

Project Fights Cancer, One Dress at a Time

Helen Sweet started the Brides' Project with two goals in mind: to make planning a wedding a little less expensive and self-indulgent, and to help those living with cancer.

SOPHIE TOLIAS

Helen Sweet was first touched by cancer on Christmas Eve, 1976. That night, she found out that her best friend Lisa had lost her leg to bone cancer. A year and a half later, Lisa lost her life at the tender age of nine.

"She would have been Maid of Honour at my wedding," Helen says, expressing how close they were.

It was in this little girl's memory that Helen founded the Brides' Project — as well as in the memory of family and friends she has lost to cancer since. But it is also in celebration.

"I celebrate with others who have survived," she writes on her website, "and hope to hear of many more survivors than losses."

On June 1, 2004, when Helen returned from her honeymoon, the Brides' Project was born.

Twice a bride, Helen understands the difficulty of planning a wedding on a budget. The project provides brides with cost-conscious options and a chance to contribute to the fight against cancer.

Based out of her Victorian Broadview Avenue home, the project receives gown donations from bridal salons, designers, and brides. Room after room, the walls are lined with over 500 designer wedding gowns ranging from \$100 to \$1250.

While the project's slogan

is "fighting cancer, one dress at a time," they also sell shoes, veils, tiaras, jewelry, and other wedding accessories.

Brides are encouraged to donate their dress back after their big day. One dress has been back in and out three times this year, and is on its way back again.

"It's like [the Sisterhood of] the Traveling Pants," Helen laughs, with a circle of women now connected because of one dress. Having each left a note with the dress when they returned it, these women still remain in contact with each other.

Photographs and notes passing on wishes are commonly found clipped on the gowns at the Brides' Project.

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All profits are donated to the Canadian Cancer Society, the Breast Cancer Foundation, and Camp Quality, which offers camping experiences and support to children receiving treatment or in remission and their families.

Last year, the Brides' Project raised \$30,000, and also donated to Movember, a foundation that supports Prostate Cancer Canada.

This year, with a \$40,000 goal, Helen wants to add Wellspring to the list — an organization offering support, wellness, and recreation programs to cancer patients, survivors, and their families, free of charge.

Even after an 11-year career as a management consultant, it's no surprise that Helen's path led her here. A minister's daughter,



Helen Sweet is driven by passion to make the project succeed

Helen started volunteering in the church at the age of five. While attending university, and in grad school as Vice President of Student Services, she organized fundraisers for groups such as United Way, volunteered at the birth control center, and was a rape crisis counsellor.

At the management consultant company she worked at, Helen reignited the social committee, involving them in events like the Ride for Heart and the AIDS Walk.

When she was laid off in 2007, it was apparent that the Brides' Project would get her full attention.

"I realized how much I loved spending time doing this," Helen says. "It became sort of like my baby and everything I had I gave to it."

Recalling an article she read recently, Helen explains if Terry Fox were diagnosed today it is unlikely his leg would have to be amputated and his chance of survival would be much greater.

"So what people are doing in terms of raising money and doing research ... it's having an impact," Helen says. Thinking of Lisa again, she says, "If she was diagnosed today, it would be a different ballgame."



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