

## Woman speaks out about rare life-threatening condition

Sonia Whyte-Croasdaile says what kept her alive was her faith, her husband and the tremendous care she received at Milton District Hospital

By Julie Slack  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

The arrival of spring marks an anniversary that Sonia Whyte-Croasdaile would just as soon forget.

It's that time, in 2011, when she went from a beauty pageant top-10 finisher to a burn victim in a hospital bed — nearly unrecognizable to friends and family.

Today, the upbeat Milton woman is back to routine, but she's not the same and never will be. Her good looks returned, but finding her good spirit, energy and drive has been difficult.

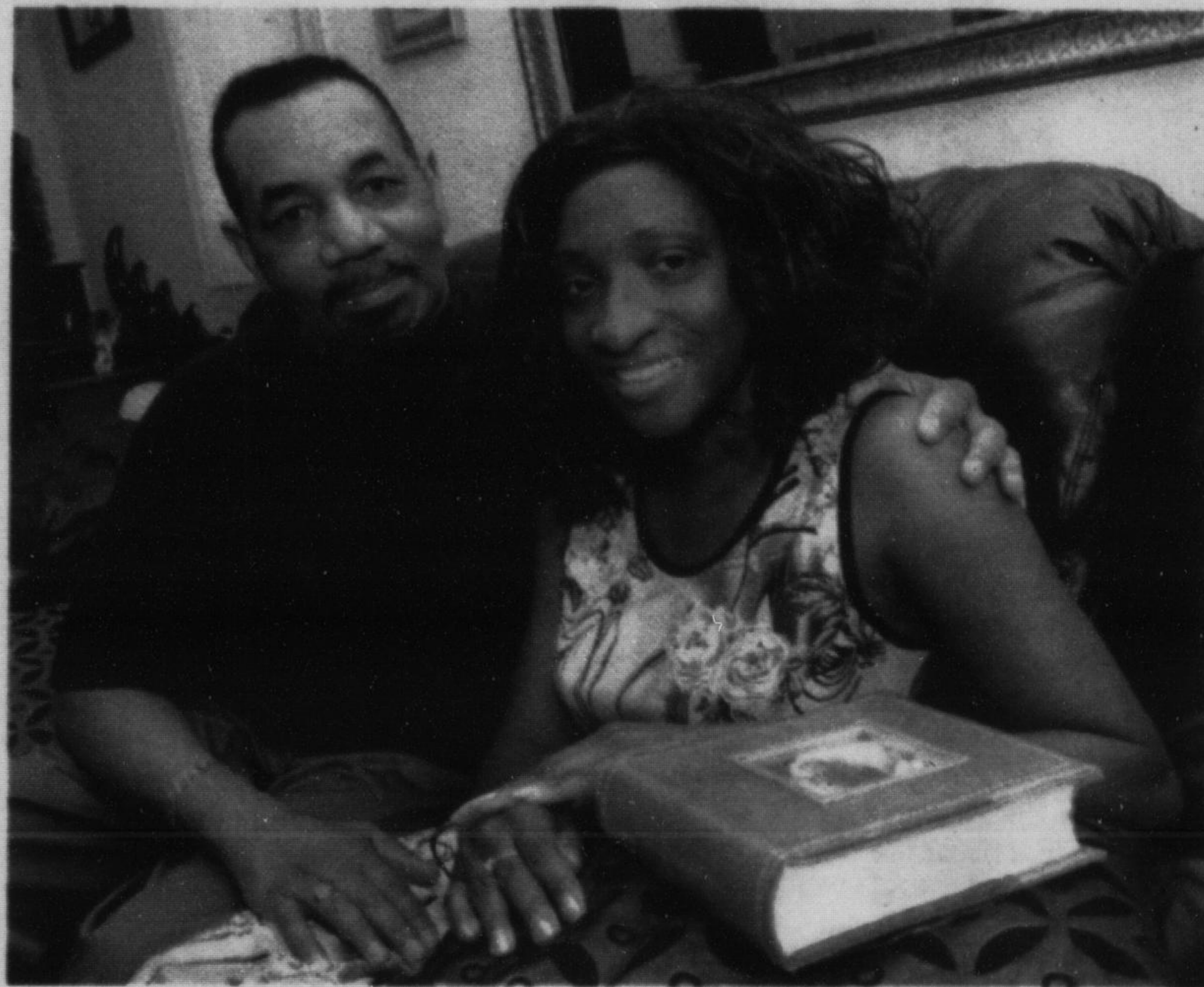
She was diagnosed with Stevens-Johnson Syndrome (SJS) and Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis (TEN), a severe, acute, life-threatening mucocutaneous reaction.

Daily, she struggles with pain that affects her skin, which is now hypersensitive to heat and cold. Her feet are sensitive to everything and feel best swathed in cozy flip-flop style slippers. Her eyes are blinded by light — even indoors.

She went from being an avid gardener who describes herself as the "life of the party" to a fragile person with little energy who finds herself tired out after the slightest activity.

Her oral and genital mucous membranes are dry, and she has blurry vision sometimes because her eyes are also so dry.

SJS/TEN is a rare disorder that is difficult to diagnose — especially when some doctors haven't even heard of it before.



Sonia Whyte-Croasdaile has Stevens Johnson Syndrome (SJS) and Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis (TEN), a life threatening condition. She has started an online support group to help survivors like herself. Here, Whyte-Croasdaile with her husband Joseph Croasdaile in their Milton home. *Graham Paine / Milton Canadian Champion (Follow on Twitter @halton\_photog)*

In Whyte-Croasdaile's case, that's just what happened when her flu-like symptoms, facial swelling and burning eyes took her to Milton District Hospital's (MDH) emergency department. A day prior, she had sought assistance at a walk-in clinic and was prescribed eye drops for pink eye.

At MDH doctors didn't know what was causing her to suffer symptoms including: high fever, sores in her throat, cough, and burning skin.

Tender skin lesions began to appear over a period of hours. Eventually Whyte-Croas-

daile's entire body, with the exception of her knees, shins and calves, was covered in burns.

To an outsider, it appeared she had suffered first-degree burns from a fire or a chemical burn.

She also developed painful erosions of the mucous membranes which in Whyte-Croasdaile's case involved her lips, mouth, eyes, nasal cavity, urethra and more.

Eventually, the burns caused her skin to peel from her body. Photos taken during her hospital stay show how drastically it affected her.

She was practically unrecognizable to family members and friends.

Still, she managed to stay upbeat. She says the strength of her faith and the love of her husband Joseph Croasdaile — along with the staff at MDH — kept her alive.

MDH's Dr. Nathan Wong agreed Whyte-Croasdaile's case is one neither he nor the hospital has ever seen before.

"Not in my nine years as a physician have I seen this," he said, adding he hopes he never sees SJS/TEN again. "It was so bad that we were very worried and kept her in the ICU."

"It came so quickly and she got sick so quickly and so severely," he said. "It's one of the worst skin illnesses I've ever seen."

He credits Whyte-Croasdaile's sunny outlook on her recovery.

"She was really positive throughout the entire time," he added. "With the amount of skin involvement it would have been easy for her to get down, but she never did."

He said the hospital's treatment of her was not out of the ordinary.

"The nursing care, the staff, they're the ones who are in contact with her, and she was influenced by the type of nursing she received," he said.

Whyte-Croasdaile said what impressed her at MDH, which she calls a gem of a hospital, was that doctors didn't pretend to know what they were treating. Because they had never seen it before, they were open to listening to others and were more than willing to research to find treatments.

"They did not take an 'I know it all' attitude," she said, noting they embarked on personal research to figure out her case. "They took on an 'I will research this on my own' attitude."

"I was not just a number, I was a person," she added. "I believe I would have died at another hospital."

"We have a gold mine here in Milton." Eventually, a skin tissue sample from her



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