

# GARRY'S JOURNEY

## FROM ACCEPTING DEATH TO EMBRACING A NEW LIFE

Last year, Garry Hanwell was saying goodbye to his family in preparation for a medically-assisted death, the last resort in his relentless battle with skin cancer. Today, he's planting a new garden and celebrating 70 years of marriage.

For decades, Garry Hanwell and his wife ran a cottage resort near Algonquin Park. It was their dream job. Garry worked long days in the sun taking care of the property and its guests. He would still be doing it now if he were physically able. Today, aged 86, Garry is grateful to be working on his garden at his Orillia, ON home instead. It's a small but significant opportunity he never would've imagined having following the ordeal that he has endured over the past two years.

After being diagnosed with cutaneous squamous cell carcinoma (cSCC), an aggressive and common form of skin cancer, in May of 2018, Garry underwent three surgeries and several rounds of radiation. Unfortunately, the cancer continued to spread, and he was in incredible pain. The 24-hour care he required had been hard on his wife, Dorothy, and their daughters, Deb, Janette and Karen, as well.



## THE INVISIBLE BURDEN OF CARE

Through it all, Garry's daughters were ready to keep fighting for their father for as long as he was prepared to fight. Deb and Janette supported him with daily care and helped to manage his treatment. Along the way, they learned some valuable lessons about being caregivers. "You have to accept that you're going to go a little crazy," Deb says. "I recognized that it was absolutely necessary to take time for myself."

By early 2019, no amount of care was enough. The pain was so unbearable that Garry sought medical assistance in dying. But as Garry lay on his deathbed in late February, Deb received an unexpected phone call. On the other end of the line was Dr. Marcus Butler, a medical oncologist with Princess Margaret Hospital in To-

ronto, with a promise of hope. "I was in a daze. I didn't know what to make of it all," recalls Deb. "We were in the middle of having all the grandchildren come to say their last goodbyes, and then suddenly there's this phone call. I answered the phone and he told me that my dad was an ideal candidate for a clinical study."

## A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO TREATING SKIN CANCERS

Garry's cancer is a type that mutates readily and rapidly, making it exceptionally difficult to treat by traditional methods. But it's also particularly responsive to a new class of immunotherapies that has caught the attention of oncologists like Dr. Butler. "Immune checkpoint inhibitors have been in

clinical trials for other cancers since the late nineties,” says Dr. Butler. “We’ve been using this technology for cSCC since the mid-2010s, starting with clinical trials.” However, although immunotherapy has been shown to shrink tumours and prolong survival for patients for whom other treatments have failed, not every patient can benefit from it, cautions Dr. Butler. “It is exciting and unique, but we do need to better understand which specific patients would benefit the most from this treatment.”

Though Garry had made his peace with dying, he and his family were willing to hang onto this glimmer of hope. “I talked to my dad and he said, ‘Well, I’d really rather not die.’ So, that very week, we went to Toronto to see Dr. Butler,” says Deb. “Two weeks after that he had his first infusion. We could see, right from the very first day of treatment, that there were changes.”

The change was so rapid that it was hard for Deb to believe she had her father back, and they could once again look forward with hope. “After his fourth infusion, just weeks after he had been on his deathbed, he went out and bought 24 cedar trees,” Deb says. “My dad has always been very strong and very handy. No rock has ever been too heavy for him to move. My daughter nicknamed him Superman years ago because of his physical strength, and that title has stuck. He still lives up to it today.”

## ON A PATH TO RECOVERY

The cedar trees are an apt metaphor for a future that previously seemed unattainable. Garry is still in awe of the change that has occurred. “It’s a second life I’ve been offered,” he says.



“I look forward to enjoying it. It’s a life that I was thinking I wouldn’t have. I’m looking forward to being outdoors in the nice weather, gardening and daily walks, being productive.”

Garry is also cherishing every extra day he has with Dorothy. Though the elaborate 70th anniversary party his family planned for them has been delayed due to COVID-19, Garry is happy to be able to look toward more family gatherings in the future.

Although cancer-free, he still lives with scars from his battle with skin cancer – both visible and invisible. A portion of his thigh had to be grafted to the affected area on his left cheek, leaving him with major disfigurement and speech problems. “People stare at him in public and their mouths drop open,” says Deb. “He’d always been a very good-looking man and now people look at him like he’s a monster. It’s really hard on him and it’s made him not want to go out. It’s very isolating.”

Fortunately, Garry was approved for corrective surgery in July. For all the optimism this surgery brings, however, it’s just another step in a very long journey. The hope is that Canadians diagnosed with cSCC

in the future won’t have nearly so far to go. “If Dad had been treated just three months earlier, he could have avoided both the radiation and the surgery,” Deb points out, underscoring the importance of receiving a prompt diagnosis from an oncologist or dermatologist.

## A NEW LIFE IN BLOOM

For patients like Garry, and especially for those who will be diagnosed in the future, we need to keep supporting innovation and expanding access to existing treatments. “With most cancers, we don’t even have the majority of patients successfully controlling their disease,” says Dr. Butler. “After seeing what a difference it makes when an effective new treatment becomes available, it’s clear that we need more development and innovation so that we can treat more patients with novel and effective medications.”

Watching him tending his yard and nurturing his cedar trees, the importance of this mission is obvious. Garry’s entire life has been a love affair with nature, and Canada’s vibrant summer provides a stark contrast to the isolation of his cancer journey. Whatever else happens, springtime always comes. And every patient in Canada deserves the opportunity to savour it.

Save Your Skin Foundation is dedicated to ensuring all skin cancer patients across Canada have access to the most accurate and up-to-date information about their illness, the support they need, and the best available care and treatments. Please visit [saveyourskin.ca](https://www.saveyourskin.ca) to find additional resources, seek support, or to learn more.