

March 15, 2007 Peachland View Article on Brad Lazar, Town's groundskeeper who died in March 2005.

"Do Pesticides Cause Cancer?: Wife of town's former gardener on a journey to discover the reason why her husband died of cancer"

By Dave Preston (Originally published in the Peachland View).

Brad's death seemed to come fast.

For the hundreds of people who turned out for the Lazar family fundraiser in March, 2005 and for Brad Lazar's funeral three months later, Brad's illness seemed to take over with blinding speed.

Two years after the fundraiser, Brad's wife Debbie is stepping forward with the results of her 18-month quest to find out what caused cancer in her physically fit, mentally strong, town groundskeeper husband. Debbie believes she has found the answer to why non-smoking Brad, a former Golden Gloves boxing champion, contracted lung cancer that metastasized through his body with the speed of a left hook. Now with the help of doctors, politicians, a lawyer and many others, Debbie Lazar is on a mission to educate the public about the danger of pesticides and to urge municipalities to ban them.

"There was a time when I couldn't stop crying and the kids made me go to a counsellor," said Debbie. "I wasn't going to make it," Debbie said. "I sat on the couch and just cried." The pain of losing her husband continued for three months until, one day, Debbie found herself sitting at her dining table in Rose Valley, where she moved with son Derek and daughter Amber shortly after Brad's death. "I was thinking, what is the reason for taking him like that?" said Debbie. "Why?" "It suddenly popped into my head... Deb, don't you know?" said Debbie.

In her closet was Brad's pesticide book, a manual and notebook the groundskeeper had used while working for the District of Peachland since 1996. Debbie retrieved it and enlisted the help of her kids. "We started digging and we started realizing there's something there," said Debbie.

Grower's Supply is where the district got a lot of its supplies. Debbie phoned and asked what the town had ordered for pesticides in the nine years her husband worked for the town. "The next day I got the list and started researching," said Debbie. "I realized at that point there was a connection."

The connection was as plain to Debbie as the spectacular hanging baskets Brad was famous for in downtown Peachland: a link existed between the pesticides Brad used and the cancer that took him.

It wasn't easy for Debbie to convince people what she felt could be true. "I'm a housewife trying to prove something that has never been proven," said Debbie. "A lot of people said, oh you'll never prove that."

Regardless, the quest began and there were no more days crying on the couch. "I had to get out of bed and get my day rolling and go on," said Debbie. "If this is what he died from, I want to be able to save other lives."

There were nights the canker sores in Brad's mouth were so painful he would make a trip to the dentist to get freezing just so he could eat supper. Brad first went to the doctor about the sores in December 1999 and, for the next six years, the sores made it difficult to eat. They didn't come one a time, but in groups -- on his gums, his tongue, the roof of his mouth.

The cankers were a nuisance to Brad, said Debbie, but viewed along with the rashes, the sores, the aches and the pains, they may have been a sign something was wrong. In January 2005, Brad went to the doctor with a headache. One month later, he was diagnosed with cancer. On May 16 2005, Brad died.

There is no question cancer took Brad Lazar but could pesticides have caused the cancer? To answer the question, Debbie Lazar had to roll up her sleeves. Jerry Blake is a lawyer in Victoria and in addition to helping Debbie deal with the Workmen's Compensation Board, he put her to work researching.

"He said, you're right, Deb. There are huge connections there," said Debbie. About a year ago, Debbie sat down with Elsie Lemke, Peachland's chief administrative officer, and explained what she was doing. "I said, this is not about suing anybody," said Debbie. "She said, whatever you need, we'll do our best."

If Debbie needed a paper, a date, information about what Brad used or what he wore for protective clothing, Peachland provided it. "I had everything dissected about Brad, doctors reports, everything," said Debbie. Then Blake put Debbie in contact with Dr. Margaret Sears, who is a doctor of philosophy and holds a masters degree in chemical engineering.

Since 2001, Sears has been involved in pesticides advocacy, assisting the city of Ottawa's Health Department Advisory Committee and the Coalition for a Healthy Ottawa with a campaign for a bylaw banning cosmetic uses of pesticides in that city. "Dr. Sears wanted to know every single detail," said Debbie. "When did I wash (Brad's) clothes, did they go into the hamper, did they go right into the washer."

MLA Rick Thorpe (Okanagan-Westside) told Debbie that if she ever needed anything to give him a call. "So I did," said Debbie. "He gave me one of his secretaries. He said, when you hit a wall, give her a call." MP Stockwell Day's office also pitched in to help cut through government red tape so Debbie could get the information she needed.

What Debbie put together was a detailed history of her husband, his involvement with pesticides and his medical history. "I tried everything when he had those canker sores, making bread without yeast, we tried changing his whole diet, everything," said Debbie. For skin problems and rashes, doctors would prescribe ointments but nothing seemed to work. "He was just a really strong person and he thought when he had the canker sores, oh this isn't going to drag me down," said Debbie.

"I get one little canker sore on the end of my tongue and I'm complaining about it," said Debbie. "They were down his throat." "He didn't go to the dentist for a long time because he couldn't handle anyone poking around his mouth," said Debbie. "He never complained about anything."

When it came to pesticide use, Brad would have assumed that what he was using was safe, according to Debbie. Brad received his pesticide applicators license in March 1997 and took the proper precautions, said Debbie. "He's the only one that held the applicator's certificate," said Debbie. "He mixed it, which is the most toxic part."

There were days Brad would get dressed in a special suit, gloves, hat and respirator, but there were times when the special gear wasn't necessary, according to Debbie. "To do the park downtown, when he's weed and feeding, he's not going to put all his gear on because it's not required," said Debbie.

After a year and a half of research, Debbie believes she found the answer she sought. "From what I believe to be true, from studies and research, Brad's death was a direct result of his exposure to pesticides," said Debbie.

Pesticides are any substance or mixture of substances intended to prevent, destroy, repel or mitigate any pest. They include insecticides, herbicides and fungicides. There are thousands of chemicals used in the manufacture of pesticides, sold under countless labels and trade names.

The most used herbicide in the world is Roundup, a product manufactured by Monsanto, and reportedly the top-selling agrichemical of all time. Sold under a number of trade names, Monsanto's number-one herbicide contains the active ingredient glyphosate -- only one component that makes up the chemical cocktail and the only ingredient listed on containers.

In his six years of spraying Peachland parks, Brad used a number of products containing glyphosate. He also used weed and feeds containing 2,4-D and compounds with the active ingredients dimethoate, dichloroprop, mecoprop, chlorpyrifos and diazinon.

Debbie has only been able to put together the list of active ingredients because chemical manufacturers consider additives in the mix proprietary information. In Canada, pesticide manufacturers are not required to list what are officially called formulants -- nor are they required to test them.

"Pesticides are one of the few chemical products on the market where the only ingredient that has to be disclosed are the so-called active ingredient," said Dr. Warren Bell, an MD from Salmon Arm and founding president of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. "The rest of the preparation -- surfactants, emulsifiers, dispersants -- collectively called formulants, are left off the label," said Bell.

In her research, Debbie wanted to know what else was in Roundup besides glyphosate and she phoned Monsanto directly to get an answer. "Monsanto asked what I wanted the list for," said Debbie, who explained her

situation to the company. "They said we're not giving that information. It's a trade secret and we're not telling you that."

"Roundup's formulant, a surfactant, makes the glyphosate in the preparation horribly toxic to amphibians like frogs, even though Roundup is supposed to just be a herbicide," said Bell.

The health concerns of pesticides are well documented and chemicals found in them have been linked to a number of health issues. According to the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides:

A study published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute finds that household and garden pesticide use can increase the risk of childhood leukemia as much as seven-fold.

A study published by the American Cancer Society finds an increased risk for Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL) for people exposed to common herbicides and fungicides, particularly the weed killer mecoprop (MCP). People exposed to glyphosate (found in Roundup®) are 2.7 times more likely to develop NHL. 75 out of all 99 human studies on lymphoma and pesticides find a link between the two.

Four peer-reviewed studies demonstrate the ability of glyphosate-containing herbicides to cause genetic damage to DNA (mutagenicity), even at very low concentration levels.

"I think what we're seeing in our whole population is ill health because of the chemicals we are spreading through the environment," said Dr. Sears, who was reached at her home outside Ottawa Monday. Sears has worked with Debbie for more than a year now and she has gotten to know Brad.

"Society is losing out by losing a really fine man like that," said Sears. "The chemicals he used could very well have been a contributing factor to his cancer," said Sears. "Brad was exhibiting symptoms that very well could have been from pesticide exposure."

Dr. Sears, Dr. Bell and a host of other professionals and lay people are working towards the ban of cosmetic uses of pesticides in Canada, something that began in Hudson, Quebec in 1991. Hudson's bylaw 270 was the first to restrict the use of pesticides in Canada. A 10-year legal challenge from pesticide manufacturers ensued, which eventually went to the Supreme Court. There, in a unanimous decision, the court upheld Hudson's pesticide bylaw. Today, restrictions or outright bans on pesticides are in place in 127 municipalities across the country, including the entire province of Quebec.

In the whirlwind that has become her life, Debbie Lazar became an advocate with the Canadian Cancer Society, going from one municipality to another, telling Brad's story and encouraging elected officials to ban pesticides. "We want people to know this is causing cancer," said Debbie. She has been to Kamloops and Kelowna (both considering pesticide-banning bylaws) and will be off to the Kootenay's shortly, to spread the message of the danger of pesticides.

In addition to being a pesticide-banning advocate, Debbie wants the Workmen's Compensation Board to set up a new category in its books for pesticide applicators who have been stricken with cancer.

Debbie has one other goal, a big one, and one that is near and dear to her heart: seeing a bylaw enacted in Peachland banning pesticides in the town where her husband tended the gardens. Mayor Graham Reid said Tuesday he hasn't heard any complaints from the public about pesticides. He said it is standard for the town to see what other Central Okanagan municipalities do in regards to new policies and try to piggy-back on new bylaws.