

## NIEBOER LECTURE 2024 ANNOUCEMENT

### **Sandie and Larry Varcoe**



**Sandie and Larry Varcoe** have been named the Louise and Frank Nieboer Lecturers for 2024. Sandie experienced a stroke many years ago and Larry is her husband of nearly 57 years, and main caregiver. Together, they have created a community support network in eastern Ontario in and around Belleville.

Sandie suffered a stroke in 1986 at the age of 35 and lives with severe aphasia and still has mobility and movement challenges. This has not slowed them down. She and Larry work as equals in their community, making sure that no one has to go through the life changes as a result of stroke alone. They are recognized and respected for their incredible efforts in being activists, always looking for opportunities to promote the views and interests of people living with stroke and driving improvements in support and recovery. Their work to expand aphasia programs in their region and increase accessibility to supports for people living with aphasia, and leading by example has improved so many lives. They inspire so many others every day with their phone calls, social events, and visits to bring joy and hope to others at such a challenging time.

The Louise and Frank Nieboer lecture was established in 2021 to recognize people affected by stroke who have used their personal experiences to actively improve the journey for others. It is named in honour of Calgary's Louise and Frank Nieboer, tireless advocates for people who have experienced stroke and their families for more than 30 years and members of the Canadian Stroke Network Board and Canadian Stroke Strategy steering committee.

The Nieboer Lecture and the Hnatyshyn Lecture will be a feature event in conjunction with the Canadian Stroke Congress, which will be held November 28 and 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024 in Calgary, Alberta. More details about the winners, and timing of the lectureships will be provided in the coming weeks.

Learn more about the <https://strokecongress.canadianstroke.ca/> and join us in November!

## NIEBOER LECTURE 2024 PROFILE

### **Sandie and Larry Varcoe's Story:**

#### **One couple, one voice**

Sandie and Larry Varcoe give their time and ideas to support stroke recovery in eastern Ontario

They've been chosen as the Louise and Frank Nieboer Lecturers for 2024 and truly embody the spirit of using their personal experiences to actively improve the stroke journey for others.

Sandie Varcoe has severe aphasia, so her ability to speak clearly and be understood is very compromised. However, she's more than able to communicate — especially when her husband of nearly 57 years, Larry, is at her side.

He might do most of the talking, but with her facial expressions, body movements and vocalizations, it's utterly clear what Sandie is trying to share. And more than apparent just how much passion she has for her family, for life, and for helping others navigate stroke recovery.

Over the last eight years, the Sandie and Larry have become the core of peer support in their community in and around Belleville, Ont.

"Sandie is known in these groups as The Sunshine Girl. Everybody needs in their group a Sunshine Girl. She has aphasia, but she's not afraid to stand up and give her opinion," says Larry.

Before they started getting involved in 2016, there was very little in their community. In fact, the very first support meeting they attended comprised of them alone.

That's changed so much thanks mainly to the support-related events they now attend and have started themselves, along with the one-on-one help they give others on an almost daily basis.

Back in 1986, the Toronto-based Varcoe family was busy with two careers — accounting for her, and he was head trainer for a franchise owner that trained people in sales and management at the time — and two young children. Then, Larry came home one day to find Sandie unconscious, bruised, and their room in disarray. "I thought someone had broken in and beat her up, it was that bad," says Larry. He found out later she had been in so much pain from her head, she'd been flailing around, try to cope.

He took her to the hospital, where they discovered five painful brain aneurysms, one of which then ruptured, causing a hemorrhagic stroke (a bleeding stroke). “Get the family together, she won’t see the morning,” a nurse told him.

But Sandie, 35 at the time and turning 36 days later, survived. She could not walk, talk or do anything for herself, plus she needed multiple surgeries to repair the remaining aneurysms, so she remained in hospital for 14 months.

Larry committed right away to making sure Sandie knew she was loved, utterly, and had everyone’s full support. “We were there every day. We were rubbing her arm and her back. We were talking to her, encouraging her.”

When she came back home, the family was faced with a new normal. In time Sandie, regained basic skills, dexterity and more mobility so she could do things around the house such as vacuuming and the laundry. The family moved out of the city and Larry changed jobs to avoid travel and eventually took a job driving a bus for the TTC, which gave him the hours he wanted to support Sandie and the kids best.

They found no one to guide them through these difficult times. “Caregivers have the toughest job,” says Larry. “All of a sudden, you have a career that’s 24/7, 365, no coffee breaks, and you don’t get paid for it. You have to learn to become a taxi driver, a pharmacist, a nurse.”

In 2016, now-retired Larry and Sandie moved to Belleville. There, they finally had the time to reach out, attending a support meeting held by Community Care for South Hastings.

Soon, they were attending more events and starting their own. On the last Thursday of every month, they go out with a group to a restaurant for lunch. “We don’t talk stroke, we just enjoy a nice meal, and encourage others to re-engage in social activities”, says Larry.

They host an annual barbecue at their house — now their daughter’s place, since they further downsized — for people with stroke and their families. During Covid, they began a Friday video call with a fun activity, usually Bingo, that continues. They’re on the phone on a regular basis with caregivers and individuals with stroke, helping them talk through their latest challenges.

They still attend regular community support meetings and take part in programs such as the Aphasia Conversation Group. Importantly, they advocated for secure funding to continue programs in the region.

“I cannot recall a special celebration or awareness event that was not attended by Sandie and Larry, and they are always relentless in their efforts to encourage others to join them in the community,” wrote Shell-Lee Wert, executive director of Community Care for South Hasting, in her nomination letter.

It's not just what this duo does, but how they engage with positivity and love, and as a couple. While Larry may say more words, they're both guiding and supporting others to get through what they did themselves years ago. "There's baby steps," says Larry. "You have to follow the steps and be willing to redevelop yourself and find that new normal. The old one's gone."