



**Announcer**

It is time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

**Enzo Garritano:**

Welcome to this very special episode of *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm Enzo Garritano, President and CEO of IHSA. In this episode, IHSA's own Ken Rayner speaks to Jennifer Wright and Scott McKay from Threads of Life. IHSA is a proud supporter of Threads of Life and their Steps for Life memorial walk. Threads of Life is a Canadian registered charity dedicated to supporting families after a workplace fatality, life-altering injury, or occupational disease. We share in their belief that traumatic workplace injuries, occupational diseases, and deaths are all preventable.

Now let's pass it over to Ken and thanks, again, Jennifer and Scott for joining us today.

**Ken Rayner:**

Thanks, Enzo. It's my sincere pleasure today to welcome to the IHSA podcast both Jennifer Wright, a Threads of Life family member, and Scott McKay, Director of Partnerships with Threads of Life. And, Scott, we're going to start with you first. Scott, if you could provide an overview of Threads of Life and your mission to our listeners, please.

**Scott McKay:**

Sure, Ken. And thanks for the opportunity to share some information with your listeners today. Threads of Life, we're a relatively new charity and we're always trying to grow awareness, so thanks for the opportunity.

Yeah. What Threads of Life does is we provide peer-based support programs to Canadian families who are living in the aftermath of a life-altering workplace injury, an occupational disease, or a fatality. These are injuries that not only affect the life of the worker, but they forever affect the life of the worker's family as well. And so once again, we're there to support the families.

And sadly, when you look at the occurrence of life-altering workplace injuries, illnesses, and diseases, the numbers are extremely troubling. If today's a typical day in Canada, there's going to be three families who are going to get notified that their loved one has died as the result of acute workplace injury or an occupational disease. If today's a typical day in this country, there's going to be hundreds of workers who are going to be made ill or seriously injured because of work. And if today's a typical day in this country, there's going to be thousands of workers, their families, their friends, their co-workers, and entire communities negatively impacted by workplace tragedy.

So where did these families turn to in their time of grief? Prior to 2003, there was no place. Threads of Life was the first organization in the world to offer peer-based support programs to families living in the aftermath of workplace tragedy. Our mission is twofold. One is through a community of support to help our family members heal, and the second part is to promote the elimination of life-altering injuries, illnesses, and diseases, so the prevention component.

I'll just spend a little bit of time maybe going through some of the peer-based support programs we provide so your listeners have a bit of an idea of the supports we provide, is one thing we do, we do it on a monthly basis, we call it Families Connect. And these are virtual workshops, so our family members can take part from coast to coast to coast. And they will always have a different aspect of dealing with grief or loss or anger or substance abuse, all of the things our family members go through when a tragedy occurs.

We also have a program that we call our Volunteer Family Guide program. And what that is all about is, is we have family members that have been with Threads of Life for a number of years, and they're at a stage of their healing where they say, "I'd like to give back. And the way I'd like to give back is I'd like to become what we call a Volunteer Family Guide." And what this is, it's an individual who's not a psychiatrist, who's not a psychologist, but an individual who's an active listener. And what that individual can do for new family members is provide support for them. Virtually 100 per cent of the time when we're contacted by family members, we hear that they feel very much alone and that no one understands what they're going through. In our case, we have literally thousands of people who understand what they're going through.

Currently, we're providing our support programs to over 3,200 family members across the country. That number has grown each and every year since when we were founded in 2003. But we still know we have a long, long way to go before every family in this country becomes aware of Threads of Life and the programs that are available to them.

So once again, that Volunteer Family Guide will then get matched to new family members, if a new family member decides they want to be matched. All of our programs are voluntary. And a lot of times widows will ask to be matched with widows, moms with moms, siblings with siblings. Sometimes the way the matches are asked is they say it's by the tragedy. For instance, drowning victims might say, "Can you match me with someone who's experienced that?" And the answer is, "Yes, we can." So that's our Volunteer Family Guide program.

We also offer what we call Family Forums. And what a Family Forum is, it's a three-day event. And what occurs over the course of the three days is there's professionally facilitated sessions on dealing with different aspects of loss and grief and substance abuse, and how a coroner's inquest works, and how a Ministry of Labour investigation works, everything that a family member would go through when a tragedy occurs.

But I'd suggest what the most important part of a Family Forum is, when we invite approximately 100 family members to attend these Family Forums, some of them are new, attending the Family Forum for the first time, and others have been with us for a while. What we do is we match that new participant with a returning participant. And it's transformative in the difference you see what occurs over the course of those three days, is when a new family member lot arrives, they're fearful. They're not sure what they've signed up for here. They're not sure what they're getting themselves into. When they leave

on a Sunday, what they've come to realize is they've landed in a safe place and a place that gets them and a place that understands them.

All of our programs are available at no cost, so there's no cost for a family member to attend. The hotel is covered, the meals are covered, the facilitators are covered and whatnot. Yeah, all of our programs are available at no cost, and there's no time frame on when someone can participate in a Threads of Life program or how long they stay in Threads of Life programs. That's up to the individual themselves.

Sometimes we're asked is to say, "Well, how does Threads of Life define a life-altering injury?" And the answer to that is we don't. We allow the family member to define it. If they think there's value in participating in our programs and services, they can participate in them for as long as they want to.

And another one of our programs too is what we call Speakers Bureau. And once again, what a Threads of Life speaker is, is this is a family member who's been with us for a number of years and they say, "I want to give back. And the way I want to give back is I'd like to become a Threads of Life speaker. And I'd like to be able to go into workplaces, into schools, to health and safety conferences, and share my story. And through sharing my story, hopefully prevent tragedies from occurring in the future."

And now I'd like to turn things over to you, Ken and Jennifer. Jennifer Wright is one of our family members and just an extraordinary individual. And it's my pleasure to turn things over to the two of you now.

**Ken Rayner:**

Thank you very much, Scott. Jennifer, really appreciate you being with us on the podcast. Maybe you can start first with telling us a bit about your father, George Mercer.

**Jennifer Wright:**

Basically, my dad worked his whole life with trucks. And started at early age of 16, he was delivering groceries, to getting his trucker's license and driving every truck imaginable that you can think of. The last type he drove was the long combination vehicles. In March 2012, he got a certification and training for that, and he was quite proud to start that type of driving.

My dad was really...he attracted all kinds of people. He really made people feel like they were his friend and he treated them special. He could strike up a conversation with anyone and it could be comfortable. He had this big sense of humour and a really ... a friendly grin is how they would describe it.

But my dad, growing up, I didn't always appreciate the trucks, trucks, and trucks, to be honest. However, my dad still made me feel special. He allowed me to play hockey when it was against the norm back then. He convinced my mom and my aunt and others, and I played as long as I could until was no longer allowed in the league, so to speak. And then he would still come out to see my rec hockey as I was an adult, played in women's hockey, and there was no longer the \$5 incentive for the goal. And he would still give me feedback and I would say, "What about my \$5?"

So really, he influenced my brothers too and their friends in the trucking industry, and he was very proud. Around 2004, he was profiled in the Ontario Trucking News. He had an article called "Trucking: A Family Affair", and he was just so happy to share how he loved being on the road, he loved seeing the

sights. And his life just revolved around the truck shows, trucks. And unfortunately my mom passed away in 2005 after 36 years of marriage, and he was always there for the grandchildren. That became his focus. And he was there for my wedding day, which I'm so grateful for.

**Ken Rayner:**

The \$5 a goal, Jennifer, that's quite something. I used to get a Coffee Crisp every time I used to score a goal, so wow, that's a special dad right there. Jennifer, how about sharing with us what happened on the night that your father was killed at work? Can you share that story with us, please?

**Jennifer Wright:**

Basically in one moment, it all ended on Monday, November 12, 2012, and my dad never came home again. It was a cold, dark, rainy evening at a busy old truck yard. Just after 8 a.m., my dad was in the usual area, doing his usual pre-trip truck inspection. He was connecting two big 53-foot trailers, connecting the second trailer to the first trailer, and things started to shift, rolling forward. I think my dad must have realized the problem because he reacted by running to reach for the manual brake, realizing maybe the braking system wasn't engaged, but he got caught and pinned by one of the trailers.

Another employee nearby heard a yell or a scream, and he saw my dad, and he started to scream and to yell for 911. And he quickly went to the truck and to move it to get my dad out from the crushing pressure of the trailer. He stayed with my dad until the ambulance arrived and my dad was taken to the hospital. They were thinking of sending him to the trauma center, but it was just too extensive. And then they revived him a few times before he passed away at around 10 o'clock.

**Ken Rayner:**

Jennifer, I'm so sorry, and I'm so grateful to you to be sharing this story with us today because hoping to wake people up to what happens. Unfortunately, what happens today in Ontario and in Canada, as Scott mentioned, these things do occur on a regular basis, and telling the story hopefully will wake people up to the reality.

So Jennifer, how about this, how did this affect you and your family personally?

**Jennifer Wright:**

Yeah, I think, well, one of the hardest parts for me was to process how much he suffered and the actual shock that he had actually died at work. It just never occurs, you know what I mean, that this would be the end. And it's hard to believe, even when ... I think you mentioned 10 years. It's been 10 years and you're still triggered.

And so when you hear the news story or you hear they're sending the Ministry of Labour to investigate, that line in itself, and I do limit my listening to news and whatnot, but every time I hear that, I literally feel this physical, something like a twinge, a painful feeling. It comes and goes, but it's a horrible kind of a feeling of empathy, I suppose. Being constantly tuned in, but tuned in to understand and physically feel this pain, knowing what the next will be. Knowing that shock, that disbelief, and then the loss, and then it passes.

But it's been tough on the family just to... We have to be purposeful to be together. And it really, with all the change in the relationships, it unglues, it disconnects you a bit so you have to be more purposeful. So I've really found that we've had to really ... Everyone copes differently, everything changes, so we've had to really be more mindful to come together.

**Ken Rayner:**

Jennifer, how did Threads of Life come into your life and how has it helped you along the way?

**Jennifer Wright:**

I'm very thankful for more than a few times the health and safety inspector that was involved in the investigation from my dad's incident, he told me about an organization. He kept mentioning this Threads of Life, which provides support to families with work life-altering injuries, occupational illness, workplace fatalities. He repeated this a number of times. And at first I guess I was absorbing that message.

I did reach out in the spring after my dad's death, and literally it was the best decision that I made because it's really helped to keep my dad's memory alive, and especially for his seven grandchildren, because nothing really brought more joy than that to my dad. And I started attending the Threads of Life Family Forum in the fall that year, of 2013, and it's really helped me to move forward, getting unstuck with dealing with just the whole aftermath of that sudden loss, and also just helping that positive direction for the family.

And then I started volunteering for the Barrie Steps for Life Walk in 2016 and then became a family spokesperson in 2018. It actually led to my whole family coming out because they were like, "What are you doing?" There was a moment where with my one brother saw the Memory Lane sign and broke down, and he was able to have some feelings creep out. And then my older brother was like, "I can't believe you've made this into a positive for our family, something so horrible." It helped us together as we all cope very different.

And the most interesting thing recently was my...Well, two things, with my son, because remember, they're like ... I might not have told you, but they were two and four at the time. So my son was two and my daughter was four. And so we've really had to work on that memories and try to keep the stories telling.

But my son, when he was in grade four, he took initiative to write... When he was asked by the teacher to write a speech, he chose to write his own speech about the Steps for Life. And he was standing beside me in 2018 when I shared my story, and he came up to me and brought me his speech on his computer and said, "Mom, this is my speech, not yours. This is my speech." And he took ownership of it. He just made that connection and he was so proud. And this past year, last year, my daughter wrote a poem about the Steps for Life Walk, and it really just shown me how the organization helps to express themselves as they grow up without their grandpa in their lives.

**Ken Rayner:**

Your involvement with Threads, your family's involvement with Threads of Life, has been very therapeutic for you, and it's been a positive experience in that regard. We have the Day of Mourning on

April 28, that we remember all those that have passed in a workplace tragedy or an illness. What does that day mean to you and your family?

**Jennifer Wright:**

For the Day of Mourning, it's really about acknowledgement, time to reflect and share stories, to help raise community awareness. Just this whole impact that the tragedy has on the family, the workplace, the work colleagues, the community.

And one person can really make such a difference, you can influence others by your actions. And I found that even in my family, just by me participating there has been a ripple effect. So being mindful of all your moments at work and what steps keep you safe will also impact others around you. Thinking about what prevention strategies and fail-safes do you have in place that protect you so that you come home safe. And I want a future where nobody and no one needs to be speaking because their dad or someone they love went to work and never came home.

**Ken Rayner:**

Particularly in this beautiful province we have where we have so many resources, there's just no reason that every single worker shouldn't come home safe at the end of the day, no reason for it. Jennifer, I can't thank you enough for coming on and sharing your story about your father George Mercer. We certainly hope that this raises awareness to others.

Scott, how about our listeners today who are listening, how can they support Threads of Life?

**Scott McKay:**

Yeah. Thanks for that, Ken, and thanks very much, Jennifer. Yeah, you're an extraordinary young lady. Thank you.

Yeah, so there's four ways that an individual or a company can support Threads of Life, and most important to us is to create awareness. Our ultimate goal is that every family in this country who's experiencing a life-altering workplace injury, illness or death, becomes aware of Threads of Life. They become aware of the peer-based support programs that are available to them at no cost, and then they can make an informed decision. We know we're not for everybody, but we also know there's literally thousands or more families out there that could take advantage of our services if they were available, or sorry if they're aware of them.

So anything your listeners can do to share information. And that could be as simple as talking to your next door neighbor today and saying, "Geez, I listened to a podcast about Threads of Life and here's what the organization's all about." Or it may be through your corporate communication channels. That's why this podcast is so important to us, it expands the awareness for us. So help grow our awareness.

Number two would be to participate in our events. And there's several ways you can do that, but one would be to have a Threads of Life speaker. Like Jennifer, come and speak to your staff, to your employees, that share their message. There's been lots of research done on storytelling, and what it suggests is, is that when an audience emotionally engages, and just as we did as listeners to Jennifer's story, we emotionally engage, when an audience emotionally engages, it's a lot more likely to drive

behaviors. And the behaviors we are trying to drive is what Jennifer shared, that we all have to own health and safety. We all have to do our part. Health and safety isn't the supervisor's job, isn't the health and safety manager's job, isn't the worker's job, it's collectively, it's all of our jobs.

So yeah, participate, have a speaker come to your workplace. The other way is to participate in what we call Steps for Life, and Steps for Life is our flagship fundraising activity we do every year. It's always aligned to the last week of April for Day of Mourning, and the first week of May for Occupational Health and Safety Week. This year we'll be walking in 28 communities across the country, but we also have a virtual opportunity to walk as well.

And I'd ask your listeners to check out [stepsforlife.ca](http://stepsforlife.ca) and participate as an individual, participate as a family, participate as a corporate team, any way at all, but get out and support Steps for Life. We have a target this year of a little over \$500,000, so we're well on our way. I just looked at the thermometer today, we're at 91 per cent of that goal. All of the funds go to our support programs so we can continue to offer them at no cost to our family members, so participate.

Third way you can support us is consider volunteering for us. Jennifer mentioned she's on the Barrie Steps for Life Walk, all 28 of our walks across the country, including 13 in Ontario, they're all volunteer-driven. They're driven by a Steps for Life steering committee. We're always looking to grow that membership. The day of the walk, we're always looking for volunteers to help with registration or flip burgers or help with media and whatnot, so we're always looking for volunteers.

And then the last way is to provide financial support. That could be through an individual donation, it could be through corporate sponsorships. We have a tremendous network of partners, including the Infrastructure Health and Safety Association, but we're always trying to grow our partners and whatnot. So if any of your listeners, if their companies are interested, yeah, you can visit [threadsoflife.ca](http://threadsoflife.ca) and you'll see a tab there that says "Get Involved". And it'll tell you all four of what I just described, help grow our awareness, consider volunteering, participate in our events, and consider funding us. That's how your listeners can help us out, Ken.

**Ken Rayner:**

That's great, Scott. And I just want to thank you again, Jennifer, for being with us and sharing your story regarding your dad. And, Scott, thank you for being with us as well and giving us a better understanding of Threads and how both individuals and organizations can assist if they're interested. So thank you both for joining us on this very special edition of the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

**Enzo Garritano:**

Thanks again to Jennifer Wright and Scott McKay from Threads of Life. And thank you for listening to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel and visit us on [ihsa.ca](http://ihsa.ca) for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

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