

# Letting the light back in

We'll never forget the date our lives were changed forever. Black Friday. June 4, 2004. My husband Jim was diagnosed with pleural mesothelioma, an incurable cancer caused by asbestos fibres in the lining of the lungs. He was given six months to live.

Jim faced each new challenge and the progression of this insidious disease with a wonderful, positive attitude that helped him beat the odds. After a long journey filled with tears, laughter, trauma, and loss, Jim died on October 22, 2011. He was such a fighter!

Jim enjoyed family, friends, sports, and fun in any order. The youngest of six, he grew up in Waterloo, Ontario. Drafted by the NHL, he played for the Hamilton Red Wings before family and his smaller height changed his career direction.

After hockey, Jim became a plumber/steamfitter. He had been working with asbestos pipe wrap and boiler removal since his late teens. Protective gear was unheard of in the early years of Jim's career.

An active member of the community, his flamboyant, outgoing personality and outrageous sense of humour made him a joy to those around him. He endured a brain aneurysm at 33 and the loss of his first wife at 35, never giving up.

We met at work. I was a single mother of two young girls and Jim had two grown children and grandchildren. We married in 1996 and became a family.

We enjoyed golf, Jim played recreational hockey, and I was still raising my daughters. Jim often threatened to become "Uncle Buck" with his convertible and bathrobe if they got out of line! We were married eight



*Jim and Heather Dahmer on their wedding day in 1996*



*As light returned to her life, Heather made a family visit to Scotland*

years when illness began to slowly erode the life we had created and the energy and fun we had always known.

Jim had started to investigate post-retirement plans as a college instructor in the trades when he began feeling unwell, experiencing shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, and an extreme decrease in energy.

Mesothelioma was diagnosed—a disease, that can lay dormant for 40 years or more before becoming active. Our lives became seemingly endless procedures, treatments, decisions, loss. Anger and frustration became my closest friends. Questions shouted to a world at large were answered with silence.

When we were told that he was going to die, we were in shock. How do you tell your children—especially Jim's who had lost their mother at an early age—such devastating news?

After surgery and recovery, we went west to visit Jim's son and daughter and their families. My daughters were so close to the man they had come to think of as dad. My parents thought of him as a son. We spent time together, all of us trying hard to come to grips with our new reality.

## A soft place to land...

Threads of Life helps families of workplace tragedy along their journey of healing by providing unique family support programs and services. To raise awareness and funds, Threads of Life holds Steps for Life Walks each April and May across Canada. In 2016, the goal is to have 5,000 participants walking in more than 30 communities and raising \$650,000. For more information on the Steps for Life Walk, visit [stepsforlife.ca](http://stepsforlife.ca)



*Threads* newsletter is a free, quarterly publication containing personal stories, news, and information from Threads of Life and their family members. To subscribe, visit [threadsoflife.ca](http://threadsoflife.ca) and click *Threads* newsletter. Previous issues are available online.



We provide support and services for families who have experienced a workplace fatality, life-altering injury, or occupational disease.

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*Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support*

Acceptance took a long time, but the sense of profound loss would never go. Jim, with his amazingly forthright approach said, "It can't be helped, no one knew the dangers and I've had a good life."

When faced with the unthinkable, it became urgent to put life in order. Visits to our lawyer, accountant, and funeral director put our minds at ease, more able to face what was to come. Some days were harder than others and pity parties were scheduled every Friday, half an hour or less.

Scheduling our grief was one way to keep it from taking over. Time together with friends and as a family was the most important priority. We rented Camp Big Canoe in Bracebridge where we had volunteered many summers. Our families joined together for a weekend of fun and to give thanks for each other.

Our friends came to our house and built a deck so Jim could rest outside. They finished our basement so all the kids would have a place to stay when they came home. We were truly blessed.

One of the brightest lights in the darkness was being introduced to the Threads of Life family. We found support, energy, and love from these wonderful people who had endured such loss themselves.

After Jim passed away, I was in a black hole of sadness and loss. It is not easy to lose your best friend. He was such a wonderful man, larger than life, more charisma than any one person should be allowed, and a sense of fun like nobody else.

Sleep and hide was all I wanted to do. Friends and family gathered me in the warmth and safety of their love and let me grow again.

I did not know how I was going to fill the void that had opened up since his death. Threads of Life offered us the hand of welcome and the shoulder of support. We have also been fortunate to meet others who have suffered the loss of a loved one due to mesothelioma, and their support has been invaluable.

Our family now has a 'call to action'—making sure all workers wear protection when exposed to asbestos. If you have been exposed, get tested—an airborne fibre may have reached you. It only takes one.

Be sure test information is followed-up (e.g., make sure to note 'exposure to asbestos' on the CT form you complete prior to your scan). Ask, ask, ask, then demand. Stop unnecessary workplace tragedy before it happens.

My world continues moving forward. At first, I was struggling to get up every day, then gradually laughter, fun, and sunshine slowly crept back in. Our family hosted a Worker's Memorial Golf Tournament with the proceeds going to Threads of Life. A family invitation to Scotland came, so I went—the most amazing, terrific family holiday ever.

I have also decided that I am finally ready to take the Volunteer Family Guide Training course offered through Threads of Life. It was always our hope that I would carry on in this way after Jim was gone. I wasn't ready until now and I hope I am able to support other families the way I have been supported.

*This article is a combination of two articles originally published in the Threads of Life newsletter (Fall 2007 and Spring 2015). A special thanks to Heather Dahmer for allowing us to republish parts of her story and help bring awareness of the devastation caused by an occupational disease.*