Three Local Women Celebrate Life, Resilience, And 135 Years Of Living With Type 1 Diabetes

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Submitted

It started as a discussion over "diaversaries," a blending of the number of years living with Type 1 Diabetes (T1D). It was a big year for Marti King-Coburn and Julie Evans. Marti was marking 25 years living with the disease, and Julie was to mark 50. They thought about honouring their journeys with a small gathering at Julie's. They also wanted to celebrate another community member, Catherine Willis, who was marking her 60th year with T1D. After some planning, they realized they would need a larger location.

What resulted on November 8 at Kitscoty Community Hall was a beautiful evening that included sharing a meal, learning about T1D, and hearing touching stories about three women's nothing-short-of-remarkable journeys, highlighting strength, determination, resilience, and pride. They shared it with no less than 130 of their biggest supporters. The night included dancing and even a video message from Canadian country singer George Canyon, who was diagnosed with T1D at age 14.

Marti King-Coburn, 25 years with T1D

For Marti, a 26-year-old wife, mother of one and day-home operator, "25 years of living with T1D is something that should be celebrated. It's an around-the-clock job that I never get a moment away from." Diagnosed at 15 months old after her doctor noticed her breath smelled of acetone, Marti was started on insulin therapy immediately. She remembers the red-striped pajamas from her first hospital stay.

Her management evolved over the years: first "site" injections at age six, her first pump in Grade 2, important little milestones like eating a whole chocolate bar and enjoying recess without an EA. By 2023, she was using her 26th insulin pump, an Omnipod, with a continuous glucose monitor. In 2025, she began "Looping," using an app that acts like her pancreas. This winter she plans to release a children's book, Mommy Has Diabetes.

Marti's mother, Rebecca King, spoke candidly about her and her late husband's experience caring for a young child with T1D. Catherine said Rebecca's honesty brought back her own early memories. "She had me in tears… up in the middle of the night with poking fingers, and then trying to figure out the food. So little was known about it when I got it."

Catherine Willis, 60 years with T1D

Catherine's journey began in 1961 at just five years old, after slipping into a diabetic coma. Growing up when little was understood about the disease, she was one of only two people in her community with T1D. Hospitalized in a crowded ward, she lived with strict dietary restrictions that left her constantly hungry—so much so that she once ate a banana, peel and all, "right down to the little brown nub."

Insulin therapy involved reusable needles injected only in her arms, causing tissue damage that took 15 years to heal. Urine testing gave only rough estimates of glucose levels. She left birthday parties early, avoided sleepovers, and wore long sleeves to hide scars. Still, she persisted. "They advised me way back when not to have children… I said, No, I'm having kids. I'll deal." She went on to have three children.

Her philosophy: "You get one life. Live it." Reflecting on her journey, she said, "I guess that I have done everything in life that I ever wanted to do. And, yeah, I feel very blessed."

Julie Evans, 50 years with T1D

Julie's story began in 1975. She spent a week in St. Mary's Hospital in Camrose learning to practice injections on an orange. Diabetes care then was unforgiving: boiling syringes, plungers that sometimes shattered, and insulin made from beef and pork, absorbed unpredictably.

Life went on—Bible camp, urine testing in a metal bowl at the doctor's office, and diet Shasta as her one daily treat. Disposable needles appeared in 1978. Real progress came slowly: her first glucose reading in 1982, her first insulin pen around 1985, and her first home glucose monitor in 1987 that required a massive blood drop compared to today.

Her adult life brought milestones: a diabetic pregnancy in 2000 resulting in a beautiful baby girl, and technological improvements—from her first pump "Phil" in 2010 to the Freestyle Libre in 2018 and her Tandem pump "Slim" in 2023.

Julie reflects on her journey with gratitude, humour, and pride. "I wanted to honour my journey and celebrate the effort Marti and Catherine have also put into living well with T1 Diabetes." She hoped the evening would remind the community "to come together to celebrate our strengths and our successes," and left feeling "so proud of myself and so grateful to the people who have stood with me." Re-creating a 50-year-old photo with cousins brought laughter. "I didn't have a clue what I was up against… It does not define me. It's shown me the importance of persistence, that I need others, and that it's okay to be vulnerable."

What the night meant

Catherine said, "Just because you got diabetes doesn't mean life's going to end… don't let diabetes rule your life. You'll miss out, and you don't get time back." She added that this night of celebration "was the first time in my whole life, I think I was glad that I had diabetes."

Marti said they "deserved to raise a glass and share our stories with our biggest supporters." Hearing Julie and Cathy share their experiences deeply moved her. "They had to boil their needles to sanitize them as little girls, I had an insulin pump!" A late-night conversation with seasoned diabetics sharing what were at times jaw-dropping stories of T1D experiences became her defining moment: "It was my 'this is why we did this' moment. I felt seen."

Reflecting on her journey, Marti said, "I crushed almost all of the 'you can't do this' barriers… I played sports, I found the love of my life, and I have a beautiful baby girl."

A note from the organizers

"A note from Julie, Marti and Catherine: "This event was not intended to be a fundraiser but a chance to celebrate with friends and family. As an unintended consequence, we inspired people to donate to Diabetes Canada. The response was overwhelming. We are so grateful. We've decided to put these donations toward D Camps: www.diabetes.ca/d-camps)."

Photo submitted