still worked and did what he did with these very diseased lungs.

On May 17 Tommy did a five-km walk for the Alberta transplant association. The girls and I were sure he was never going to be able to complete it but he did. It was definitely an emotional day as there is no way he would have been able to do that in the past. Our future looked so much brighter. He was going to be able to do these things with the girls and I. He would have the energy once again and not be short of breath.

Things can change in a moment. On June 1, 2018 Tommy was admitted back in hospital. He had not been feeling the best and had a high temperature. They took an x-ray of the lungs that night and found nodules on them. The following day they did a cat scan of the whole body to find some nodules also on the

liver and kidneys. They rushed a liver biopsy and we were told he was full of cancer.

My world turned black. My best friend of 25 years was told he had months to weeks to live. The medication that was supposed to keep my husband alive did the opposite. They figure he may have had a small tumor on the bladder. Once Tommy started taking the anti-rejection drugs for his new lungs, the cancer spread quickly as he had no immune system to fight it. There were so many emotions: how was I going to live without him? How were we going to tell our girls that their dad was going to die after we all had so much hope for our future? The four of us were devastated. We spent the next 10 days in the hospital but the morning of June 14, 2018 I watched my husband take his last breath. The lung disease won and my best friend; Hope and Haley's dad passed away at the age of 48.

If it was not for the organ donor and the donor's family, we would not have had those four months with Tommy. Their selfless act gave Tommy the gift to be able to run and walk and what we all take for granted: breathe. Tommy was so thankful and swore he was going to take care of those lungs. Given the chance, anyone that knew Tommy knows he would have. The girls and I are so thankful to the family and donor for giving him that second chance because if anyone deserved it, it was him.

We meet a lot of great people in this journey and I am hoping some good will come out of Tommy's death. The Alberta Lung Association have an annual walk/run in memory of Tommy, called Tommy's Run and all the proceeds raised will go to Breathing Space, a recovery house for lung transplant recipients and their caregivers. This will help so many patients and families.

If I have learned anything, life is definitely short and can be taken in a second. I want to

tell Tommy's story so others don't have to go through what the four of us as a family have had to go through. At the end of the day, BE SAFE. Tommy always had so much anxiety about losing his job and not being able to take care of us, that he worked literally 'til he could no longer. Now I'm left without my best friend trying to figure out how to live without him as he was all I have ever known. I moved in with Tommy right after high school, so now I'm trying to figure out how to survive and live life the best I can without him.

Our oldest daughter has chosen respiratory therapy as a career choice and is in her second year, our youngest has chosen human resources as her career choice and is in her third year. As hard as it is, I keep going for them as I know Tommy would want me to. His kids and I were his life, so my goal now is to do what I can to help others and to tell Tommy's story and keep his memory alive. I hope as you read this story you will decide to put on that mask or PPE, even if you only need it for two minutes. There are still people in our workplace who decide not to protect themselves, which is crazy to me. However there are employees who never take those masks off and there are people who have quit smoking after Tommy's death. I chose to go back to the same place Tommy and I worked together, so that has been tough, but when I'm having bad days they understand why.

Tommy was an amazing husband and father. He is missed by so many. He had a great heart and deserved to be here on earth so much longer. I still struggle every day with why it was his time and what we could have done differently. Some days I can honestly say I'm not sure how I'm going to get through this. I miss him more than you could imagine. As for what my future holds, my motto is 'one day at a time' as clichéd as it sounds. I have chosen to move forward with my life, as I know that's what Tommy would want, for me to be happy.



Tommy along with his wife and their two daughters made up what Tommy called his 'Core 4'