

In 1978, Sharon Hampson teamed up with Lois Lilienstein and Bram Morrison to form a musical trio that would entertain young children and their families. The group intended to make only one record, called “One Elephant, Deux Éléphants.” Once released, however, the album proved to be a sensation, and the trio, now dubbed “Sharon, Lois & Bram,” were soon touring across Canada singing to hundreds of thousands of families.



Meet Sharon Hampson: Three-time breast-cancer survivor

By Chris Noone

Over the ensuing years, the popular trio went on to create 16 more recordings, three song-books, and two television series. They have won three Juno Awards, and in 2002, Sharon and her colleagues were initiated as Members of the Order of Canada.

However, during this period of enormous success, Sharon battled breast cancer—not once, not twice, but three times—and won each time. *Solutions* editor Chris Noone caught up with Sharon to hear her remarkable story.

Q With touring, recording, and volunteering, you lead quite a busy life. How do you stay healthy?

I do much less touring now, but I still try to stay in shape. In the thick of touring, when my life was the busiest, my body somehow knew not to get sick. It only seemed to happen when I came home after a tour. Our concerts were always high energy and it took a lot of stamina to perform and tour, which helped me to stay healthy. Besides, I loved and continue to love my work, and I think that promotes good health.

Now I take a pilates class and a dance/exercise class each week, and I try to eat healthy—but not always!

Q You grew up playing piano and cello, and you made your musical debut as a folk singer at age 17. Did you ever think you'd become a celebrity?

I never even thought about it. To me, the music itself was important. I always loved singing, and I enjoyed playing piano and, later on, cello in my high school orchestra. Eventually I left school during Grade 13 to become a folk singer. I enjoyed hanging around the Toronto coffee houses where the folk music scene was thriving.

Q What values did you share as a group when you planned your first recording?

When the three of us got together, we shared the belief that children deserve the best, and we always applied this value in making our music. I think this attention to quality has played a large part in our fans' appreciation for our music.

Q What has it been like to be part of the “Sharon, Lois and Bram” phenomenon?

I remember performing as Sharon, Lois and Bram for the first time at Massey Hall in Toronto with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and thinking at the time how wonderful it was. Growing up, I never could have possibly dreamed such a big dream.

I've been incredibly lucky to be part of the group. We had something to offer at a time when society was eager to receive it. And being in Canada helped. We had the support of CBC Radio, which reached Canadian parents across the country and helped to make us far more successful than our American counterparts.

Q How did you handle your first case of breast cancer in 1988?

I recall the time quite vividly. I went to see my doctor for another issue, and she suggested that I have a mammogram because I was in my mid-40s. After my diagnosis and subsequent two operations, I went back to work, which was very therapeutic. It was great to sing for an audience, see the smiles on the children's faces, and have all that love coming back to me.

Q You've been involved in the breast cancer community since 1993. What inspired you to get involved?

In fall 1993, I was diagnosed for the second time. During a post-radiation visit to my doctor, he asked me to speak at an upcoming breast-cancer forum which he was co-planning.

It was my first experience with public speaking and the topic was so personal. I was terrified. However, I delivered my speech, and it was a catharsis for me. Afterwards, a woman from Sri Lanka approached me and said, "Everything you said was about me." It made me realize that certain feelings are universal and that by sharing my story, I could help others.

Q Tell us about your work with Willow, Breast Cancer Support Canada.

Willow was started by 10 women who wanted to help others with breast cancer. Sandy Wise, June Callwood and Sally Armstrong were among the pioneers. When we first met, we simply sat down to share ideas on how we could best help other women. We decided that Willow would act as an information provider; that is, a woman with breast cancer or a friend or family member could contact us, and we'd provide information that was specific to her needs. Also, when women call us, the person who provides the information has had breast cancer so she is able to personalize the experience. This has been the strength of Willow and I'm proud to be a part of it.

Q You've survived breast cancer three times. What is your message to women living with the condition?

I believe that for many women it is helpful to educate ourselves as much as possible. It helped me to learn about my diagnoses and to take part in treatment decisions.

I read, in *Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book*, that many women who are diagnosed with breast cancer live to die of other things at a ripe old age. However, we only know that in retrospect. So most of us will be just fine. I've been diagnosed with breast cancer three times, and I live a good, full life. I think we all need to remember to live each day to the fullest.

Q How has your popularity helped you deliver your health message?

Being part of the group was the main reason why my doctor asked me to speak at the breast cancer forum in the first place. So my public profile, both at the time and now, has given me many excellent opportunities to share my experiences and to help other women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Q What one piece of advice can you offer to families with aging parents?

My mother had a massive stroke in 1999, and she went through two years of hell before she passed away. My sister and I visited her and cared for her everyday, so I understand the hardships of caring for aging parents. My advice is that if you don't take care of yourself, you can't care for others, so it's important to nurture yourself and find balance in your life. Eventually you have to give yourself permission to look after yourself so that you will be able to care for your parents.

Finally, we can easily get lost in the everyday details of caregiving, and I think it's important to focus on the bigger picture. Anyone caring for a parent is very lucky to have that parent around. Take time to enjoy life with them. ●



“ I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they fly by.”

Douglas Adams