

LIFE&TIMES

'Little Mary Sunshine' Mary Johnston advocated for melanoma prevention

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There was a bittersweet irony attached to Mary Johnston's moniker Little Mary Sunshine.

Mrs. Johnston, who spent the first half of her life adoring the sun and the second half shading herself from it, was diagnosed with skin cancer more than 20 years ago.

She went on to become an advocate for safer skin care and was the president of the Alberta Society of Melanoma.

Mrs. Johnston died after her two-decades-long battle with cancer on Sunday morning. She was 52.

While she was vigilant about protecting herself from the sun's potential harm after she was diagnosed, she would not be deterred from enjoying the activities she loved.

Mrs. Johnston was a passionate gardener and often got her hands dirty in the garden of her Windsor Park home, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and plenty of sun screen.

When her husband travelled to tropical locations for his annual orthopedic conferences, Mrs. Johnston joined him readily. In Jamaica, Mexico and St. Martins, she sat with other doctors' wives under palm trees and thatched roofs that earned them the name "the shady ladies."

As the daughter of the late Ronald Banister — who built the pipeline construction firm, Banister Inc. — Mrs. Johnston used her family ties to try to get more people in out of the sun or covered up.

Years ago, she scheduled a meeting with Enbridge executives to discuss safer conditions for pipeline workers whose



Mary Johnston

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jobs kept them outside for long hours.

In addition to her activism, Mrs. Johnston was also a committed wife and mother.

She met the love of her life when she was just a toddler.

William Johnston was her brother's best friend and started courting his future wife when he was in the first grade. The two were married four days after her 21st birthday.

"When they got married I thought how perfect — Mr. Success was going to marry Mrs. Success," said her brother, Harold Banister.

"My pal Bill gave my sister a wonderful life."

Despite rarely going more than a few years without being told her cancer had returned, Mrs. Johnston knew her life was wonderful.

"Life must be lived today," she said at a meeting of the Alberta Society of Melanoma in 2000. "We must learn to appreciate every moment with awareness and with the knowledge that life is short."

During that speech, Mrs. Johnston suggested her survival had a lot to do with her attitude.

Her doctor agreed.

"She was an exceptional person all around and this translated into how she managed her disease and how positive she was," said Dr. Kenn Petruck, of the University Hospital.

Petruck, who administered a trial vaccine to Mrs. Johnston earlier this year, called his patient a "frontierswoman" for the medical cause.

"She really wanted to push the science forward for her disease and help other people."

Her daughter Susan also noted her mother's openness to new treatments.

"She wasn't opposed to trying anything," she said.

Mrs. Johnston was a committed activist to the end.

In a January 2003 letter to the editor, Mrs. Johnston criticized a front-page story in *The Journal* that featured a photograph of a man trying to escape his winter blahs in a tanning booth.

"*The Journal* would not promote smoking as a way of relaxing or 'being cool' so why would you promote another practice that is carcinogenic," she wrote, adding that any claim that tanning booths were safe was false. "You must promote the message that there is no such thing as a healthy tan."

Mrs. Johnston leaves her husband, William Johnston, and her four children, Susan, Laureen, Ronald, and Elizabeth.

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