

Keeping Memories Alive Through Giving Back

It was the beginning of 2020, and Gregor Leithhead wasn't feeling like himself. He lost forty pounds in three months, and he and his wife Tara MacIntosh were searching for answers. Answers that proved challenging to find at the beginning of a worldwide pandemic.

On the day that Gregor finally received his esophageal cancer diagnosis, Tara also learned that she was pregnant with twins. It was complete joy and utter despair, simultaneously. In less than 24 hours, the couple's life as they knew it was changed forever.



Tara MacIntosh and Gregor Leithhead.

The following months were a foggy blur of appointments for both Tara and Gregor. Tara bringing Gregor to his radiation treatments, and Gregor dropping off Tara for ultrasounds and check-ups. They offered each other support the only way they could at the time - from the parking lot. "It might sound crazy," Tara shares looking back, "but I almost don't remember being pregnant. I was so focused on Gregor's cancer." At first, the couple was determined to get to a surgery date to remove the cancer. But after Gregor's radiation was complete and doctors found cancer on his spine, surgery was no longer an option. Tara's pregnancy continued to take a mental back seat as they searched for alternative options, desperately holding onto hope.

Tara describes Gregor as a lover of experiences and of life. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do once. There were, however, things he wouldn't do twice, like going to the ballet, Tara shares with a laugh. Gregor was a graphic designer, a music lover, an avid Blue Jays fan, and a want-to-be Master Chef. As a couple, they were bonded by their mutual sense of wanderlust and a zest for life, filling their days with adventures and traveling to places they loved. "Our relationship was a little off-beat or non-traditional," Tara says, sharing details of their murder mystery themed engagement party and eloping in Vegas with 40 of their closest friends and family.

On January 29, 2021, twins Abigail and Benjamin were born. Gregor was doing aggressive chemotherapy at the time, so Tara's c-section was scheduled around his treatments. Tara hangs tightly to those first memories of Gregor and the twins. Like many first-time dads, he was excited - but nervous. He didn't have much experience holding babies, but as soon as the twins arrived, he scooped them up into his arms as if he'd done it a thousand times before. The days following the twin's birth were a beautiful fog that covered the pervasiveness of Gregor's cancer.



Gregor and Tara with twins Abigail (left) and Benjamin (right).

Despite their challenges, Tara and Gregor continued to create meaningful memories. They even produced a children's book together. Tara wrote the book during a 2:00 am stroke of inspiration after being up with the twins, and Gregor illustrated all the characters and most of the storyboard. Their vision for the book was to help teach Ben and Abby about courage one day. "Sweetheart, you find courage when you live every day with love in your heart no matter what tomorrow may bring," an excerpt from the book reads. "Does courage live in your heart, Daddy? Yes, my loves, that's exactly where courage lives."

"Sweetheart, you find courage when you live every day with love in your heart no matter what tomorrow may bring."

— excerpt from Tara and Gregor's children's book

Six months after the twins were born, Gregor unexpectedly ended up in the hospital with a hole in his stomach. The doctors don't know how he survived, but despite the odds, he did. To Tara, it felt like a gift, and time was even more precious from that moment on. "You're always hopeful," Tara shares looking back on that time. "Even up to the last second, you try to stay hopeful." Gregor continued to try any treatments that the doctor suggested, but he felt weak, and it was clear that his body was starting to fail. Three short months later, he was back in the hospital with organ failure, and they knew it was the beginning of the end. "We had three more weeks together after that," Tara remembers. Tara's parents cared for the twins so she could be with Gregor for fourteen hours a day at the hospital. She describes those days together as precious. Sitting beside him, watching movies together, and spending quality time just the two of them.

The couple learned about St. Joseph's Hospice through their care team at Victoria Hospital. As soon as Gregor heard about it, he knew that's where he wanted to be. On December 6, 2021, they got the call that there was space available. They arrived in the evening, and Tara remembers the excitement on Gregor's face when he saw the big window in his room. In the morning, he was greeted with a fresh coat of snow draped over the tree branches outside. At the hospital, he kept the curtains drawn because it was bright, but this view was too beautiful to hide.

Gregor was at Hospice for just 24 hours before he died. Twenty-four hours in a space that was quiet and peaceful, away from the loud beeping and bustle of a busy hospital environment, where both Tara and Gregor were cared for in Gregor's last hours. Being at Hospice provided Tara with the comfort, resources, and practical support to be present with Gregor during his last day on earth. "We were only there for 24 hours, but it had an enormous impact on us," Tara says. "If you're looking for a place where people will open their hearts and take care of you while caring for the person you love, Hospice is it." Tara remembers their nurse explaining each step of the dying process, what she could expect, and letting her know when Gregor was comfortable and no longer in pain. That level of attentive, wrap-around care, delivered in a home-like environment where you're treated like family, is the Hospice difference.

After Gregor's death, Tara started a registered charity in his honour. Gregor's Gift: Caring for Caregivers was set up as a tangible way for Ben and Abby to remember and be a part of Gregor's legacy, but Tara says giving back is helping her heal too. Gregor was always aware of the weight Tara carried, and he continued to care for her in meaningful ways throughout his cancer journey. It wasn't uncommon for him to call and order takeout or ask Tara's mom to take the kids so they could have some time together. "Even though he was suffering, he was always thinking about me. That's why the charity is centered around caregivers," says Tara.



Tara with twins Abigail (right) and Benjamin (left).

Even though their time at Hospice was short, the impact motivated Tara to give back. This year, just over a month after Gregor's passing, Gregor's Gift purchased a sleeper sofa for St. Joseph's Hospice. Tara calls it a gift to Hospice from Ben, Abby, and herself in honour of their first birthday and in honour of Gregor. "I want to instil in the kids Gregor's courageous and generous spirit," Tara says with a smile. "It's not always about getting but about giving too."

At St. Joseph's Hospice, dying well matters. Not just for the person living their last days, but for their families and friends whose lives continue after they're gone. Every moment matters. And with so many precious moments lost due to the pandemic, the care, space, and services that Hospice provides are now more critical than ever, and demand is at an all-time high. Each year Hospice needs to raise \$1.3 million to continue offering our programs and services to the community. Its through generous support of people in our community like you

Will you give a gift so that more families like Tara's can experience the holistic physical, emotional, social, and spiritual care and support that Hospice provides? By supporting Hospice, you're giving families the gift of moments, memories, and more time together - when it matters most.