

# NO REGRETS

Joannie Rochette's mother sacrificed everything—including her own health—while her daughter rose to become an Olympic athlete. Joannie now hopes her mother's death can help save other women. BY CHRISTINE LANGLOIS





Joannie Rochette, with her biggest supporter and closest confidante—her mother, Thérèse.

**“We never thought it was her heart** that was going wrong. We just never thought about the heart,” figure skater Joannie Rochette says softly, her voice husky with emotion. Last February, two days before the 24-year-old skater was set to perform at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games, her mother, Thérèse, died of a massive heart attack.

A year later, Joannie is coming to terms with how she and so many others—including Thérèse herself—could have missed the clear signs of serious heart disease.

Joannie’s loss played out on the world stage: News media covering the Games speculated about whether grief would force her to withdraw from the competition. Then millions watched as she delivered a flawless performance in the short program. Her face a mask of sadness, she nailed every jump. Only when the music stopped and the crowd roared its approval did

she lose her composure. She skated off the ice and broke down, sobbing in her coach’s arms. Joannie went on to capture bronze after the free-skate event.

It was not how she imagined her Olympic story unfolding. “You always think these things happen to other people. You never think they will happen to you,” she says. But in the same way she found the courage to step onto the ice in Vancouver, she’s now finding the courage to share her story in a bid to help other families avoid the pain she’s living with.

Teaming up with the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, Joannie has launched the “I Heart Mom” campaign to raise awareness about heart disease in women. “If my story can help someone like my mother, I’ll tell it,” she says.

**Joannie’s story is of a singular talent** nurtured by a hard-working mother who sought every advantage for her

athletic daughter—but seemed blind to her own needs. “My mother was my biggest supporter, my biggest fan,” she says. “But I wish she would have taken better care of herself.”

The family lived in Ile Dupas, a village on a tributary of the St. Lawrence River, 90 kilometres northeast of Montreal. Joannie’s father, Normand, worked at various construction jobs, and Thérèse worked as a caregiver in a seniors’ home until a back injury—the result of a car accident in 2002—forced her to quit.

Joannie was a toddler when she first donned skates and took to the frozen river, skating around the ice-fishing huts. Her talent was obvious from early on, and by age 13 she was living in Trois-Rivières to train during the week and coming home on the weekend. Although she was away from her family, her mother was a constant presence at her competitions and the two spoke frequently on the phone when they were apart. Thérèse eventually became Joannie’s manager, working four or five hours

## CANADA’S NO. 1 KILLER

It’s a small comfort, but Joannie Rochette now knows that her mother was not alone in ignoring her risk of heart disease. Dr. Chris Glover, a cardiologist at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, sees women all the time who are shocked when he tells them there is something wrong with their hearts. “They just never consider it,” he says. While most doctors now realize the risks, “women themselves consistently underestimate their risk.”

Today, heart disease is the leading health threat among Canadian women and is the cause of a third of all female deaths—more than

all cancer fatalities in women, combined.

In its 2010 report on the state of Canadians’ heart health, the Heart and Stroke Foundation issued a dire warning about an impending explosion of heart-disease cases. Titled “A Perfect Storm,” the report blames this imminent upsurge on the huge increases in major risk factors for both men and women at younger and younger ages. Between 1994 and 2005, among people 35 to 49 years old, the prevalence of high blood pressure increased 127 percent, that of diabetes increased 64 percent and obesity, 20 percent.

The report also makes special mention of the risks to young women age 20 to 34. Out of 3.4 million Canadian women who are in this age group, one million are overweight, more than 800,000 smoke and about 1.7 million are inactive. “These are the women we might see in cardiologists’ offices within this decade,” says Dr. Beth Abramson, cardiologist at St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto and spokesperson for the Heart and Stroke Foundation. “As a society, we need to support women at all ages in reducing their risk of heart disease.”

*Christine Langlois*

a day on her daughter's skating career.

Raising an elite skater is a hugely expensive project that can cost a family thousands of dollars a year. While Normand took on extra jobs, Thérèse fundraised to keep her daughter in training. She canvassed local businesses for sponsorships and held regular spaghetti-dinner events in the community. In the early years, money was always tight. When the family couldn't afford the services of a sports psychologist who would help Joannie analyze her performance, Thérèse bought a video camera instead, recording her daughter's practices so the two of them could do their own analysis at home in the living room.

**Mother and daughter were incredibly close, driven by their common goal of Joannie winning an Olympic medal. But when it came to health and lifestyle, the pair couldn't have been more different. While Thérèse made sure her daughter trained properly, got enough rest and ate only wholesome food, she didn't follow the same rules herself. She avoided fruits and vegetables, never exercised and gained weight—especially after her car accident. She also smoked heavily, a habit she picked up when she was 12. It was the cigarettes that bothered Joannie the most. “A lot of people in my family smoke. We had so many fights about it,” she says.**

Joannie remembers how excited her mother had been before heading to Vancouver. She'd even gone shop-

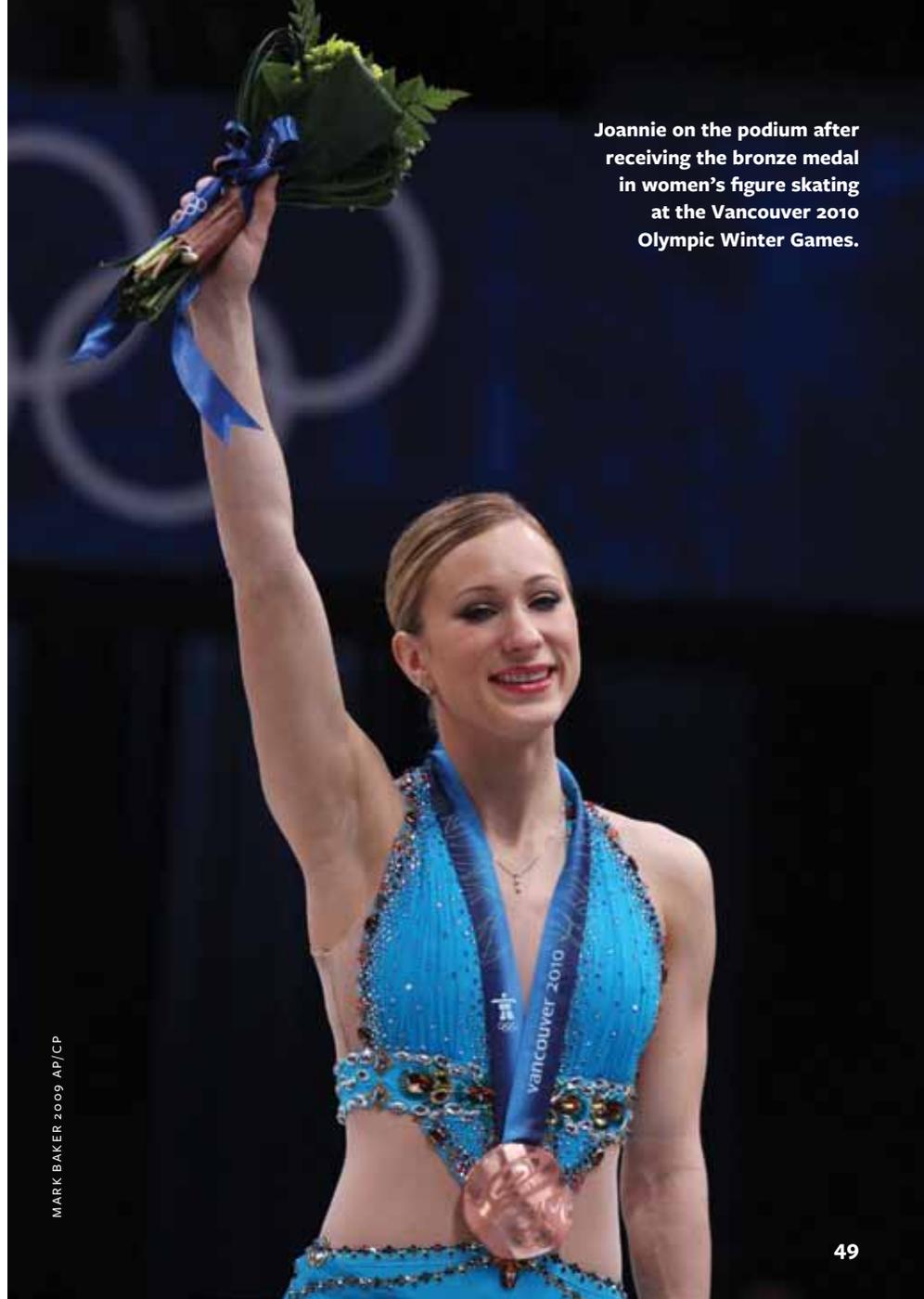
ping for the occasion, splurging uncharacteristically on a new coat that cost \$500. “I was so happy she bought it,” Joannie says. “I told her she didn't need to worry about me anymore. She should do things for herself.”

A few weeks before the Olympics, Thérèse was experiencing numbness and tingling in her arm, and pain in her shoulder—classic signs of heart disease that neither she nor her family members recognized. She told Joannie she would see a doctor after the Games and, in the interim, she went to a clinic and got a shot of cortisone for her sore shoulder.

On the afternoon of her death, Thérèse was so exhausted that she had to rest on a public bench before she could walk the rest of the way to the condo where she and Normand were staying. That night, just as Normand was climbing into bed next to Thérèse, he heard what sounded like her coughing. When he looked over, he realized she wasn't breathing. A friend who was staying with them tried CPR, but got no response. Thérèse was gone. She was 55.

**For Joannie, what happened the next day is a blur. Her father came to the Olympic Village early in the morning to give her the news. Later, her boy-**

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Joannie on the podium after receiving the bronze medal in women's figure skating at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

MARK BAKER 2009 AP/CP

## WHAT CAN THREE MONTHS DO FOR YOU?

Since her mother's death, a huge source of comfort for Joannie Rochette has been the remarkable improvement in the health of her father, Normand. Even before Thérèse's death, Normand had decided to make big lifestyle changes, including quitting smoking. Last year, he learned from his doctor that his cholesterol was high and that he needed to start taking medication. No more summer camping trips with "big steaks and beer," Joannie says with a smile.

Normand was determined to improve his health without medication: He told the doctor he'd come back in three months with his numbers under control—and he succeeded. He improved his diet ("He was looking up healthy recipes on the Internet," says Joannie) and started running every day. In three months he lost 30 pounds. When he went back to the doctor, his cholesterol levels were normal and he didn't need medication.

"I was so proud of him," Joannie says. "It's a good story about how lifestyle can improve your numbers," she says. "I want people to know that three months can make a big difference."

friend was allowed to join her in the village. "That first day I didn't want to come out of my room. I just kept the door closed," she says.

But even in her grief, she knew she had a decision to make. Her short-program performance was two days away. Should she stay in the competition? She couldn't think and she didn't know what to do. The person who had always been her closest confidante, who had guided her through many of her toughest decisions, wasn't there to help this time.

But in the end, her mother's guidance still made the difference. Three years earlier, the sudden death of her training partner had left Joannie reeling and struggling to get back to the ice—until Thérèse spoke up. "My mom said that [my partner] would want me to do whatever I needed to do to skate," Joannie explains. "She could be a little bit tough sometimes."

Joannie also considered her mother's favourite mantra. "She always said 'No regrets,'" Joannie says. What her mother meant was: Choose a course of action that won't lead to a missed opportunity. Joannie took this advice to heart in Vancouver. The next day, she got back on the ice and practised. And to her amazement, she was still landing her jumps. She realized she could perform despite her grief. "You find the strength," she says.

**Now, Joannie knows she made the right choice to compete—she has no regrets. And while she is also working hard to come to terms with her moth-**

er's death, she can't help but think about the circumstances surrounding what happened: the family history of heart disease (her maternal grandfather suffered a heart attack at 50) and her mother's less-than-healthy lifestyle.

Joannie found a note in Thérèse's wallet shortly after her death, detailing some of the symptoms she was experiencing—perhaps in anticipa-

tion of heart disease seriously—and to pay attention to their symptoms. She also wants to assist in raising funds for the University of Ottawa Heart Institute's research work, which will help families like hers, in which heart disease may be hereditary. "I'm doing it for me, to find a bit of comfort. And I'm motivated to help mothers to be healthy for their kids," she says.

Now a spokesperson for the "I Heart Mom" campaign, Joannie is determined to continue following her mother's mantra of "No regrets."

tion of her post-Olympic visit to the doctor. Each was a telltale sign of heart disease. "I can't believe we didn't think of it," she says, then shakes her head. "I just try to think of my mother in happier times."

As a spokesperson for the "I Heart Mom" campaign, Joannie hopes to encourage women to take the risks of

As an athlete, she knows the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and she wants others to get these benefits as well. She's also determined to continue following her mother's advice of "No regrets."

"I'm really glad I had her for those 24 years," she says. "My mom did her job well. She raised me as best she could."

### SURVEY SAYS...

**People fear speaking** in public more than death, studies reveal. "Which means," Jerry Seinfeld points out, "that if you have to be at a funeral, you would rather be in the casket than doing the eulogy."

**"According to a survey,"** says Robert De Niro, "women are more comfortable undressing in front of men than in front of women. They say that women are too judgemental, where of course men are just grateful."

Submitted by *Ben Broughton*

