

# Saying goodbye

Terminally ill patients,  
families travel similar paths

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

Like many terminally ill patients, Sharon Collier-Large seemed to choose the moment of her death.

Somewhere between hanging on for a last visit with her family and waiting for them to leave her room so they wouldn't witness her passing, she let go.

"I don't think my mom would have died in front of me," said Shannon Collier, whose mother had been in a coma leading up to her death last September.

Mrs. Collier-Large's death and her journey through breast cancer weren't unique. She and her family, more or less, followed the same route travelled by countless terminally ill patients.

Shock, anger, resiliency, denial, hope, despair, pain, courage, support, resourcefulness, selfishness, love — they tried on and discarded each emotion in turn.

In the end, Mrs. Collier, a Richmond Hill mother, wife, teacher and Girl Guide leader, embraced dignity.

"We didn't break any new ground," said Ms Collier, who hopes her mother's story will inspire others.

At the same time, she praised her mom as an unbelievable fighter.

"She managed to pack 85 years of living into 56 short years. Never quitting, not even at the end, she managed to inspire and impress everyone around her," she said.

"She took the hand that was dealt her and played to win. I am proud to be her daughter. I am proud to carry her genes. I hope I, too, will live my life by the same rules — never give up, never give negative a chance, control your future and learn from your past."

Ms Collier was 16, her older sister Jennifer 19, when her mother was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1991 at the age of 44.

"I don't think they called it breast cancer at the time. She went for a routine mammogram and there was a problem with her lymph nodes," she said.

Although she and her mother were always close, Ms Collier was still reeling from the recent break-up of her parents' marriage.

"I wasn't very supportive. I was in denial. I was a rebel as a teenager and I thought this doesn't happen to people like me. She was a strong woman, so for her to be sick, she wasn't allowed to get sick," she said.

"I wasn't mad at her, I was mad at cancer.

Why my mom? She never did anything to anybody. I was resentful. I had this rebellious lifestyle I had to curb for a while."

Those are typical reactions to serious illness, a time of upheaval in the lives of patients and their families, said Jack Knight, a Newmarket psychotherapist.

In the case of a person with a terminal illness, as opposed to the sudden death of a loved one, the process of loss starts from the point of the diagnosis.

"What you are experiencing is the loss of the life that could have been," Mr. Knight said.

"There is no cookie-cutter approach but there are many usual ways of grieving. No matter what the age of the person who has had a loss, it's very much a process in which each of us has to deal with the loss in our own way. Eventually, I like to focus beyond the loss to celebrating the life of the person lost."

Initially, her mother's illness seemed like a minor health concern, Ms Collier said.

After treatment, Mrs. Collier-Large threw herself back into life.

She married her second husband, Don, in 1994. The couple participated in royal Scottish country dancing, even belonging to a demonstration team.

For two years running, Mrs. Collier-Large was acting chairperson of the annual Tartan Ball at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto.

She belonged to a quilting group, a weekly bridge league, played golf, travelled, taught at Richmond Hill High School and took part in many other activities.

They were activities she refused to forego when the cancer returned five years after her original diagnosis.

"She was clean for five years so it was like it was not big deal," Ms Collier said.

"It wasn't serious. She ducked the bullet. My sister and I were in denial that it was over. My mom said, 'You're never clear, it could come back.'"

Through a mastectomy, chemotherapy, radiation and drug cocktails, Ms Collier said her mom kept on, always with a positive attitude and her wicked sense of humour.

"She was totally upbeat, even when she was really sick. She was more worried about making others happy. A lot of people didn't even know she was sick," she said.

"She thought she could beat it. 'Just cut it out of me. I beat it once, I know I can beat it again.' After the mastectomy, she was 100-per-cent mom."

Unfortunately, Mrs. Collier-Large's busy oncologist failed to recognize what turned out to be classic symptoms that the cancer had metastasized, or spread, to her brain.



Shannon Collier of Richmond Hill holds a photograph of her mother, Sharon, who died of breast cancer last fall.

The family later lodged a complaint with the College of Physicians and Surgeons, which found the physician was overburdened with too many patients.

In May 2002, Mrs. Collier-Large and her husband were participating in a dance convention in New York when she decided to return to her hotel room for a nap.

She woke up in the middle of a seizure and was paralysed down one side. She tried to use the phone but was unable to, so she dragged herself into the hall.

After being treated at a hospital in Connecticut, Mrs. Collier-Large was brought to Sunnybrook, where she learned she had an untreatable brain tumour.

"Inoperable and left hopeless, my mother did the unthinkable. She persevered," Ms Collier said.

She kept buying plane tickets and taking vacations. She continued to dance when she could, resting when she couldn't. Unable to reach her at home one day, I discovered her on the golf course, barely getting through six holes, but playing anyway.

Despite all her efforts, Mrs. Collier-Large's condition continued to deteriorate.

Shortly after travelling to British Columbia last summer to help her step-son celebrate his 40th birthday, she was admitted to Hill House Hospice in Richmond Hill, where she would spend her final days.

However, when she learned her daugh-

ters wanted to participate in the Weekend to End Breast Cancer, a two-day, 60-kilometre fundraiser, she got the ball rolling by e-mailing everyone she knew to raise money.

Sept. 21, her daughters visited their mother, now in a coma, after completing the walkathon to tell her about the event.

After the women and their step-father left, Mrs. Collier-Large died.

"I told her about the walk. I said I loved her and I was proud of her," Ms Collier said.

"I went home. Just as I put my head on the pillow, the phone rang. They called to say she had passed away."

Ms Collier admits she worries the disease that robbed her mother of life could some day strike her.

So, she thinks about what she eats, if she's getting enough sleep, if stress is affecting her, whether air pollution or something else is taking its toll.

"My mom didn't think about any of that stuff. Got cancer a couple of times, kicked its ass a couple of times, lived her life without a single doubt, to the nth degree of no regrets," Ms Collier said.

"I don't want to live my life burdened by the what-ifs of cancer. I want to live it like my mom did. If I get cancer, then I get cancer. But I deal with it standing up, not laying down."

"She may have died from cancer, but she lived for everything else. That's her legacy."

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