

Reflecting on Ten Years of Making a Difference for Young Women Across Canada

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My daughter Shanna (Shan) was diagnosed late with metastatic breast cancer in early 2005. Shan's symptoms were misdiagnosed repeatedly by medical professionals and the cancer had time to spread. Despite her positive outlook and the predictions of hope, Shan lost her life to the disease. Shan was only 24.

As a nurse and health promotion specialist, the issue of breast cancer in young women had not come across my desk. Encouraged by colleagues and experts in the field I was asked to consider using my nursing skills and talents to fill the information gap in breast cancer awareness for young women. I took on the commitment to support my grief journey and make a difference for young women following in Shan's footsteps.

With colleague and community support, I established Team Shan Breast Cancer Awareness for Young Women (Team Shan) in Shan's memory in 2006. Using public health and social marketing best practice guidelines, Team Shan planned, implemented and evaluated a multi-faceted breast cancer awareness campaign for young women in the London and Oxford County region of Ontario in the fall of 2007. Our goal was to reach young women with their breast cancer risk and breast health information.

Young women responded positively to the campaign and asked for more. They thanked Team Shan and appreciated not being forgotten in breast cancer messaging. The project Research Consultant concluded that *"Young women need information and awareness about their risk of breast cancer. Knowledge of symptoms and self help strategies provide young women with the opportunity for self detection and earlier medical diagnosis. The multi-faceted approach undertaken by Team Shan addresses these needs."*

The successful awareness campaign was replicated in 2008. Recommendations encouraged more awareness campaigns targeting young women and requests came in from other regions of Ontario and Alberta. Team Shan registered as a national charity early in 2010. Team Shan's mission is to educate the public, health care professionals and young women about early detection, risk reduction and prevention of breast cancer.

Purpose, perhaps my destiny, evolved over the next few years. I developed a passion for the work following my loss. The development of an effective breast cancer awareness model has helped close the gap in breast cancer awareness and breast health information for young women.

Over the years, Team Shan has created a health promotion niche on college and university campuses across the country...coast to coast to coast!

Team Shan has facilitated successful multi-faceted awareness campaigns with consistent evaluation results in Ontario, across the Prairies and into British Columbia. The campaigns incorporate Shan's Story, breast cancer facts, risk factors, symptoms and self-care strategies targeting young women. Young women have understood their risk, taken action and informed friends and family about their breast cancer risk and breast health.

Team Shan has been realizing our goals for earlier detection and improved outcomes for young women diagnosed with breast cancer. Young women diagnosed early because of Team Shan messaging have thanked Team Shan for the gift of life e.g., *"I thank Team Shan for running programs in Shan's memory, for reminding me that breast cancer is not just a disease of older women. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I have been given the gift of life, a renewal of sorts, and an opportunity to see life as a spectacular gift."*

Over the past ten years, I have had the opportunity to facilitate campus marketing and media campaigns, speak at community events, in high schools and on college and university campuses from St. John's to Victoria and north to Yellowknife. The reception and impact has been consistent and overwhelmingly positive.

I have also had the opportunity to share our work with colleagues in the adolescent and young adult (AYA) cancer community. I have educated peers and health care providers at the provincial, national and international level. Team Shan has been acknowledged for exhibiting leadership in developing a communication strategy to reach young women, a population at risk of developing breast cancer.

I have participated on provincial AYA cancer projects, supported national efforts and written extensively on Team Shan work and my personal journey.

You work hard to get through the grief, but you never get over the loss. Team Shan is a positive outcome to Shan's death. Having made a positive difference to young women following in Shan's footsteps has been a very rewarding part of my nursing career and personal grief journey...all in Shan's memory.

