

# Poignant tales of SARS tragedy

The dread of SARS is long gone from the city, from its subways and shopping malls. No longer are photos transmitted worldwide of Toronto Blue Jay fans reaching for foul balls from behind surgical masks.

News media long ago moved on from daily briefings on epidemiology and quarantines, from death tolls and case counts, to more current tragedies and fresher anguish.

In a way, sometimes standing as good news, sometimes anything but, it's as if it never happened.

Recent reports from a convention of convention organizers said the local SARS stigma has happily disappeared as an albatross on the tourist industry. This week, it was reported that the strain of the virus that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome seems to have vanished from the planet.

But, also this week, a provincial investigation into the handling of the crisis of 2003 said the lessons of its reign of terror on Toronto were apparently poorly learned.

Except, of course, for those who paid most dearly from a mutating virus carried through the marvels of aeronautics from an Asian hothouse into a Toronto hospital waiting room – the front-line health workers, the grieving families of those who lost their lives.

Maybe their reminder of what the microscopic can suddenly deliver to any among us should be recalled to add emphasis to Justice Archie Campbell's warning that four years after SARS "serious problems persist and much remains to be done."

Among the hundreds of thousands of words written from those grim days, the most compelling were produced not by a professional but a 10-year-old who told the story in the *Star* of what the outbreak had done to her family.

Jenna Pollack lost her grandparents, Joseph and Rose, after their exposure at Scarborough Grace Hospital in March 2003, when Joe was apparently put beside a 43-year-old factory worker whose mother had inadvertently brought the virus to Canada and died the previous week.

"I never would have suspected that my family, out of the millions of families scattered all over, would get this disease," she wrote.

"I have no clue what is going on. I shiver when I think that death actually came and did its job by breaking up a family ...

"Sometimes I wonder if there really is a God because if there is how could he/she let this happen to such a wonderful family.

"Ever since this happened, no one, and I mean no one, was the same."

Appalling, too, was the first-person account told in *Toronto Life* magazine in October 2003 by Anna Morgan of the deaths due to SARS of an elderly Russian immigrant, and the son and daughter who contracted the virus while visiting her in hospital.

"Cut to the bone, our medical-care system is stretched to the breaking point and beyond; it simply lacks the resources to deal with or even monitor a widespread health-care crisis. Who can predict when the next one will arise?"

For this space, the most poignant day – a grace note of deep commitment, depth of love punctuated by quiet anger – was probably the Fourth of July in the summer of 2003.

That was the Friday morning that hundreds of Toronto nurses filled the pews of St. Michael's Cathedral for the funeral of colleague Nelia Laroza, the first Canadian health-care worker to die as a result of the SARS virus acquired on the job, one of the victims of what senior officials would concede was a guard let down too soon.

It was a signal event, a modest 51-year-old immigrant from the Philippines – her funeral attended by the high and mighty – standing as a symbol of the courage of a profession that had not so very long before been disparaged by the then-premier of Ontario, while he laid them off, as being as outdated as Hula Hoops.

For months, they had worked under intolerable conditions. For months, they'd put their own health on the line just by showing up for work. And, that day, surgical masks off, no Hula Hoops in sight, Laroza's casket passed through an honour guard of black-ribboned nurses with hands on their hearts.

Laroza was eulogized that sunny summer day by her niece.

**"Her spirit lives," Hazel Corda had told her aunt's colleagues, "through each of your brave actions and gentle compassion, constantly focused on helping someone in need.**

**"We hope no other family will have to pay the high price we paid for what has been referred to as a mistake."**

**Which essentially echoed the words of Anna Morgan, and presaged the conclusions of the Superior Court judge.**

**"If we do not learn from SARS and we do not make the government fix the problems that remain, we will pay a terrible price in the next pandemic," Campbell wrote.**

**At Laroza's funeral, her family said they would like to thank all those "who have honoured their beloved Nelia by their presence here today."**

**The greater honour, of course, would be to remember a little girl's warning that it can happen to anyone, a young woman's plea that no other family know such anguish, and Justice Campbell's admonition that there is much work to be done.**

Source: Jim Coyle, Saturday Star, January 13, 2007