

A "Bright Spot" article by Joel Jacobson

Ostomy group opens up a new world

GEORGINA PENNY'S voice chokes as she presents a history of the Cape Breton chapter of the United Ostomy Association of Canada to the local group's 25th anniversary meeting.

Her emotion is understandable. Her late husband, Sam, founded the chapter in 1975. With Georgina's stalwart support, countless hours were devoted to the chapter's growth.

Georgina takes us back even further than 25 years, to 1953 when Sam was sick with bowel problems.

"He was thirty and had a colostomy" says Georgina. "He was virtually alone, no contact with another ostomate and little contact with doctors, who really knew little about it in those years."

In 1975, Sam made a call for help. He sought other ostomates to meet as a self-help group, thinking they all needed someone to talk with who was in the same predicament.

The first meeting attracted 60 people with ostomies (an operation that involves making an artificial opening in the body). No one knew anyone else but that quickly changed.

Eva Campbell attended that first meeting. She's missed only one since – when she was visiting a new ostomate in hospital on behalf of the association.

A slight woman, she's embarrassed when she's honoured as a charter member for devoting so much time and energy over the years.

Soon to be 80, Eva has mailed meeting notices, worked with the media and prepared food for meetings, even when it wasn't necessary, just because she thought there mightn't be enough.

Eva, who had a colostomy in 1967, calls the pre-association years "the dinosaur age".

She wouldn't leave home after the surgery, afraid her ostomy pouch would leak. "What would you say to someone who didn't know a thing about ostomies? I just did lots of nothing in those dark-age years."

When the Pennys started the Cape Breton chapter (two years after one began in Halifax) "they made a brand new world for me and so many others" says Campbell.

"I felt more secure. I could go out. I could have new surroundings."

In 1953, says Georgina, Sam's ostomy was protected by a rubber pouch with a

cage around it, held firm to the body by a belt. Sam bought his ostomy supplies through a catalogue and saw improvements in style and comfort as the years moved ahead.

In 1975, Glace Bay pharmacist Don Ferguson, who is also chairman of the board of Cape Breton Regional Hospital, became a founding member of the chapter. He isn't an ostomate but wanted to help provide supplies.

"I took courses in Montreal to gain knowledge" he says. "Yes, it helped my business, but it also helped people who needed service and had no one to offer it."

In its first year, the Cape Breton chapter concentrated on finding members and encouraging them to become officers.

"We had round table discussions about being an ostomate" says Georgina, who never had an ostomy but continued serving the chapter for several years after Sam passed away in 1985.

"People shared their experiences. Fears and shyness were relaxed. We learned to laugh at our foibles."

In 1977, St. Rita's Hospital in Sydney hired enterostomal nurse Lynn Tremblett part time, "until we could convince officials that a trained, full time person could help before and after surgery, and that there were enough of us to need one," says Georgina.

The chapter's first newsletter was published in 1977, with Sam as editor and Georgina the typist.

"We raised money through raffles, bake sales, grocery tape collections and donations. We helped new ostomates buy supplies. We provided funds to send child ostomates to summer camp and we helped our ostomy nurse attend conferences."

Today the chapter has about 60 members, with between 20 and 30 attending each meeting.

"Close to 100 ostomy surgeries are performed in Cape Breton each year, some reversed," says Georgina, "so we aren't getting lots of new members".

Those not joining are missing out. They don't share product knowledge, ostomy experiences, and, of course, the comfort of meeting others with the same conditions.

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