

STORIES OF LOVE AND LIFE AT STEDMAN COMMUNITY HOSPICE

Bert Barker's example inspired his family during and after his life

Bert Barker had many gifts, but his ability to connect with others and converse with ease topped the list. A social being and born entrepreneur, Bert was decisive and communicative in all his actions, things for which his family had a great appreciation, especially towards the end of his life.

Whether he was greeting customers from Stan's Variety Plaza – his business in Brantford's north end, cheering on his beloved Cincinnati Reds, or chatting with a friend on the phone, Bert exuded enthusiasm, always making those around him feel valued and important.

A family man above all else, Bert was a champion for his entire family, including nieces, nephews, cousins and their children.

He was an avid supporter, often attending their sporting endeavours where the language was peppered with his cheers, congratulations, and encouragement, and quite possibly, a few coaching tips.

"He was very principled, and led by example," says daughter Heather.

"Dad was a patient, natural teacher who held my brother Aaron and I to high standards, all underpinned with strong core values and doing the right thing always."

"He would be the first to extend forgiveness, when it was needed, as long as we learned from our mistakes," Heather adds.

In leading by example, Bert also instilled a spirit of volunteerism in Heather and Aaron as well as his granddaughter Hayley, serving his community through organizations like the Ontario Hockey Association, the Kiwanis Club and Participation House.

For a family that was given so much in the way of love, encouragement and example, the diagnosis of an aggressive form of cancer for their lifelong hero was devastating.

Bert was determined to fight as best he could.



Bert and Sonja Barker are pictured here in 2017 with their children: Heather and her husband Guy, granddaughter Hayley, Aaron and his partner Julie, and family pets Wisner, Torch and Sam.

For Sonja, Bert's wife, it was especially hard – the two started dating back at Burford District High School when she was 14 and they had been married for 57 years.

A few months after diagnosis, when doctors indicated the cancer was too aggressive to respond to treatment, Bert's hospice journey began, with a palliative care team providing support through the Community Outreach Program.

"With the tremendous support of the outreach team, we managed things from home for two weeks," says Sonja.

During that time, Bert, the consummate organizer, called around to his friends and extended family to get things in order, to say his thank yous and good byes, to make pallbearer requests and funeral plans – in short, to prepare for his death, so his family wouldn't have to.

"He was selfless that way," says Heather.

"Bert knew when it was time to go to the Hospice," Sonja shared. He said "It's time." He made that decision himself."

"He did that for us," says Heather.

Bert Barker did not want the weight of that decision to be placed on his family.

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On October 30, they celebrated his birthday at home with his favourite dishes before moving him to hospice the following day. It was a difficult day, but the family knew it was the right decision.

"We could just be there for him, and others were now doing the heavy lifting," says Sonja.

Bert's son Aaron, a Brantford Firefighter, has visited Stedman Community Hospice many times in a professional capacity.

"I always knew it was a wonderful place, but until my dad came here, I had no idea just how incredible a place it truly is. They cared for all of us," Aaron shared.

Bert lost his battle with cancer on December 1, 2023, with his family by his side.

After some time had passed, Sonja decided to participate in the Hospice's 10-week group support meeting series for individuals who have lost a spouse or partner.

"The hardest part was coming through that front door," says Sonja.

"But the supportive care staff was wonderful, and because of them and other participants who were going through a similar experience, it was incredibly helpful. I am so glad I found the courage to be there. I made some good friends from the experience who I get together with and chat with on a regular basis. That was a gift and not something that I had anticipated," says Sonja.

Since Bert passed away, Hayley, his only grandchild, has been volunteering at the hospice while continuing her studies at Laurier University.



Bert Barker was an avid sports fan who frequently attended national league games with his family, always ready to display the colours of his favourite team, the Cincinnati Reds. Bert is pictured here at a Toronto Blue Jays game with members of his family.



During Bert's time at Stedman Community Hospice he delighted in being able to spend time with his siblings, all of whom reside outside of the area but often came to spend time with their brother during his final days. Bert is pictured here in November 2022 in a hospice family room with Ann, Dan, Mary, and Bette.

"As a young person who has lost three grandparents, it has been hard for me with friends not understanding, but through volunteering and the training I've received, I am now able to support friends who are dealing with a loss. I've been able to refer friends to the Hospice's grief & bereavement support programs."

Heather is now volunteering in a leadership role as a member of the Board of Trustees that oversees Stedman Community Hospice.

To express their gratitude for the care they received, the Barker family and friends, numbering 28 members strong, came together for the 20th Anniversary of the Hike or Bike for Hospice fundraiser in May of 2024. Their team, Bert's Big Red Machine, was named in honour of his favourite baseball team. This year they will be back and serving as official ambassadors for the event.

"We are so honoured to be the ambassadors for this wonderful event," says Heather, "and Dad would be so proud."

"Bert will be up there, being our #1 cheerleader," Sonja smiled.