



# The Health Whisperer

Equally at home in her store or at home on the range, Lovie Wesolowski has been sharing the message of good health with the people and athletes (four legged and two) in Saskatchewan for over 40 years.

*Story/photos by Bruce W. Cole*

If you happen to be in Saskatoon and are hoping to see Lovie Wesolowski, there are two places you are likely to find her. The most obvious spot is her store of 40 years, Nature's Health Centre. It's where she has helped countless people regain and maintain good health. It is also where she has helped launch the careers of many elite athletes.

The other spot you can find her is out on the plains of Saskatchewan, in the midst of other elite athletes – these ones of the four-legged variety. In recent years, she has been applying her vast knowledge of nutrition and wellness to an entirely new community – horses. As Lovie says, it is all part of the journey, and her journey began shortly after she became of school-age.

Lovie showed an unusual interest and amazing clarity in her own health from a very young age – between six and seven – and a remarkable talent for assessing and then solving any issue she had. "I had bronchitis, so I modified my diet: I

stopped eating meat and drinking milk. It was around this age I toured a meat packing plant. I never touched meat again after that. . . I was basically a vegan at age six, even though I didn't know what a vegan was. I only knew what was good for my body."

## Starting young

Her family doctor was intrigued by the way she thought things through. "He recommended I would need vitamins if I was going vegan, so I started taking B12. It all took off from there. I developed an interest in the human body. I'd draw pictures of how the heart worked and how it related to the lungs. Our doctor was amazed at my comprehension of the human body. That was my interest from a young age: how does the body work. I'd go to the library and do research. I had an innate interest...it was so natural. I learned that things don't just happen in the body...there's a reason for everything."

Growing up in a rural Ukrainian setting both helped and hurt, she explains. "I was raised in folklore medicine, so part of my interest came from that. I was very conscious about what I ate. However, this was hard to do when you are raised Ukrainian, where the regular diet is made up of items like holubtsi (stuffed cabbage rolls) and petahe (pierogies)."

Lovie bought her first nutrition book at age 12. For her 14th birthday, her parents bought her a stethoscope (which she still has.) All things pointed to career in medicine. Unfortunately, her parents didn't have the money needed to send her to medical school. Her options seemed to be very limited, and then a series of events sent her in a new direction.

It all started when a brand new mall was built in Saskatoon in the mid-1970's, and Lovie's brother Laddie decided to open a hair salon there. He was negotiating his lease and the entire family was excited about this new business venture.

Lovie's other brother Jules – who was attending school in Moose Jaw – asked her if she had ever dreamed of opening a store. “I was in grade 11 at the time. Jules suggested I open a health food store, given my passion and my extensive knowledge. It made me think that would really be something.”

At the time, there were no health food stores in Saskatoon. The closest thing to one was the health supply bookstore in town where Lovie bought all her books. And then, the news hit: the local Bay department store announced it was going to open a health food department and was looking for help. Curious, Lovie went for an interview. It didn't take her long to realize that she knew a lot more about natural health than the people who would be running the department. Instead of feeling disappointed, she was filled with optimism. “It gave me the confidence to think about opening my own store as Jules had suggested. I went back and told my brothers that I think I could do it.”

#### Planning her store

Still in high school, Lovie began the process. She went looking for a space and was accepted as a tenant at each plaza she visited. “Despite my youth, they didn't see me as a risk. I was mature. I was always old for my age.” Like her brother, she signed a lease for 400 sq. ft. in the new Grosvenor Mall.

She went to the library, researched every supplier she could find and wrote them letters explaining her plan. The family helped financially. Her parents co-signed a loan, and so did her brother Fred. And brother Jules – who was the first to encourage Lovie on this idea – loaned her \$5,000. Suppliers began to ship her vitamins. She waited for the new mall to open.

And then – disaster! The new mall was delayed! Normally, this would not have been an issue, but Lovie had a houseful of vitamins to sell, and each bottle had an expiry date. She was in danger of going under before even starting.

In an incredible act of paternal generosity, Lovie's father saved the day. He had a small barbershop in the Sutherland Plaza and realizing the situation, he retired, giving the space to Lovie so she could open her store on time. “He did that so I could sell my vitamins. Otherwise, they would have expired before the mall was ready.”

Eventually, Grosvenor opened and Lovie moved over there and has remained there for 39 years. However, she kept the Sutherland location open for a few years to give her mother a job until she retired. “My mother was my biggest

supporter from day one and throughout the journey, even helping out after we had the kids. Without her, I would never have had the flexibility I enjoyed.”

After opening, the real work started. Lovie began attending as many classes related to natural health as she could. “I would go to work during the day and go to school at night.” And she didn't limit the classes to Saskatoon. “I'd travel all over the province. I even attended classes in places like Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver. I'd borrow my brother's car to get there and then sleep in the car to save hotel costs. And I'd stay with extended family in Toronto to attend classes.”

As an investor, Jules was Lovie's partners. But he had other business interests so the the majority of work fell to Lovie. “He'd cover for me primarily when I had class. Any money we made went to pay rent and to help Jules' family. I was still living at home so money wasn't a concern for me.” Lovie eventually bought Jules out.

Very early in her career, Lovie became something of a sports nutrition guru. It all started rather innocently. “I knew there were things you could take to get well, to get your body back into balance. So I began to wonder how much an athlete could improve his or her performance by taking the right combination of products?

#### Connection with elite athletes

“My brother Fred was a weight trainer, so he became my guinea pig. I made a program for him. Other athletes at the gym noticed how strong he was getting and how much he had grown. Soon, many started to come to me seeking the same results, including athletes and even doctors from the University of Saskatchewan.” Lovie even attracted interest from Dr. Abram Hoffer, the renown Canadian biochemist, physician, and psychiatrist. “I spent a lot of time with Dr. Hoffer and he would talk to me about health. And he started sending his patients to my store. They were very intrigued with my journey.”

Lovie has had a close tie to many elite athletes coming out of her hometown and home province, and include major junior teams, university athletes, Olympians and even National Hockey League players. They seek her out for her expertise in the hopes of enhancing their performance. Among the clients she served include current NHLers Mike Green, Luke and Brayden Schenn and Devin Setoguchi. She worked extensively with her hometown Saskatoon Blades and her system improved player performance and output considerably. This garnered



Lovie Wesolowski has operated her store – Nature's Health Centre – in Saskatoon's Grosvenor Mall for 39 of the 40 years she has been in business.

interest from as far away as amateur and pro teams in Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver.

Kevin Cheveldayoff, who is currently the general manager of the NHL's Winnipeg Jets, has known Lovie since his teen years, and he attributes much of his success to her. This is what he wrote to her, to be included in the book she is currently writing: “When I was growing up, what we knew about our bodies and how to fuel them for athletic performance was limited. I was very fortunate to have met sports nutritionist Lovie Wesolowski through my older brother, who played football for the University of Saskatchewan's team.”

As a young hockey player, Kevin says he was looking to become the best that he could be. “I gained a keen interest in nutrition by age eighteen. I played hockey for four years and was drafted by the New York Islanders, and I prided myself on being in top physical condition. Lovie's guidance and expertise throughout those years was a substantial part of that for me. Through Lovie, I learned how the human body works, how my own body reacted to foods, what I needed to do to fuel it properly, and what would help me to achieve my goals. When I look back now, I can see how my understanding of nutrition positively affected my body and my performance then. I really believe that the evolution of nutrition, and expertise in understanding how your body reacts with it, has continued to grow due to Lovie, and people like her. She has dedicated her life to constant

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PHOTO: Sharon Ebbert

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learning and teaching what she has learned to all of those around her. This, in my mind, has helped to advance the science of nutrition a great deal.”

### Working on her book

Lovie’s work with elite athletes is currently being formalized as she continues to finish on her book. It is something she has had in the works for several years and is close to completing. “It is a book to assist hockey parents in their journey to find the best nutrition for their kids. It’s a compilation of my knowledge and experience, coupled with the knowledge and experience of many of the people I have worked with, including amateur and Olympic athletes, junior, university and professional hockey players and team, coaches, agents, scouts and general managers.”

### “A consultant first”

When asked if she sees herself first as a natural health retailer or a nutritional consultant, Lovie answers without hesitation. “I’ve always been a consultant first. The store was just a way to earn an income, and a place to show people what products to use and how to use them. If you weren’t around in the early days, it might be hard to understand how hard it was for natural health retailers. Products were virtually unknown. There was no marketing or merchandising support. At that time, nutrition was primarily promoted to people who wanted to LOOK better, not feel better. People weren’t exercising like now. Even at the University of Saskatchewan, there was only one small gym. That was the kind of atmosphere and terrain we started in.”

In her 40 years as a retailer, Lovie (centre) counts herself fortunate to have had amazing people come and work with her at Nature’s Health Centre. “I’ve been the lucky one. I’ve had people search me out who had an interest. They found me.

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From left, current staff members Nicole Landahl, Brittany McGonnigal and Megan Woloschuk, along with Beckie Harris (far right) who worked with Lovie for over 25 years before recently retiring.

### Staffing has been a “win-win”

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An example is Beckie Harris, who worked with Lovie for 25 years until she retired a few years ago. “She was incredible. Committed, supportive, things were in good hands when I wasn’t there. Everything you could imagine. I’ve had staff stay 12, 15 years. Some have gone on to careers as naturopaths and biochemists. It was on their journey they made a stop with me. They were looking for something to move them forward to their knowledge. I always knew the right people would find me. It has been a win-win for both. I don’t really own the store...I see myself as the gate keeper, and keep things flowing. I see the customer owning the store, and they tell me what they want and need. My co-workers become part of that community. I don’t see it benefitted me as much as it benefitted the customer, by having these amazing people who worked with me. I connected with them and trusted them. You connect with who you have to at the right time. It’s been a privilege to see my co-workers learn and evolve and the same with customers...they evolve, too. To see them grow and start families and learn about wellness, then see their kids go through the same things. The relationships are what have kept everything fresh, as nothing ever stands still.”

Lovie has pinpointed the thing that worked for her when it came to staffing. “You have to put your co-workers first... that’s how you succeed. You have to respect they are there helping you and

they have lives and other interests. I treat them as I hope someone else would treat my own children. It’s about how you treat people, be it clients, customers or co-workers. It’s important to respect them. I have tried to create an environment that I would want to be in and one I think my co-workers would want to be in. You need to be part of it, but not be ‘it.’

### Eli: a love story

These days, when Lovie has some spare time, you’re likely to find her at Barbour Performance Horses, a stable at the end of a muddy country road, about a half-hour drive out of Saskatoon. That is where she boards Eli, her beloved six year-old quarter horse. He was a gift from her husband Steve and twin sons Adam and Austin in the summer of 2013.

Horses had always been a passion for Lovie, and understandably so: her brother Fred bought her one when she was a young teen and it was kept in the family backyard. She rode it and walked it everywhere. It was the most important thing in her life at that time. Eventually, Saskatoon city officials forced the family to move the horse, and it lived out its final days with Lovie’s cousin on a farm 25 kms outside of town. Still, Lovie would faithfully ride her bike out there every week to visit and groom him and ride.

After starting her family, the tradition of a once-a-year visit to a local ranch – complete with trail riding – would have to suffice. It became an annual family tradition for Lovie, Steve and the boys and helped in some small way to satisfy her life-long passion for horses. This eventually evolved into Lovie taking riding lessons and culminated three years ago, when Steve and the boys surprised her with Eli.

“The funny thing is Eli picked me, not the other way around,” recalls Lovie. “Before Steve bought him, we’d drive to the farm, and Eli would come and greet me. He’d wait and watch me. I thought, ‘My gosh, whoever gets this horse someday, will be so lucky. If I could have a horse, it would be him.’”

Lovie was shocked with the gift and in disbelief...but not for long. Almost immediately, she channeled her decades of natural health and nutrition experience into Eli’s health, augmented by an on-line crash-course in equine nutrition from the University of Guelph. “He gets as many vitamins as anyone. He’s more compliant. I experiment with him regarding his cognitive abilities and responsiveness and recovery. He’s healthier. He’s never been sick or lame.” Lovie’s reputation in the local equine community spread quickly. “I am working with my current

veterinarian so she can apply some of my experience. I gave her some omega 3s to give to a horse that was having respiratory issues, and some of the other local vets are being 'converted' after hearing about my experiences."

#### Nutrition for horses

These days, everyone at Lovie's stable is supplementing their horses, because of her influence and practices. "People see Eli's endurance and health and they want to be part of it. Even Bobby Ann Barbour – the owner of the stable – comes to me about her performance horses. I'm also seeing interest from owners of race horses. All of this has me looking at developing an equine nutrition line. This could be a real opportunity."

After 40 years as a retailer, Eli has offered Lovie a diversion and re-ignited a former passion. "He's like my retirement package, although I'm still working. He brings balance to everything."

Not that Lovie is contemplating retirement. "I don't know if I'll ever retire. If someone is meant to buy my store someday, I hope it can continue. I've never really thought about it."

However, she is reflective as she considers her four decades of bringing natural health to the people of Saskatoon,

with a special focus on elite athletes.. "It was never about doing it for money, because when I made enough every month to pay my rent, I was elated. It was always about the daily experience. With the store, it has always been like being in a relationship. By going through different times and experiences and , it creates new relationships with your business. It's the same as with customers and co-workers. It's definitely never stagnant."

#### Enjoy the journey

Part of her success, says Lovie as both a retailer and as a nutritional consultant, has been doing everything in a professional manner. "I've been able to find my way into areas – like working with pharmacies and doctors – that were maybe at one time considered unattainable, because of acting in a professional way. Where can you fit? The sky is the limit if you act and conduct yourself as a professional. It will attract other profession-



Lovie's influence on her local equine community has been profound. Many horse owners – even stable owner Bobby Ann Barbour (left) – come to Lovie for advice on nutrition, recovery, health and performance of their animals.

als and bring respect. Your limit is only what you put upon yourself. You have to be able to have a balance to stay in business, and really understand and remember why you're in to it. It depends what you're in it for. I've never fought the journey. I've just enjoyed it." •

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