



## Debra and Mike Sharpe

For Mike and Debra, their love story began later in life. Despite knowing each other since childhood, it wasn't until they reconnected decades later that they realized they were meant to spend their lives together. With their complimentary personalities, Debra a true people person, and Mike always willing to lend a hand, it was no surprise that volunteering became a shared interest.


Over the years, they dedicated their time to causes near and dear to them, like the SPCA or visiting patients and residents with their beloved companion, Hazel, as part of the Saint John Therapy Dog Program. Debra's genuine compassion for others was so evident. When reflecting on her role as a crisis line counselor she would say "I am an ear for those who just need someone to listen."

They balanced volunteering commitments with their busy day-to-day responsibilities as building managers to a large complex. Devoted to their blended family, when they learned their soon to be great-grandson needed them, they never hesitated. In the lead up to Joshua's birth, it became clear that he would have high needs. When the number of medical diagnoses became evident, the hospital staff cautioned Debra and Mike that Joshua may not be well enough to leave the NICU, and if he did, the level of care he would need would be extensive.

Although Joshua's lifelong mental and physical abilities and progress were uncertain, they were not deterred. As Mike says, "Joshua is the highlight of our lives." Though still working, they were steadfast in their determination to provide the best quality of life for Joshua. They were tireless, spending countless hours educating themselves, learning the different strategies, interventions and equipment recommended by the therapists and medical teams.

It is because of these efforts that Joshua continues to not only amaze his care coordinator and care teams, but his great grandfather too. Mike's motto of "it's not what he can't do, but what he can" could not be truer than when Joshua surprised everyone with his ability to communicate using sign language. While Joshua was always expressive, particularly with his eyes, his sense of humor now shines through, often being silly or making jokes as a way of showing his awareness and understanding.

His strength is also greatly improved, allowing him more independence with the use of his equipment. Mike credits Debra for the incredible progress Joshua has made and their strong bond, noting the many activities they do together, like Debra coaching their great grandson from the end of the hall as he found his balance, encouraging him every step of the way. Stronger and more confident each day, Mike would hear him giggling as he would make his way into GG's arms, as Joshua lovingly refers to her.



Sadly, Debra was diagnosed with cancer and soon began treatment. In the face of all of this, they continued to work together. Even as Mike became primary caregiver to both she and Joshua. Mike never missed a beat. He oversaw all the services and care, ensuring that Joshua never lost any of the progress he had made. As Debra's cancer progressed, Mike was steadfast in his commitment.

While grappling with his wife's prognosis, he continued to put hers and Joshua's needs first. Knowing how much it hurt them to be separated, Mike would arrange regular video calls. It's those moments remembering how they would both light up seeing one another and the love reflected on their faces that he cherishes.

Joshua was everything to Debra, which is why when they were awarded legal guardianship, Mike knew that this was the long-awaited confirmation that Debra was holding on for, reassured in the knowledge that he and Joshua would have each other.

For Mike, these last several months have been challenging, but it's Joshua that has got him through. With Debra's passing in October, Mike lost his soulmate, best friend and partner. While navigating end-of-life care and grief, he's found strength and solace in his faith, work and community, both local and the one he's found online, connecting with other caregivers supporting children like Joshua.


He's found a renewed purpose and a way of honouring Debra's legacy by dedicating his spare time to helping other families. From sharing tips he's learned and resources he's created, to collecting, coordinating, and delivering excess medical supplies to others.

Now 3, Joshua continues to astonish everyone. Still navigating their new world and shared loss, honouring and remembering GG is woven throughout their routine, which begins bright and early at 5:30 am. Each morning, Mike is greeted with a beaming Joshua eager to start their day.

Medication and breakfast is followed by practicing their signing and nursery rhymes like, "Twinkle Twinkle" that Joshua can now proudly do by himself. Mike, when recognizing that Joshua responds well to touch and textures, created one of their favorite activities. As Joshua proudly wears a different animal mask, he will match it with a little figurine and together they will sign its name and different facts.

In meeting Mike to prepare his story, he was eager to share and celebrate Joshua's recent successes, like the good news they received from the medical team or the number of words he can now sign. To say that Mike is a proud great grandparent is an understatement. Joshua keeps him on his toes, and he's had to speed up his own learning with sign language to stay ahead.

It's in the quiet moments, though, that they'll cuddle on their favorite chair and talk to GG. Her presence is still felt as Joshua will point to a picture or sign her name. Then Mike will tell him stories



about GG and all the people who love him as Joshua rests his head to feel the vibrations from Mike's voice.

Like many caregivers, Mike prefers to talk about Joshua and Debra more than himself. However, in reflecting on the last few months and what got him through, he told us “it's important to enjoy the time you have.” When thinking about losing Debra, he's now reframed his perspective from focusing on the why to simply being thankful for her.

For Mike, there's no regrets he shares, “Joshua has brought us so much joy and we get back more than we give. He's already surpassed everyone's expectations. I want the limited time he has to be great. In my eyes, he's perfect.”

**Thank you for going Above and Beyond!**