



*Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support*

## **Turning pain into purpose**

Aaron Kearley has always been a hard worker. In his 25-year career in the sheet metal industry, he would often work six or seven days a week - sometimes putting in 16-hour days. Colleagues would describe him as a helper who was always going the extra mile to be there for others.

As a father to six children, a grandfather, and a devoted husband, Aaron took pride in his ability to be a provider for loved ones. He was healthy and active, and was focused on the life he and his wife were building for their family.

However, a few months after he took on a new position at a sheet metal company, he began to notice flaky skin, small cuts and blisters developing on his hands. He brushed this off at first and focused on how the job allowed him to provide for his family. But by 2014, his hands were completely covered in open sores that bled from his wrists to his fingertips. The pain became unbearable and he found himself missing more and more work.

Aaron was eventually diagnosed with Allergic Contact Dermatitis - a rare disease, but one that was not uncommon for sheet metal workers. His case was unusually severe due to the fact that he had tried to push through the pain and continued working for so long after the initial injuries appeared.

He now finds himself allergic to most things that he touches. In fact, when he went in for a biopsy to confirm his diagnosis, he developed an allergic reaction to the surgery itself: the scalpel, the stitches, and even the Band-Aids caused his hands to swell up painfully and set him back in his recovery.

The ensuing years brought on even more challenges for Aaron including a complicated process with the WCB, stress-induced Fibromyalgia, and a decline in his mental health. The constant pain forced him to stay home and took away his ability to do the things he once enjoyed. He struggled with such a big change in how he perceived himself, reflecting: "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."

It's been nine years since Aaron's life changed due to occupational illness and he has had to work hard to find a new normal in spite of the devastating pain he continues to experience daily. In addition to the unwavering support from his wife and children, he credits Threads of Life with helping him to find himself again and giving him the chance to be the helper he has always felt he was.

He says, "[Threads of Life] 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... 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 a national Canadian charity, Threads of Life counts on the leadership of companies and organizations committed to health and safety and to Canadian families. They assist by:

- spreading the word to people who need support,
- increasing participation in Threads of Life programs and events,
- facilitating volunteerism, and
- growing Threads of Life's funding.

Aaron is now an active member of Threads of Life as a member of the [Threads of Life volunteer speaker's program](#), has completed his training to become a [Volunteer Family Guide](#), and in 2023 was a spokesperson for his local [Steps for Life-Walking for Families of Workplace Tragedy](#) event in Halifax.

Though his journey is far from over, he has found hope and deep connection with the people he's met through Threads of Life and despite his continued challenges Aaron he no longer feels alone. He has turned his pain into purpose and in sharing his story, he is helping countless other people to do the same.

[Read more of Aaron's story on the Threads of Life Blog](#)

You can help people like Aaron and his family on their journey towards healing. [Learn more about how to get involved](#), or contact Threads of Life Director of Development Lorna Catrambone at 289-651-2988 or [lcatrambone@threadsoflife.ca](mailto:lcatrambone@threadsoflife.ca)

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