

JOANNE COLMER PROFILE

Life changed forever for a fraction of an inch

Joanne and Ron Searle were oh-so-happy. They lived a dream: nice home, great jobs, wonderful family and friends.

“Every day, going to work, we’d both say, ‘I love you’. It was the last thing we said to each other on the spring day Ron died,” she recalls.

The 52-year-old foreman for an electric sign manufacturer was crushed to death by a 9,000-pound machine being moved on rollers. To reposition them, a forklift raised the machine a fraction of an inch. It went too high, and the machine toppled onto him.

Sharing how her life “changed forever” is what brings Joanne to speak at the Day of Mourning ceremony, April 28 in Kamloops.

“I used to say Ron was the reason I breathed. As I continued to breathe after he died, I realized he was the reason I wanted to breathe,” says Joanne.

“But I had family, and friends who became family. They watched over me, cried with me, hugged me and both let me be and pushed me.”

She started to heal, although it took “so much effort and energy. But eventually, I was able to work again, to have a life again. The new life was mine, and not ours.

“Time passed, and brought a miracle. I met a man named Roy, and we fell in love and married. We’re both widowed, so we understand each other’s loss. We can talk about our first spouses.”

Joanne remembers Ron’s commitment to his work. In the sign industry all his life, he was a designer, architect, sheet metal worker, electrician, serviceman.

“Ron made art out of metal in an industry with no formal training or manuals,” she says. “He taught others so the craft wouldn’t be lost — giving extra attention to those with what he called the ‘gift’. Ron expected 110 per cent from his people, and it was easy for them to deliver because he gave back 210 per cent.”

Five years after Ron’s death, Joanne and Roy Colmer have made a new life together. They cherish it and don’t take it for granted “because we know better than to count on tomorrow,” she explains.

“Ron died because of something that was ‘common practice’ — not necessarily safe, but accepted because it had always been done that way. But getting away with a dangerous practice doesn’t make it right, or worth losing life or limb,” declares Joanne.



This lesson wasn't lost on my sister's husband, Leo. "A few days after Ron's funeral, Leo saw someone in his workplace doing something risky that was 'common practice'. Leo put a stop to it, and perhaps saved a life. The practice hasn't been repeated there.

Joanne calls that "a legacy from Ron" and says he left more than that to family, friends and co-workers.

"Ron showed us that life is to be lived to the fullest. He took each day and ran with it, because he knew every day was special. And Ron was never afraid to show or share his feelings. He told us that he cared, that he loved us.

"That's what you need to do: tell your loved ones how much you care. Call... write... email — however you do it, let them know. Also, show them you care by always practising safety, on and off the job. And ask your loved ones to do the same.

"Tell them, show them. In the end, that's all there is; it's everything."