

How cancer has affected me and why I take part in Relay for Life

By Dave Crossman

In the 1980s, I had a grandmother who had breast cancer and a grandfather who had a cancerous tumor on his neck.

In 1986, my uncle was diagnosed with testicular cancer and survived. I remember staying with my aunt so she wasn't alone while he was in the hospital and she was home with a newborn. In 1990, I remember my other grandmother wearing a wig to my wedding as she had lost her hair from chemotherapy treatments while battling bowel cancer.

Even with all this, I didn't really feel affected by cancer until 2002 when I had to tell my then nine-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter that their favourite uncle wasn't going to make his annual visit from New Brunswick for my son's birthday. This is when my younger brother was diagnosed with stomach cancer.

The one thing I really remember about my brother was how, when he was in the hospital, to him it was never about him. As soon as someone would come to visit, he'd ask how they were or how their kids were doing. When the nurses came in his room, he'd ask them how their day was going. My brother stayed in the hospital through his battle with cancer, but his friends made sure he was never alone. There was a group of six guys who took shifts staying at the hospital 24 hours a day so he wouldn't be alone, and so my parents and other brothers could take a break and go home.

My brother put up a good fight, but cancer won and he lost his battle four months later at the age of 35. Even in his last hours, as I was helping him clean himself up, my brother was saying sorry to me and I had to keep telling him he didn't need to be sorry.

This is when my association with Relay For Life began. In 2003, we put a team in the Brampton/Caledon Relay For Life, and after walking that night, we knew we'd do it again. The next four years, we relayed in memory of my brother.

In 2007 while visiting family in New Brunswick, like we do every summer, cancer hit us again! I'll never forget being in the room when my mom got a phone call telling her to come to the doctor's office the next day and to not come alone. This is when my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. My wife and I went to the doctor with her the next day and I remember the doctor saying if she had to have breast cancer this was the best kind to get and beat. They scheduled my mom for a lumpectomy as the doctor assured her there was no need to remove the breast. After surgery my mom got a call saying the margins weren't clear and another surgery was needed. Again, she was assured there was no need to remove the breast. With the second surgery out of the way, Mom got another call telling her the margins still aren't clear and the doctor wanted her to go in for a third operation. She asked the doctor to please just remove the breast, but he said there was no need. But even after the third surgery, the margins still weren't clear. Finally they scheduled Mom for her fourth surgery and removed her breast.

In 2008 after finishing treatments and getting the okay from her doctor, my mom was able to travel from New Brunswick and stand on stage at the Brampton Relay For Life with no hair and cut my daughter's 12 inch ponytail off so it could be donated to help make wigs for cancer patients. My mom loved the Relay and came back in 2009 to once again walk the survivor lap. In July, she will go for her five-year check-up and so far is cancer free.

In 2011, while preparing for the Relay For Life, cancer hit my family again with my dad being diagnosed with cancer of the bile duct. Sadly, he lost his battle a few days before the Brampton/Caledon Relay For Life and we were in New Brunswick preparing for his funeral as the Relay was ending.

Last year, my mom's sister was diagnosed with breast cancer, she has completed treatment and is doing well.

So when people ask me why I relay, I tell them that these are some of the reasons.

I celebrate for the people in my life who have survived this horrible disease.

I remember all those, like my brother and my dad, who have lost their lives to cancer.

I have four nephews under 10 years old who have an uncle they have never met. They only know him through photos and our stories. So I fight back so other families don't have to be affected by cancer like my family has been. Over the past 10 years, our team has collectively raised more than \$25,000.

The Relay For Life is a way for cancer survivors to feel good about themselves and to know that they are not in this fight alone. There is a whole community of people that are there for them. What we do at the Relay really makes a difference to someone fighting a battle with cancer.

Relay For Life is the biggest cancer event that makes the biggest difference and takes place all over the country every year in June. This year, the Brampton Relay For Life will take place June 7 at the Brampton Fairgrounds, 12989 Heart Lake Rd., Caledon. This year is the Canadian Cancer Society's 75th Anniversary. By joining us during this special year, you will help make Relay For Life the most successful ever. The remarkable impact of 75 years of fighting for life can be seen in the faces of the thousands of cancer survivors who are alive today.

The Canadian Cancer Society's Relay For Life is a 12-hour, non-competitive relay and an opportunity to get together with family and friends to celebrate cancer survivors, remember those lost to cancer and fight back against this devastating disease. Last year, the Brampton/Caledon Community Relay raised close to \$300,000.

Celebrate your personal victory against cancer by joining free of charge, in the Survivor's Victory lap and special dinner banquet or as a team by calling 905-608-8411 or register online at www.relayforlife.ca/brampton



Dave Crossman and his mother Donna.