

Interview with one of the original founders of Caregivers Nova Scotia: Mary Elizabeth McLellan

There is a book I love by Rachel Naomi Remen, called "Kitchen Table Wisdom." I love the stories in this book, but I love its title most of all; for the image it conjures and how well it resonates. Maybe this is why, when I first heard Caregivers Nova Scotia's (CNS) origin story, "It was started by a group of women sitting around the kitchen table, who shared stories, supported each other, became aware of caregiver needs and prompted a desire to support caregivers across NS." I tell this story often when speaking about CNS. I sought out Mary Elizabeth McLellan—caregiver, a founder of CNS, twice board member, presently in the last year of her second term, and Alzheimer support group leader for 12 years— to see if the story I tell is true. Mary said that was as good as a story as any and then she recalled a chain of events.

It began in 1998 when her mom broke her hip, went to restorative care from January to April, and then returned home. Mary, an only child and single with no children, thought she would be able to stay in her house in New Glasgow, keep her mom in her home, provide her care four days a week, and have homecare cover the rest. She quickly found out that she did not know the system; her plan was not adequate and she struggled to find the supports she needed to care for her mom in her own home. Her struggle had such a significant impact that she had a meeting with John Hamm (former Premier of NS) to share her story and advocate for services.

Mary was conscious of Halifax's Gail Bruhm's efforts to advocate for caregivers. It was shortly after Mary's appeal to government that Gale had secured funding to run focus groups with caregivers. Mary took part and helped organize the groups. Gail, Nan MacKenzie (deceased), and Mary met around a table, not necessarily a kitchen table, to plan another meeting with John Hamm. They worked on a grant application for the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. They received a grant of \$300,000 for three years and Caregivers NS was formed.

The long vision was to support all caregivers in NS no matter where they lived; to support them in a way that would make a difference in their story; to support in a way that may be outside the box of

traditional support; and to provide support services in a person- and caregiver-centered way. This is how we hope service is delivered and received and our focus remains on what the caregivers need.

Gail Bruhm became the first Executive Director of CNS and began with the essential building of networks from Halifax out. Mary said it was hard to be patient when she was so familiar with the rural caregivers' needs, but building a strong foundation in Halifax was essential to sustainability. In the early days, there were pockets of money to support a few programs in rural NS. Another success was that our first caregiver retreat was held at the Sisters of St. Martha's in Antigonish.

Mary shared a story of a caregiver who expressed that what they really needed was time with their loved one in the pool without the chaos of public swim. Mary and a couple of volunteers made this happen, securing the pool for a short time just for them, and having volunteers there to support in whatever way needed. They were able to support that caregiver in this way for five months and strong relationships were built.

Mary is pleased that CNS now has a Support Coordinator in all regions of the province. She dreams that one day there will be a house in various communities where caregivers can go for quiet respite, read a book, have a bath, talk to other caregivers, and feel supported.

There is a quote by Mirabai Starr "What Breaks Our Heart Is Also What Connects Us." I want to thank Mary, Nan, and Gail for taking what broke their hearts in their own stories, possibly made them angry, and moved them to a deeper sense of compassion to connect to caregivers in our province. I want to thank them for the energy and commitment they gave to begin services for caregivers and secure ongoing funding from the Department of Health and Wellness Continuing Care Branch. I want to thank all former Directors, Board members, and staff who continued the dedication and built on that strong foundation to extend services throughout the province. I love my job, it is an honour to walk alongside, witness, and support caregivers. Be assured your present Director, Board, and staff strive to continue the legacy.

- Jennine Wilson,
Caregiver Support Coordinator, Valley Region