

THE NOTEBOOK

# Reporter's backgrounder: First, a neighbour. Then, a powerful inspiration

Sep 20, 2008 04:30 AM

DEBRA BLACK

STAFF REPORTER

Sometimes as a reporter you meet extraordinary people, both on and off the job. Such was the case with Steve Silversides, my neighbour and the partner of a friend of mine, Liliane Vidicek. The two had been high school sweethearts, had gone their separate ways and then reunited eight years ago. Theirs was a love story written by the gods. They wanted everyone to share their joy, love and passion. And they both taught me a lot about friendship and generosity of spirit.

I still remember one afternoon when Steve for no reason showed up at my door with a container of tomato and sausage sauce. He looked kind of sheepish, as if he was embarrassed by the fact that he loved to cook, and quickly said: "I thought your son Daniel might like this. It's my homemade sauce. My kids love it. I had leftovers." My son, of course, gobbled up every last bit of it.

And that's the memory that I returned to when I read an email from Liliane last weekend that Steve had died. It all seemed too soon and such a tragic waste. It was only in March – Easter weekend – that Liliane had come to my door in tears to tell me Steve had cancer. We were supposed to have dinner together that Sunday night, but plans were cancelled for obvious reasons. Steve would be laid up for a while, she said quietly. The cause of his cancer: exposure to asbestos on the job.

Steve, who had just turned 54, was one of the fittest guys I knew. He routinely played hockey, worked out and was extremely health conscious. Only days before he was taken to the emergency room because he couldn't breathe he had been playing hockey and gone to the gym.

The last time I saw Steve he was sitting quietly talking to friends at a surprise birthday party Liliane had thrown for him at the end of July. In a couple of weeks he was to have surgery to have a tumour removed from his kidney. He had been on an experimental drug to stop the cancer that had permeated his lungs, but the drug hadn't worked. He never recovered from the surgery.

It was because of Steve that I decided to research a story on the dangers of asbestos exposure and cancer rates. It was a kind of tribute. You see Steve, as a young man, was a boilermaker, working across northern Ontario. He routinely worked with asbestos without a mask or other precautions or protection. It was the early 1970s and no one was concerned about the havoc asbestos could wreak on the body.

Today, thousands of Canadians are dying from cancer due to asbestos exposure on the job. Sadly, many cases go unreported. And despite calls for a national registry, both from Canadian and international health and labour officials, Ottawa refuse to do anything about it. What's more, Canada continues to mine and export asbestos to the developing world, where very few precautions or protections for workers exist.

Steve wasn't very happy about any of that. He wanted something to be done to protect other workers. He wanted his death to mean something. Hopefully it will.

Steve didn't live long enough to see the story I wrote on cancer deaths from asbestos and the mounting problem in Canada. But I know he would have been pleased that it ran and that *Star* readers were given an opportunity to learn about the growing epidemic in all of the construction trades.

Steve began his professional career with the Boilermakers Union 128 and was the business rep in Thunder Bay for many years. He moved to Toronto after reuniting with Liliane and did a number of other jobs for the union, including serving as a compensation and apprenticeship representative. He was well aware of the mounting problem of asbestos exposure and cancer deaths. He often dealt with those cases in his work.

At his memorial this week, his family and friends celebrated him and his memory; as did his colleagues from the boilermakers union, many of who were in tears. But Steve did not die in vain. Because of him, I hope many more of us will think about the unnecessary deaths that are occurring in Canada, the United States and in the developing world because of asbestos exposure. Hopefully, someone will pick up the gauntlet and try to do something about it.