

A Family Crusade

Colon cancer robbed Bunnie Schwartz of her sister, and then her husband. Now she's giving all she's got to stamp out the disease for good.

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Bunnie Schwartz (seated) with Amy Lerman-Elmaleh, daughter of her late and much-missed sister, Maureen.

175 CANADIANS
DIE OF COLON
CANCER
EVERY WEEK.

Bunnie Schwartz never dreamed that she would one day head up an organization with the mandate “to get more people talking about their butts.” But the mother of three from Thornhill, Ont., never thought she would lose her sister and husband, both in their 40s, to colon cancer, either.

“People don’t think of colon cancer as a disease that affects

women or anyone under 50,” says Bunnie. “It was always considered an old man’s disease.” As founder and codirector of Colon Cancer Canada, a national nonprofit organization, she has spent the past 15 years trying to change that perception and overcome the stigma attached to a disease that is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in Canada. »

When Bunnie's sister, Maureen, was diagnosed with colon cancer (also known as colorectal cancer) at 46, it came as a complete shock to everyone in the family. "She had been complaining about how tired she was, but we didn't think anything of it," says Bunnie. "My mother had just passed away, and we were trying to deal with that, and my dad was sick, and we had our kids to take care of. Everybody was tired." Maureen died in 1994, just 22 months after being diagnosed, leaving behind her husband and three young daughters.

After losing her only sister, Bunnie, who worked full time as a teacher, was determined to help everyone with their grief. On a crisp fall day in a north Toronto park, 30 friends and family members gathered to pay tribute to Maureen with a fund-raising walk. "It was very hard, very emotional, especially watching the children," recalls

terribly wrong," recalls Bunnie. "I was just so shocked that he could come down with this disease after my sister had had it. I was still trying to deal with her death and I thought, Oh, no, here we go again."

Howard, who had always been healthy, had five surgeries over the next seven years – the first to remove a tumour the size of a large grapefruit. He continued to work at the Ontario Food Terminal until after his third surgery. "He was very tough," says Bunnie. "He wanted to see the kids grow up and graduate high school and university."

Bunnie scaled back her teaching duties so she could care for him and the children and still have time to devote to her then-fledgling charity. "Some days I would take him for chemotherapy at 8 a.m. and we wouldn't get home until 10 p.m.," she says. "I was so busy, I didn't have time to think, and that's probably

ONE IN 15 WOMEN AND ONE IN 14 MEN ARE EXPECTED TO DEVELOP COLON CANCER IN THEIR LIFETIME.

Bunnie. "But at the end we all felt really good about being able to raise funds and awareness."

That first walk raised \$23,000 for colon cancer research and awareness, and was the start of a movement to prevent others from having to go through the pain and suffering of colon cancer.

Tragedy struck again in 1996 when Bunnie's husband, Howard, was diagnosed with Stage 3 colorectal cancer. Once again, the family was stunned, because he had no symptoms other than back pain. A family friend, who was also a doctor, had convinced him to have some tests, including a colonoscopy. "When the principal called me out of my classroom to tell me my husband was on the phone, I knew something was

what got me through." That and a lot of support from friends and neighbours. Her children's friends would frequently drop by after school to play Scrabble and other board games with Howard. "He was very funny and the kids all loved him," says Bunnie. And neighbours helped walk the dog or carpool the kids, and take them to movies on the weekends. "Many of our friends would pick up dinner and come over on a Saturday night just to be with us," says Bunnie.

Through it all, she and Howard tried to keep life as normal as possible, refusing to let the disease take control. "He didn't want people to see him as a patient," says Bunnie. "He told me he was going to be the poster boy for colon cancer." Howard, »

GET THE FACTS

Sometimes individuals don't exhibit any signs, but see your doctor if you experience any of these symptoms.

- Change in bowel movements
- Blood in or on your stool
- Abdominal discomfort
- Weight loss for no apparent reason
- Feeling that your bowel is not emptying properly
- Narrower stools than usual
- Increased fatigue

Risk Factors

- A family history of colon cancer
- Being over age 50
- Polyps in your colon or rectum
- A diet high in fat
- An inactive lifestyle
- Obesity
- Inflammatory bowel disease

Get the Test

If caught early, 90 per cent of colon cancer is treatable. This cancer grows very slowly, with no symptoms in the early stages. You should get checked at least every two years after age 50 or earlier if you have a family history of colon cancer. The most common screening tests are the at-home fecal occult blood test that checks for blood in your stool and a colonoscopy, for which the doctor looks inside your colon for polyps or any abnormalities. Visit colonversation.ca.

a devoted dad, helped the kids with their homework, and the family always had Friday and Sunday dinners together. When Howard wasn't feeling well, they would still all sit together and watch TV or videos of the kids when they were younger. "I used to feel bad that we couldn't go away and do the things that other families were doing," says Bunnie. "But now, when I listen to the kids talk about their memories of their dad, I realize that they spent a lot of quality time with him, even if it was cut short."

When Howard became bed-bound, Bunnie moved her tiny basement

office upstairs so she could work on the charity and still be with him. The kids helped out with everything from stuffing flyers to making baskets to sell out of the back of the car at those early fund-raising walks and galas. "I put up shelves in the basement and we filled 70 or 80 baskets with chocolate bars, lotions, creams – whatever I could get donated," recalls Bunnie. "It was a fun, social time, with everyone helping out."

Her children, now grown, still attend all of the fund-raising events – the annual Gala of Hope/ A Derriere Affair, the Anne Murray

Charity Golf Classic and the Push for Your Tush walk and run. "They went through so much over the years," says Bunnie. "They always have that sense of loss, that their father wasn't there to see them graduate high school or university. My daughter's friends are starting to get married and she asked me, 'Who's going to walk me down the aisle?'"

The small home office has moved to a larger space to accommodate four full-time workers and two contract workers, including Maureen's daughter Amy Lerman-Elmaleh, who has been involved with the organization since her first year of university. "Sometimes we just look at each other and laugh," says Bunnie. "We can't believe we actually have six offices. We're used to just yelling across the table."

Bunnie stopped teaching three years ago to commit to Colon Cancer

Canada full time. She's proud of the fact that, with the help of hundreds of volunteers, they've raised over \$6.6 million toward research, patient support, public awareness campaigns and access to screening. And thanks to their high-profile Don't Die of Embarrassment campaign with celebrities like hockey legend Darryl Sittler and Olympic kayaker Adam Van Koeverden, Bunnie is confident that people are finally starting to pay attention to their behinds. "Raising awareness is top of the line," she says. "If you feel that something is wrong, you need to get tested." Because of their family history of colon cancer, Bunnie's two oldest children have been tested, and her youngest, 25, will be soon.

One of Bunnie's pet projects is the Wendy Bear, a teddy bear that was created in honour of Sittler's wife, Wendy, who died from colon cancer in

2002. (Proceeds from the Wendy Bear sales go directly to the organization.) Wendy wanted to make sure that anyone diagnosed with the disease would have the necessary support, and that terminally ill patients could spend time at home with their loved ones instead of in hospital, says Bunnie. "Because I went through it, and because I was in debt afterward, I think it's a very important thing to do."

Equally important is the fact that Colon Cancer Canada serves as a lifeline for scared and bewildered patients and their families, who need a place to turn to for information and support. "Bunnie talks to everybody," says Lynda Keith, public relations associate with the organization. "Someone will call at their wit's end and she'll be on the phone for hours. Bunnie can get very emotional, but she is strong and passes on that strength to those in need. Helping

others, giving them hope, is what gives her joy."

When Bunnie's daughter Arlee (who was 18 when her father died) was having a hard time dealing with the ninth anniversary of her father's death last year, she asked her mother if it ever gets easier. "It doesn't get easier; you just learn to deal with it in a different way," Bunnie replied. "My husband used to tell me to take time to smell the roses, and I do that. I've learned how important family and friends are and I take time to be with the ones I love." ■

PUSH FOR YOUR TUSH

For more info on the family-friendly five-kilometre walk, 10-kilometre run and one-kilometre toddler events scheduled in seven locations across the country from May through July, visit coloncancer.ca.

ANYONE 50 AND OLDER SHOULD BE SCREENED – REGARDLESS OF THEIR FAMILY HISTORY.

