

# Atlantic Breast Cancer Net



## The Plastic Surgeon with a Fan Club

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### The Plastic Surgeon with a Fan Club

By Barbara Thompson

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Unbeknown to Dr. Leif Sigurdson, a plastic surgeon with the QEII HSC in Nova Scotia, he has a growing fan club. Women who would never have shown their breasts in public and who have survived the disfigurement of breast cancer surgery are now proudly lifting their shirts to show off a Sigurdson re-created breast or in some cases, breasts. For Titz'n Glitz 2005, women from Breast Cancer Action Nova Scotia created t-shirts with a photo of Dr. Sigurdson on the back and the words "Titz by Sigurdson" proudly displayed on their chests. Many of the women in the group had never been to a Titz'n Glitz event and thought, upon entering Pier 21, that their t-shirts would mean nothing amid the extreme costumes parading through the rooms. They couldn't have been more wrong. Women came up to them during the night to touch the photo on the t-shirts and comment that, "He was my plastic surgeon, too." The respect expressed by his patients is shared by his colleagues; even one of his operating room nurses

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attending the event asked to have her picture taken with the BCANS crew.

Most plastic surgeons have great skills, but what is it that sets Dr. Sigurdson apart? The women who wore the Titz by Sigurdson t-shirts are perhaps the best to explain.



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Shelagh Brown, a retired nurse from Lower Sackville, lets the positive comments roll out, "He has great listening skills, compassion and an immense passion for his work. I will never forget my first checkup when he, the resident, and my husband, Eric, all bent down to check out whether I was even or not. Here I was 53 years old with these three guys checking out my boobs!

When I was a nursing student doing my OR placement in 1970, one of my most vivid memories were of women coming in for a biopsy, then after a preliminary frozen section waking up to find they had lost a breast. To my absolute horror on February 19, 2003, I received "the call" and was told, 'you have two choices, a mastectomy or mastectomy with immediate reconstruction.' Unbelievably I had an appointment the next day to see Dr Sigurdson and I knew instantly that I was not only being seen by a truly compassionate surgeon, but by an artist. He patiently discussed all the options and together we made the choice of immediate reconstruction.

Post surgery, as friends and neighbours dropped by I would proudly show off my new 'B' cup just as I had shown off my newborn daughters 20 years earlier. For me, reconstruction was a rebirth, a sense of being whole at a time when all seemed out of control. I would never have imagined that having reconstruction would change my life. Now I can be seen showing off my breasts in living rooms, hotel rooms, and conference centres—all without being arrested! It led me to some of the most caring, giving women at BCANS. It is hard to put into words how very grateful I am."

"For me," says Jeri Gallivan of Halifax, "reconstruction was a gift I gave myself; a gift delivered by a doctor that was gentle, kind and overflowing with compassion. Dr. Sigurdson's soothing voice, respectful manner and caring demeanor gave me the confidence to use my breast cancer experience to move forward and help others. I'm proud to be a member of his huge "fan club" and I hope he sleeps every night knowing how much he has enriched all our lives. He had made an everlasting positive mark on my life and I am a much better person because of him."

"What makes Dr. Sigurdson stand out for breast cancer patients is that he treats women with respect," comments Barbara Thompson from Dartmouth. "I was a young woman who had lost an important part of my body and was dealing with the grief of that experience, as well as a sense of fear about more surgery. My surgeon knew that I would get along well with Dr. Sigurdson, but immediate reconstruction wasn't possible because Dr. Sigurdson was in Georgia at the time, training with the best breast reconstruction surgeon in the United States. I chose to have a mastectomy and wait for Dr. Sigurdson. My wait was worth it. He made me feel at ease and respected the reconstructive procedure that I chose; an expander with a saline implant. I describe him to others as a sculptor. He really is that articulate about his work. I found the whole procedure to be a medical miracle that I still marvel about five years later. Reconstructive surgery helped make me feel whole and young again. How do you thank someone for doing that?"

Elaine Finlay from Chester recounts, "Dr. Sigurdson just loves his reconstruction patients. He takes all the time necessary to explain each of the options, making sure you know the pros and cons of each option, what it involves, and the possible things that can go wrong. He makes sure that you are comfortable with your decision and that it is the best for you. Apart from that he gets a great kick out of us. One patient went into surgery with signs on her written with magic marker, "Discard, Reuse and Recycle." I had my right arm, which was at risk for lymphedema, totally covered with signs saying, 'No IV, No BP.' He takes it all in stride. They don't get any better."

"I waited a year to see him and it was worth the wait," says Ilse Shea of Clayton Park. During that year I met some women who had breast reconstruction by Dr. Sigurdson and they told me I would love him. They were right. By my first meeting I had decided to have the DIEP procedure. He was quite surprised that I had already made up my mind. I found that he was a kind, gentle and understanding doctor who took the time to listen to my concerns and explain all the pros and cons. I would not have been as confident going into surgery if he had not performed it. I remember when he took off my bandages, I saw what to me was the most beautiful breast I had ever seen. Before my reconstruction I had become very shy about my mastectomy scar and would not let anyone see it. When I told my husband I was writing a little piece about Dr. Sigurdson he told me he would like to thank him for giving him his wife back. Dr. Sigurdson has enriched my life by what he has done for me, and I am truly grateful."

The idea for the homage-to-Sigurdson t-shirts originated with BCANS Co-Chair, Rosanna Bechtel, who had bilateral reconstruction. "I'm getting to be known in breast cancer circles as 'the flasher,' I'm afraid," she admits with a laugh. "I show Dr. Sigurdson's handiwork to any woman who's interested, and they're always completely blown away, as I am every time I look in the mirror.

During my nipple reconstruction, an outpatient procedure done under local anesthetic, I got the chance to ask him a question I had been wondering about for ages, although I

didn't phrase it exactly like this: Why would this young, good-looking, immensely talented plastic surgeon, who could probably make megabucks doing facelifts and nose jobs, specialize in breast reconstruction? Dr. Sigurdson replied immediately that he didn't go into plastic surgery for the cosmetic side of it; he first became interested in treating burns, and, in fact, there's a web site that was built in his honour by a grateful burn patient here in Halifax. He added that he's not attracted by the quest for physical 'perfection'; he finds it far more rewarding to give his patients back what they've lost and help them feel normal again. His dream as a surgeon is to be a member of the first team to reattach a patient's severed hand and make it fully functional. I hope he gets to fulfill that dream: it couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

If you too have been a breast reconstruction patient of Dr. Sigurdson, email [abcn@abcn.ca](mailto:abcn@abcn.ca) and share your story with the fan club.

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"My story is not that I had surgery by Dr. Sigurdson, but that I had a consultation with him and he did not advise it! To begin with, my attending oncologist/surgeon, would have liked me to see Dr. Sigurdson in advance of my mastectomy, but there were no openings for a long time and we could not wait. I had three different types of cancer in the one breast, as it turned out one being fast growing, aggressive and unpredictable. So I had the mastectomy, lymph node removal, etc. It was one year later before an appointment became available for a consultation with Dr. Sigurdson. He was so approachable and respectful! He drew pictures, gave me the name of a book to purchase (as he had given his copies away), and I had the most honest conversation/consultation one could have. He did not really advise me to have any reconstruction because of the number of abdominal surgeries I'd had in the past - the risk of hernia, on-going pain, questionable results were all too great. He gave me the option to go home, think over all the facts, do some research, and make a decision. And I was to telephone him if I had any questions at all. I found his honesty refreshing.

I think we are so fortunate to have health coverage, because in this instance, if it were a "private" plastic surgeon in a neighboring country, I am sure I would have been encouraged to "go ahead - give it a try" because of the money involved for the surgeon. My impression of Dr. Sigurdson is that whether he was a private or publicly paid physician he would be totally supportive, but honest in all instances. We're very fortunate to have him in the Maritimes. I recall my surgeon apologizing that there was no female plastic surgeon to send me to, but most women just want a competent, compassionate, honest plastic surgeon and we certainly have that in Dr. Sigurdson. I live in PEI, since six years, and I am grateful that I can to return to Nova Scotia for consultations/surgery as required. ~~Judy Donovan Whitty, PEI~~

"What can I say about Dr. Sigurdson that has not been said already? I am a six year and one day survivor today and had reconstruction surgery over two years ago. It was well

worth the wait to get the best surgeon in the country. He is the kindest and most caring professional that I have ever met. He always had at least one intern training with him and he treated them with the courtesy and respect that he gave me as a patient. Dr. Sigurdson gave me back my confidence and self-esteem along with a new breast. When his son was born it was a celebration that he shared with us as one big family." ~ Ruth Watson, Truro ~

Have comments about this article? We'd love to hear from you. Please email us at [abcn@abcn.ca](mailto:abcn@abcn.ca)!

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