

# Impact

Newsletter

Spring 2020

**VGH**  
**UBC** hospital  
foundation



Nick Kanaan with his wife Lindsay and their daughter Ameera. Nick is thriving after a life-saving double-lung transplant at VGH.

## Father saved after lifelong battle with cystic fibrosis

Before Nick Kanaan was even born, tests from his mother's amniotic fluid determined Nick had cystic fibrosis, an inherited disorder that had already claimed two of his sisters' lives, and would leave Nick fighting for his own life in 2019.

Throughout the years Nick managed the disease with daily medications. Then in October 2017, while on a work trip to Toronto, Nick started having difficulty breathing. He was getting ready to fly home to Vancouver, but he couldn't bring himself to leave his hotel. Instead, his parents came and drove him to a nearby hospital.

"I entered through the emergency room and a nurse immediately hooked me up to oxygen and said, It's good you did not get on that airplane," says Nick. "I could barely breathe."

Nick was hospitalized for two and a half months. Although he would eventually be discharged, Nick's lungs would never fully recover.

### Gasping for air

Fast-forward. January 2019. After more than a year of regular check-ups, tests have determined Nick's lungs are steadily declining and he is desperately in need of a lung transplant.

Nick would keep taking his daily medications, hoping to find a match before his lungs got worse.

But before long, Nick caught a lung infection. He would spend several nights coughing up blood at home before being hospitalized.

Time was slipping away. And so Nick was transferred

to VGH — the only hospital in BC able to perform a special surgery that would buy him vital time.

### A life-saving bridge to surgery

"The function of Nick's lungs was essentially destroyed," says Dr. Hussein Kanji, Nick's primary physician at VGH. "We knew there was no ability for the lungs to recover. In order to bridge him to his surgery, we had one option — ECMO."

ECMO is a portable, donor-funded, heart-lung machine that oxygenates the blood and reinfuses it into the body, essentially taking over the role of breathing and allowing Nick's lungs to rest

The procedure was a success, buying precious time while Nick waited for a lung donor. Three and a half weeks later a match was found. Dr. John Yee of VGH performed the double-lung transplant. Nick awoke two days later, breathing on his own with a new set of lungs.

### Going home

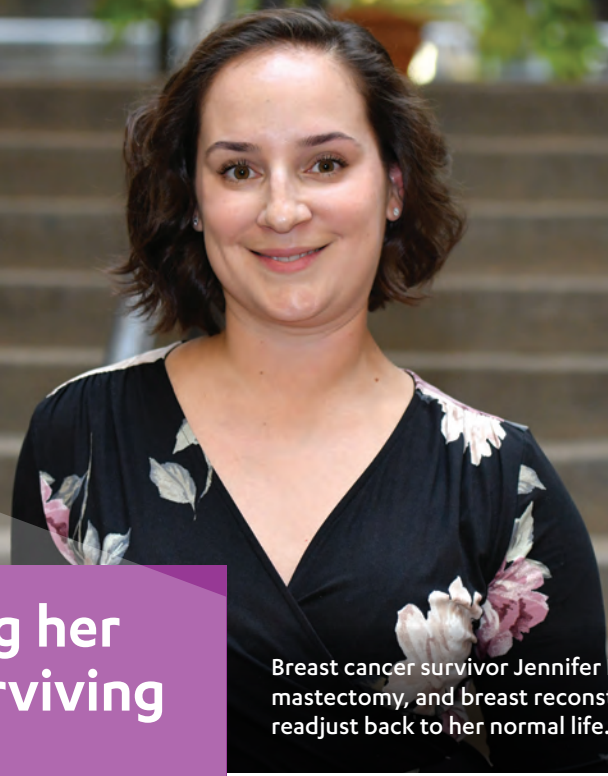
Today, Nick is nearly back to living his normal life. He still has to take it slow and he can't lift heavy objects, but he can safely chase his two year old daughter, Ameera, around the house.

"For the first time in my life I laid on Nick's chest and I listened to him take in these deep, wonderful breaths," says his wife Lindsay. "I can't describe that feeling."

### Lung care and ECMO facts

- VGH is the first Canadian hospital to achieve gold level status from the Extracorporeal Life Support Organization (ELSO) for its ECMO program.
- More than 130 patients have benefitted from ECMO at VGH.
- VGH is the only hospital in BC with the expertise to perform double-lung transplants.

Help patients like Nick on their journey to recovery.  
Learn more at [vghfoundation.ca/surgery](http://vghfoundation.ca/surgery)



## Reconstructing her femininity: Surviving breast cancer

Breast cancer survivor Jennifer Kelly. Jennifer received a double mastectomy, and breast reconstruction surgery helped her readjust back to her normal life.

It was July 4, 2015. Jennifer Kelly, 33 at the time, was happily preparing for a surprise birthday party for her mom's 60th. She and her siblings had planned a wonderful dinner and were almost ready to go. Then the phone rang.

It was her doctor's office. They needed Jennifer to come in immediately.

Before she arrived, she already knew in her heart what it was — Jennifer was diagnosed with breast cancer.

The next three years of Jennifer's life became dedicated to this fight.

### Fighting against the odds

Through all the ups and downs in those years, Jennifer felt several times like she wanted to give up, but when she looked at her children, aged one and four at the time, it hit her.

**"I had to survive for them. To have a memory of their mother — not just a photograph or a story from a loved one. A real memory," says Jennifer.**

Jennifer opted for a double mastectomy to remove both breasts and paired that treatment with 21 bouts of chemotherapy.

### Detaching from herself

Before her double mastectomy, Jennifer never associated her femininity with her breasts. But after

the removal was complete all of life's little moments around the female body became magnified and impossible to ignore.

"I remember going to clothing stores to try on things that I thought would be good, and just crying in the fitting room because nothing would fit me properly," says Jennifer.

So, in September 2016, she made the decision to have breast reconstruction surgery at UBC Hospital performed by Dr. Sheina Macadam.

### Feeling like a woman again

"It was November 2016. We went to a big fundraiser gala for my children's school, and I wore this beautiful dress and I felt like ... I'd just had the tissue expanders in, I didn't have my completed surgery yet, but I felt female again," says Jennifer. "I felt like a woman. I still had short hair — my hair was still growing back — but I felt really good about myself again."

"I'm very happy that I was able to see Dr. Macadam and have it all done," says Jennifer. "Because at the end of the day she gave me my life back. She made me feel like a woman again."

Help women like Jennifer through their journey of breast cancer care and survival. Learn more at [vghfoundation.ca/cancer](http://vghfoundation.ca/cancer)

## Breast cancer and mastectomy facts and figures

- Breast cancer is the most common cancer for women in BC. In 2019, an estimated 3,890 women in this province will be newly diagnosed and 695 will die from it.
- One in eight Canadian women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime.
- Approximately 2,000 mastectomies are done annually in BC, with 65% of breast reconstruction surgeries in Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) being performed at UBC Hospital.
- Studies show that emotional, social and functional well-being, vitality, body image and general mental health are improved in women who have breast reconstruction surgery after their mastectomy.

## Young woman saved from brink of death at VGH

It was March 28, 2018 when then 21 year old Mary Salas woke up with her right hand feeling numb.

As the day progressed, the numbing sensation would not fade. In fact, it only grew worse. The feeling had started to climb up to her elbow. Mary started to panic, so she called 8-1-1 to speak to a nurse, and they advised Mary to go to the emergency room.

As she sat in the waiting room of her local hospital, the numbing sensation spread all the way up to her shoulder. Then it went down to her right leg.

After this moment, Mary doesn't remember much — an image of a doctor, Mary groggily walking down a hospital hall, a CT scan. Then, another doctor telling her she was being transferred to VGH.

Even though Mary was in and out of consciousness, she vividly remembers the worry in that doctor's eyes.

### **Saving Mary with all aspects of VGH's neurocritical care program**

"When Mary first presented on the ward, she started having seizures because of how inflamed her brain was," says Dr. Myp Sekhon, Neurointensivist at VGH.

It took all aspects of the neurocritical care team at VGH to care for Mary: Neuro-radiologists conducted MRI scans, neurosurgeons implanted the donor-funded Brain Bolt — a cutting-edge



Only two years ago Mary Salas was fighting for her life at VGH. Today, she is back to school, excited for her second chance at life.

brain monitoring device that feeds back vital second-to-second brain health information to the medical teams. The epilepsy team performed brain scans for the neurointensivists in ICU, all while neurologists worked on determining the cause.

A day later, they had their answer — Acute Disseminated Encephalomyelitis, a rare auto-immune disease. Mary's immune system was mistakenly attacking healthy nerve coatings in her brain.

### **Getting Mary's health back on track**

Mary was put on chemotherapy medications to stop her immune system from functioning. The medical team also utilized a PLEX machine that would remove blood from her body, take out any antibodies, then reinfuse it back in.

It worked. And Mary woke up three weeks later, unaware how close she was to the brink of death.

### **Returning to normal life**

On May 15 — a day after her 22nd birthday — Mary was discharged from hospital, happy and healthy.

"It's changed me a whole lot," says Mary. "I am so thankful for the care I received at VGH. And I realized that you really have to cherish the time that you have here."

Join us in funding vital equipment such as the Brain Bolt and help save lives like Mary's. Learn more at [vghfoundation.ca/brain](https://vghfoundation.ca/brain)

## Help Purchase New Equipment

Donations to our *Most Urgent Needs* fund help our health care teams purchase much-needed equipment such as:

Rapid fluid infusers  
**\$50,000**

Endoscopes  
**\$34,800**

Pressure wound therapy devices  
**\$25,000**

Portable heart monitor  
**\$2,500**

Defibrillators  
**\$12,000**

Donate online at:  
[vghfoundation.ca/donate](https://vghfoundation.ca/donate)

Or contact:  
**604 875 4676**  
[info@vghfoundation.ca](mailto:info@vghfoundation.ca)



Garry and Pat Walker. Garry survived a rare blood disorder thanks to the expertise and care at VGH.



Dr. Hussein Kanji, Medical Director, Burns, Trauma and High Acuity Unit at VGH.

## After VGH saved his life, Garry Walker is giving back

One day, Garry Walker noticed he was so weak he couldn't climb the stairs from his building's parking garage to his office anymore.

Anxious about what this decline in his health could mean, he went to his family doctor, Dr. John Mail. Garry's fears were realized when he was diagnosed with aplastic anemia – a rare blood disorder in which his body's bone marrow wasn't creating enough new blood cells.

Garry was quickly admitted to VGH and quarantined for six days in the Leukemia Bone Marrow Transplant (L/BMT) unit.

"These were six of the most harrowing days of my life," says Garry. "Only my doctors and my wife, Pat, could visit. I was so sick from the medications and tests, and all I wanted was to get better and go home."

Happily, Garry's story ended well.

"Thanks to the incredible doctors, nurses and medical staff, and my wife's love and support, I'm walking and lifting weights again," says Garry. "VGH saved my life."

Inspired to give back, Garry and Pat reached out to VGH & UBC Hospital Foundation. They decided to help support the future of health care by including a gift in their will to the Foundation.

"We know that the BC Government funds day-to-day operations, but medicine is changing so fast that donor dollars are needed to ensure that the hospitals and staff continue to have access to the best equipment, innovation, technology and training possible," says Garry.

Join the Walker family and learn how your gift today will make a difference in the lives and communities of tomorrow. [vghfoundation.ca/legacy](http://vghfoundation.ca/legacy)

## Behind the scenes with Dr. Hussein Kanji

### Where did you grow up?

Calgary, Alberta.

### How long have you worked at VGH?

I completed my fellowship in 2013 and then started working as an attending physician in 2015.

### Why are you so passionate about ECMO?

How can you not be excited about a life-saving therapy we can institute at the bedside when all else fails! All joking aside, it's an evolving technology that allows us to use every tool we have in our arsenal to give someone the best shot at survival when there are often no more options. In order for this to work it takes the concerted effort of a team from start to finish, and I am proud to say that the team — including the nurses, perfusionists, physiotherapists, pharmacists, dietitians at VGH — are the best I have ever worked with. It's the reason we are able to continue to grow and excel in this program.

### What do you like most about your job?

Making a real difference. I know the work we are collectively doing is important and significant. If someone is in ICU, it is undeniably the worst day of their life. It is such a privilege to be part of this time, where so little can mean so much. Time has become a currency, and at the end of the day, it is the most meaningful thing you can give someone.

Support health care innovation and doctors like Dr. Kanji to save and improve lives. Learn more at [vghfoundation.ca/heart-lung](http://vghfoundation.ca/heart-lung)

