

# threads of life

VOL.20, NO.1 SPRING 2022

PREVENTION | SUPPORT | PARTNERSHIP

## Honouring the Journey

Most journeys have a starting point, and a finish – a point when you can say “I’ve arrived”. But the journey of healing that begins after a workplace tragedy is a lifelong one. Along the way, it’s important to note the milestones, mark progress and honour the journey. Each pathway is unique, but by finding community, travellers can be assured that they are not alone.



Photo by Lis Fotios of Pexels



### MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

Bill Stunt

Spring is on its way. With the increasing daylight and warmer temperatures come signs of hope. What better time for workers, government, organizations and all of us to focus on health and safety? All spring, Threads of Life volunteers and members gear up for Steps for Life events across the

country, raising awareness and funds to support those affected by tragedy. Day of Mourning in April offers the opportunity to remember loved ones, and honour lives changed forever. And Safety and Health Week, the first week of May, draws the focus of the country to prevention. As Threads of Life family members, we can find hope in the possibility of protecting other families from work-related tragedy.

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# Learning to love who I became

Dad and grandfather finds new ways to demonstrate caring

by Aaron Kearley

I'm a father to six children and have worked hard since I was about 13 years old. I really enjoyed working over the years. I worked in the oil fields for three years and went on to do sheet metal work for over 25 years. I would work six to seven days a week and eight to sometimes 16 hour days.

When I got into sheet metal work, I remember there were lots of cuts to your hands. But the job itself was very rewarding – you felt the accomplishment of seeing something you built, something you designed.

I was the provider, dad, husband, and grandfather. I always enjoyed spending my spare time with my family doing various things like camping, helping my kids build things and playing with them. I was always a healthy person and outgoing. I enjoyed my job. I was the type of guy when I would come home from work and saw someone that needed help, I'd stop and help them. I enjoyed all sports such as hockey, baseball, golf, fishing etc. I thought I had a great life and I was happy with what my wife and I had built together.

I owned and ran my company with my wife right beside me, doing ductwork, ventilation and heating systems, and a variety of other handyman projects. I worked crazy hours and it started to take a toll on me. I was getting older and wanted more time at home. I was subcontracting from a company and they came to me and offered me a job as



Aaron's hands were so covered in sores that he could no longer work.

their head guy doing sheet metal. I jumped at it because the benefits would help me and my family.

A few months into my new job, in 2011 we lost our daughter at 21 months of age. This took a huge toll on me. I took a couple months off work. Upon returning to work, after another two or three months I noticed my hands had flaky skin, small cuts and blisters. The more I worked the sorer my hands became, but I threw myself back into my work because I loved what I did, and really needed to get my mind back in the game.

By 2014 my hands were completely covered in open sores. I had blisters, cuts and bleeding from my finger tips to my wrist. It was to a point I was missing two to four days of work a week because I was in so much pain. I went to the doctor who sent me for

tests. I was diagnosed with Allergic Contact Dermatitis, a rare disease but not uncommon for a sheet metal worker. But the severity of my case was unusual. Because I had

**Along this trip I've lost who I was. I'm not the provider, dad, grandfather, a person who helps people. I lost my identity.**

worked with this condition for so long, I am now basically allergic to everything: black rubber, grey rubber which make up about 97 per cent of all rubber and plastics, chrome, chemicals, some foods, and the list goes on.

They started me on light treatments and a pill form of chemotherapy. WCB wanted a biopsy to confirm my diagnosis. When they cut a piece out of my hand, I had a bad reaction and my hand began to swell up. I was allergic to the scalpel, stitches, Bandaid and Polysporin.

This set me back on my recovery by a few months. I fought WCB for over two years and finally they accepted my claim. This put me into bankruptcy and over the course of those two years I had to seek help with mental health. This also brought on Fibromyalgia from stress. The doctor found a new pill called Toctino that has worked to suppress the Allergic Contact Dermatitis. This pill has its drawbacks: no direct sunlight, it makes me sick, and at dusk I have a hard time seeing, but on a positive note it controls the disease so I can still manage to do some things in moderation.

Along this trip I've lost who I was. I'm not the provider, dad, grandfather, a person who helps people. I lost my identity. Now I'm a mom and not much of one either. I am home with the kids, which has been a reverse of my former role. I cannot do the things moms do either. Between the two diseases I struggle with day-to-day chores as well. Although my children love having me home, I struggled, thinking I was a burden to my wife and family, and this again took me downhill in my wellbeing and mind set.

It's been eight years since I've become this new person. I am starting to realize the person I once was is gone. So who am I? What can I bring to the table now? It dawned on me that I was always a caring and helpful person. I am still a caring and helpful person. So this is what I'm hanging on to. I want to help people because I care. This is why I feel the need to share my story and hope it will help someone else

with their struggles. You need to stay positive. Don't quit fighting. Take whatever you have left and push forward and push hard! Although a piece or part of you is missing, you still have so much to give back. Find that something and run with it!

**Just knowing that I could possibly help someone like me get through their hardship or make it easier for them, would be another step forward in my own healing process.**

Life for me today is so much different than I thought it might be. Each morning when I wake up, I'm immediately in pain – sometimes just my arms or just my legs, and sometimes head to toe. I have to let my pain dictate how much I can do in

a day. I've discovered four-wheeling and really enjoy that, in moderation when the pain permits.

My wife Tanya has been a rock, and all my family are very understanding. As they've gotten older, the kids understand my illness better, and they can just look at me and recognize whether I'm in pain. I couldn't imagine how I'd cope without my family, and it has been a blessing to have more time with them. I used to work out on the rigs and was gone so much. It's a great feeling to be able to see my children grow.

I had to learn a lot over the last eight years. I had to learn to love who I became. I had to learn to say no, both to myself and to other people. I still struggle with pain every day and I continue to still have outbreaks, from overdoing things.

Over these years I found Threads of Life. I can't believe how much they have helped me in such a short time. They helped with my mental state and showed me that I wasn't alone in this fight. The first time I attended a forum I found myself. From that first day I asked to become a volunteer and be a speaker, although COVID hit before I had a chance

to speak and tell my story. I also think I'd like to become a volunteer family guide some day. Just knowing that I could possibly help someone like me get through their hardship or make it easier for them, would be another step forward in my own healing process. As I said before, I was always a caring and helpful person and I took this with me into my new outlook on life.

A huge thank you to the staff, volunteers, support workers and my new family. I say family, not friends, because at Threads of Life we become connected and we respect, care for each other and support each other. That's family! My journey is not over by a long shot but I know I am not alone because of these amazing people. Stay strong and stay safe.



Aaron and his family

# Biographical disruption:

## When a chronic illness diagnosis changes you forever

by **Kasey Boehmer, Ph.D., M.P.H., NBC-HWC**

*Reprinted with permission from Mayo Clinic Press*

**Heidi's main fear was just realized;** the doctor has informed her that — without a doubt — she has rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Gone is the hope that this wasn't a serious disease, that she'd just pushed herself too hard, working and keeping up with the kids while training for another half-marathon.

Over the past three months, she has slowly accumulated pain. First nagging and distant, now screaming and ever present like a fire moving through her body. Although there are treatments that can help her, she realizes this will be a lifelong condition. She will need to start medication and a whole new regimen of self-care. Although there's some level of relief to have the source of her pain identified, her mind is completely overwhelmed with what her new life may look like — one that seems completely unrecognizable from her life so far.

### **Chronic illness fundamentally disrupts identity.**

Three months ago, Heidi's identity for herself was an active half-marathoner and busy mother, focused on keeping up with her family and her work. Today, she is unable to recognize that version of herself in the body lying on the couch and in too much pain to do the dishes.

In the research world, this is called “biographical disruption.” This is a period of grief and struggle that occurs when chronic illness is first diagnosed or worsens. The physical changes and new self-care routines required for chronic illness disrupt a person's sense of self, social roles and normal activities. These changes are usually abrupt, and it takes time for a person to successfully cope.

A new chronic illness diagnosis can be overwhelming, particularly if it feels like the old you and the new you don't match up. However, it doesn't have to be a time of hopelessness. With the right support and strategies, you may find that you are more resilient than you thought.

### **Based on research, here are three key actions you can take during this challenging time:**

- Stay hopeful about the future — The beginning of a new diagnosis or a flare of an existing diagnosis is a poor representation of what future life may look like. While there is no guarantee of a complete remission of symptoms, there is often improvement. It may feel impossible early in a chronic illness journey to get back a full life, but it's common to normalize what feels very abnormal in the beginning. Many thrive despite the challenges of chronic illness.



Being diagnosed with a chronic illness, whether work-related or not, can change your identity.

- Surround yourself with support — Other people have walked a similar road before you. Finding people who have the same condition and may even be at similar points in their health journeys can help you understand what is possible in the future. For example, Heidi might benefit from community with other mothers living with RA. In addition to people in your own social circle, Mayo Clinic Connect is a great example of a digital platform to connect with patients from all over the world who may have insights into living well with chronic illness. There are numerous other condition-specific online support communities as well.
- Take baby steps — Focus on one adaptation at a time and start with the one you feel will help the most. At the beginning of a diagnosis, patients are often presented with an enormous amount of information explaining the condition and how to manage it. Not being able to take it all on at once can leave you feeling overwhelmed or discouraged. By focusing on one new strategy at a time — for example, learning to get an adequate amount of rest with a new condition — you get to feel the success of making something new work for you in addition to any treatment benefits. The combination can be the fuel you need to take on the next step.

# Family Forums: Looking forward to face-to-face



We may still have to observe distancing, but hope to be back together in person at this year's family forums.

We've all missed being in person together for Family Forums and other events these past two years. Online opportunities have filled in admirably to provide information and connection, but we missed the chance to share a meal or an understanding glance. Most of all we missed those hugs.

For 2022, the three regional Family Forums are planned as in-person events once again. While we know the pandemic could still throw us a curve, at the time of this writing, plans are full steam ahead for the Atlantic forum in late May, the Central in September and the Western in October.

All three forums will begin with the Reflections Ceremony, an opportunity to honour lives lost or changed forever, and to prepare the ground for a weekend of learning and sharing. That kicks off Saturday morning with a presentation from one of Threads of Life's speaker volunteers, revealing their own experience with workplace tragedy, and how Threads of Life has walked beside them on their journey.

Workshops across the weekend will include explorations of the changes brought by a workplace tragedy, chances to talk about personal experience, new ways to cope and to grow, plus popular art, yoga and music therapy sessions. The program for each forum is slightly different, but they are all built on sharing, learning, and the chance to know you are not alone.

## What to expect at the Family Forum

This year's Family Forums will be the same ... but a little bit different ... possibly. Requirements related to COVID-19 are changing steadily. Threads of Life places a priority on the safety and health of our members, volunteers and staff, so we will be following best practices and local guidance for preventing transmission of illness. This may include vaccination

requirements, masking, distancing and other measures as needed. Please watch the web site for the most up to date information about your forum.

## Exciting workshops on the calendar with FamiliesConnect

FamiliesConnect online workshops have proved a perfect way for Threads of Life members to learn and share together, and they will continue even after in-person events are possible again. Topics coming up for the remainder of 2022 cover a wide range including guilt, mindfulness, kindness, family dynamics, writing your story, music and letting go. You can register for a single session at a time, pick and choose, or sign up for every one. Visit [threadsoflife.ca/programs](https://threadsoflife.ca/programs).

Those participating in the monthly workshops are finding them a rewarding and worthwhile two hours. Here are few of the comments:

- Once I was comfortable with the platform it felt quite cozy as everyone shared their thoughts and experiences.
- Zoom is allowing us to connect from coast to coast. We always learn something new from each other. I loved the feelings of connection created by presenters and participants, respectful interactions, welcoming, acknowledgement of our great similarities and differences.
- It's comforting to be around a group of people who get and totally understand what you're going through. No judgement ever.
- Listening to others' stories always makes you feel good that you're not alone.

# “This is My Day of Mourning”



Following a workplace tragedy, many families would say that every day is a day of mourning. It's especially true in the early days following a fatality, but the aftermath of a serious injury or an occupational illness, too, are filled with grief at the loss of life, of expectations, of hopes, of an imagined future.

While grief is deeply personal, mourning is the more public expression of loss. On April 28 every year, the broader community joins together to mourn the losses caused by workplace tragedy. Day of Mourning has been observed across Canada and around the world since 1991 when Canada's Parliament passed the Workers Mourning Day Act making April 28 an official Day of Mourning. The roots of the day go back even further to the 1980s when Canadian labour unions established a day of remembrance.

Day of Mourning is an important day for Threads of Life family members – a time for private remembrance, but also a time when many choose to share their personal stories in order to honour their

loved ones and their own experience, and to help others understand the impact of a death, serious injury or illness caused simply by going to work.

For National Day of Mourning 2022, Threads of Life has worked with three family members to capture their personal stories on video, to be shared with other families, partners and supporters. These three stories are examples and symbols of all the many losses experienced by all the other families. Read more about the three families below. For Day of Mourning this year, Threads of Life will also provide a venue on our Facebook page for all families to share their loss and say their loved one's name. We will also hold a short online ceremony on April 28, a time for all those who have experienced a workplace loss, and all those committed to preventing them, to come together in community. For more information on time and how to access the ceremony, please see our social media channels, our blog at [threadsoflife.ca/news](http://threadsoflife.ca/news), or call our office at 888-567-9490.

## This is My Day of Mourning: Melanie Kowalski



Melanie was a newlywed when her husband Mark was injured at work. He was an industrial electrician and had been repairing an electrical panel in a confined area when he fell from the ladder. Mark sustained multiple injuries, including broken vertebrae, skull fractures and brain injury.

“Mark did wake up but he was never the same again,” Melanie says. He spent the next four years struggling to find a new normal, but “on the day of Mark's accident he lost everything that made him Mark.

Mark died four years after his injuries, and Melanie and their young son honour and remember him, and miss him every day.

Mark Fleming and son Liam

## This is My Day of Mourning: Michaëlle Sprackman



Cade Sprackman

Michelle's son Cade was 18 and couldn't wait to start his adult life. He had dreams of becoming a film director. In the meantime, he was working at a tire recycling facility, saving money. One January evening, Cade became entangled in the tire shredding machine and was killed.

"I just think it's important for people to be able to put a face to something that IS happening out there," Michelle says. "It is a reality that people get hurt at work, and get killed at work."

Michelle has shared her story to help improve safety education and awareness particularly among young workers. She has also trained as a Volunteer Family Guide to help other families experiencing tragedy, and will serve this year as the family spokesperson for Steps for Life Regina.

## This is My Day of Mourning: Nicki Beck



Ron Beck

Ron Beck, Nicki's dad, worked as a railroad conductor. He was working to set off and secure rail cars, when he was crushed between the cars. Ron was an amazing dad, Nicki says, who taught his daughters how to bait a fishing line, change a tire and stand up for what they believe in. He loved nothing more than to spend time with his grandkids, drinking pretend tea out of tiny cups or serving as target for rubber arrows.

Losing her dad changed Nicki forever. Nicki became part of Threads of Life to find others who had a similar experience of tragedy. She is an active member of the Threads of Life speaker's bureau, sharing Ron's story at workplaces, safety events and Day of Mourning ceremonies as a way to save other families from experiencing the grief her family has lived through.

**Join us.**  
**On the Day of Mourning light**  
**a candle in honour of lives**  
**forever changed.**

See [threadsoflife.ca/dayofmourning](https://threadsoflife.ca/dayofmourning) for details.

## VOLUNTEER PROFILE: Elaine Mailman

by **Christine Kennedy-Babineau,**  
Regional Development Coordinator

In Stellarton, Nova Scotia, on January 14, 1952, John Mailman died in a coal mine gas explosion. His son was only 18 months old. The community rallied around his widow, providing support in any way they could, but Elaine Mailman wishes that an organization like Threads of Life had been available to support her grandmother at the time. Elaine says, “There would have been a disconnect on the emotional level of how to support her ... she would have benefited from an organization like this. I’ll be dedicated to an organization like this, because she was amazing, and I don’t know what my life would have been like had my dad’s life been different, had his dad still been there”.

Elaine first heard about Threads of Life while completing the Occupational Health and Safety program at the Nova Scotia Community College when a volunteer from the Threads of Life Speaker’s Bureau shared her personal story of losing her dad to a workplace fatality. “My first impression of Threads of Life was that there was great value in the education of hearing people’s stories first hand. Watching this woman talk about her father, about the accident, how she was left feeling ... watching the people in the room listening to her, hearing it in a different way because of the education I was receiving at the time, noticing that her story will impact everyone in the room, even just the slightest bit, whether right away or 10 years from now, my first impression was in the value that those types of talks can bring to a group of people”.

In an effort to show her support, Elaine first attended the Halifax Steps for Life event in 2017 and by 2019 she found herself stepping up to volunteer as a co-chair for their planning committee. “Walking up the stairs (to the meeting) I was nervous, but then walking into the room I immediately felt like I was welcome ... having a sense of community is really important”. Now in 2022, she still holds the co-chair position. “The most rewarding part is knowing that we are raising money to be able to support families, knowing that every dollar we bring in is going to help”.



Elaine is excited about being able to return to an in-person Steps for Life event in Point Pleasant Park on May 7, 2022. “Last year we did a virtual opening ceremony. It all came together in this incredible way, but I like getting together and going for a walk, being in the community and bringing like-minded people together.” Elaine is excited to be able to see everyone in one place again and to know that the park-based outdoor event is possible despite the challenges of the last two years.

Having grown up in a household that was impacted by a workplace fatality, Elaine often wonders how her life would have been different. “I work as a Safety Officer, so my whole life is about prevention, literally every single thing I do is to prevent someone from getting hurt at a workplace”. When asked why she volunteers to organize the annual Steps for Life event to support Threads of Life programs and services, Elaine shared that “knowing that we are raising money for a charity that does this type of work and is able to give support to people is important to me. It makes me proud to volunteer”.

## How to support someone *after a tragedy*

Families who’ve experienced a workplace tragedy may not be experts in health and safety (although they learn a lot, quickly) but they are experts on their experience and on how best to support someone following a work-related fatality, injury or diagnosis of illness. Threads of Life has been working with our families to gather some of that expertise and will be publishing our findings this spring – watch for it!





# PUTTING THE FOCUS on workplace safety and health

The importance of workplace safety and health crosses many boundaries, and draws together individuals, organizations and even nations. Safety and Health Week, this year May 1 to 7, is proof of that.

Threads of Life is one of the long-time partners in Safety and Health Week (formerly known as NAOSH week), along with:

- Canadian Society of Safety Engineering (CSSE)
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)
- Employment and Social Development Canada
- American Society of Safety Professionals (ASSP).

The event began with the CSSE's Occupational Health and Safety week in 1986, and when a trade agreement was being discussed among Canada, the United States and Mexico, the three nations decided on a shared health and safety week, built on the CSSE's model.

Today, Safety and Health Week is dedicated to focusing employers,

employees, partners and the public on the importance of preventing injury and illness in the workplace, at home and in the community. It kicks off with a virtual national launch ceremony on May 2, 2022. Many companies and organizations across the country plan their own safety events and campaigns throughout the week. Threads of Life's flagship fundraising and awareness event, Steps for Life, is also held during this time, and offers an opportunity to make a concrete contribution to preventing injuries and illnesses, and supporting those affected by past tragedies.

"For our Threads of Life families, it's always encouraging to see the conversations and the focus during Safety and Health Week," says Shirley Hickman, Threads of Life's Executive Director. "We want safety and health to be a focus in workplaces every day, year round. The activities during that week are a perfect way to get everyone – workers, employers, families and the public, aligned on prevention."

## 5 ways to celebrate Safety and Health Week 2022

From [www.safetyandhealthweek.ca](http://www.safetyandhealthweek.ca). See web site for more suggestions!

- **Officially acknowledge Safety and Health Week** with a proclamation by your mayor, community dignitaries or other government officials.
- **Promote Safety and Health Week** through articles in your newsletter and on social media channels. Don't forget to use the #SafetyandHealthWeek hashtag.
- **Launch a recognition program** for safety suggestions that are put into use or enhance ongoing health and safety practices.
- **Organize training sessions** for staff (in person or remotely) or host a Threads of Life speaker who can deliver a powerful and moving personal message for your audience.
- **Encourage local retailers and businesses** to show their support by sharing Safety and Health Week posters and messaging on their websites and social media channels.



# Safety and Health Week



## BAKER FAMILY STEP UP As National Steps For Life Spokespeople For 2022

Jim Baker died in 2014 after the bulldozer he was operating rolled into a pit and Jim was trapped under the water. This year, Jim's wife Pam and their children have agreed to serve as the national spokespeople for Steps for Life – Walking for Families of Workplace Tragedy.

“After Jim's death, we were looking for support, for some way to know we weren't alone in what we were going through,” Pam says, “and we found Threads of Life... This spring, we would love to see everyone across Canada step up and support Steps for Life. You can make such a big difference to families like ours. Please join us.”



**Don't be fooled.**  
April 1 is the deadline for our early bird registration contest.  
Win a \$500 gift card!

Watch Pam's story on Threads of Life's YouTube channel and other social media channels.



**FINDING YOUR  
STEPS FOR LIFE  
COMMUNITY...  
no matter where  
you live!**

There is a Steps for Life community for you, no matter where across Canada you may find yourself. For 2022, 26 communities from coast to coast are hosting Steps for Life events. Many are planning for traditional, in-the-park walks, a few are entirely virtual, and all offer the choice to walk on your own if that's your preference. If you live in or near one of those 26 communities, please register with that event so that your participation and fundraising will contribute to your community's tallies. In-person events will observe all applicable health guidelines for the area.

And, if you don't live near one of the walk locations, you still have a community! Register for our National Online Steps for Life Event, and become part of the national Steps for Life family. That's how, wherever we walk #WeWalkTogether.

## WALKING TOGETHER: National sponsors and Threads of Life families

Our national Steps for Life sponsors come from different sectors, with different histories and backgrounds, but they all share a compassionate commitment to help families affected by tragedy, and to ensure safer workplaces today and tomorrow. Thank you to all!



## Upcoming Events

- **Atlantic Family Forum** - May 27-29, 2022
- **Central Family Forum** - September 23-25, 2022
- **Western Family Forum** - October 28-30, 2022



- **Families Connect online workshops** - [threadsoflife.ca/programs/families-connect-workshops](http://threadsoflife.ca/programs/families-connect-workshops)
  - **Dreams, Signs, and Coincidences: Ways our Loved Ones Stay Connected** - April 20
  - **Increase Your Sense of Awareness of True Kindness and True Friendship** - May 18
  - **Tragic Optimist or Cynical Pessimist** - June 8

## SHARE THIS NEWSLETTER!

Pass it along or leave it in your lunchroom or lobby for others to read.

## How to reach us

Toll-free: 1-888-567-9490  
Fax: 1-519-685-1104

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**Threads of Life** is a registered charity dedicated to supporting families along their journey of healing who have suffered from a workplace fatality, life-altering illness or occupational disease. Threads of Life is the Charity of Choice for many workplace health and safety events. Charitable organization business: #87524 8908 RR0001.

### MISSION

Our mission is to help families heal through a community of support and to promote the elimination of life-altering workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths.

### VISION

Threads of Life will lead and inspire a culture shift, as a result of which work-related injuries, illnesses and deaths are morally, socially and economically unacceptable.

### VALUES

We believe in:

**Caring:** Caring helps and heals.

**Listening:** Listening can ease pain and suffering.

**Sharing:** Sharing our personal losses will lead to healing and preventing future devastating work-related losses.

**Respect:** Personal experiences of loss and grief need to be honoured and respected.

**Health:** Health and safety begins in our heads, hearts and hands, in everyday actions.

**Passion:** Passionate individuals can change the world.



## DONORS LIKE YOU: Maureen looks to the future

Maureen is a wife, mom, grandmother, and a health and safety professional with a career dedicated to preventing tragedy. She's also a Threads of Life family member, after her son Marc was seriously injured in an explosion at work. Maureen wants to ensure Threads of Life can support families for as long as it's needed in the future. To help accomplish that, she changed her will to include a gift to Threads of Life. Thank you, Maureen, for looking to the future!

When you leave Threads of Life a gift in your will, you're providing healing and hope to families in the future. Find out how easy it is – visit [www.threadsoflife.ca/donate/legacy-giving/](http://www.threadsoflife.ca/donate/legacy-giving/)

Maureen Shaw with her grandsons