

# Cancer-stricken Stratford woman continues her fight to be reunited with British fiancé



Cory Smith

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**With surgery to remove a cancerous thyroid and surrounding lymph nodes just weeks away, Stratford's Sarah Campbell is writing letters to prominent politicians, including the prime minister, to allow her British fiancé to enter Canada. Cory Smith**

With surgery to remove a cancerous thyroid and surrounding lymph nodes just weeks away, Sarah Campbell pulls up a chair to the island in her parents' kitchen and puts pen to paper. After weeks of futile attempts to contact government officials, the 25-year-old Stratford woman feels ignored, and now she's writing four of the most prominent politicians in Canada, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and asking them – once again – to

reconsider who is deemed immediate family allowed into the country during a global pandemic.

“I don’t want to be swept under the rug, and if I’m silent I will be swept under the rug,” she says. “What we need is the right person to see that we’re not going to stop fighting.”

You may be familiar with Campbell’s story, which has garnered national attention.

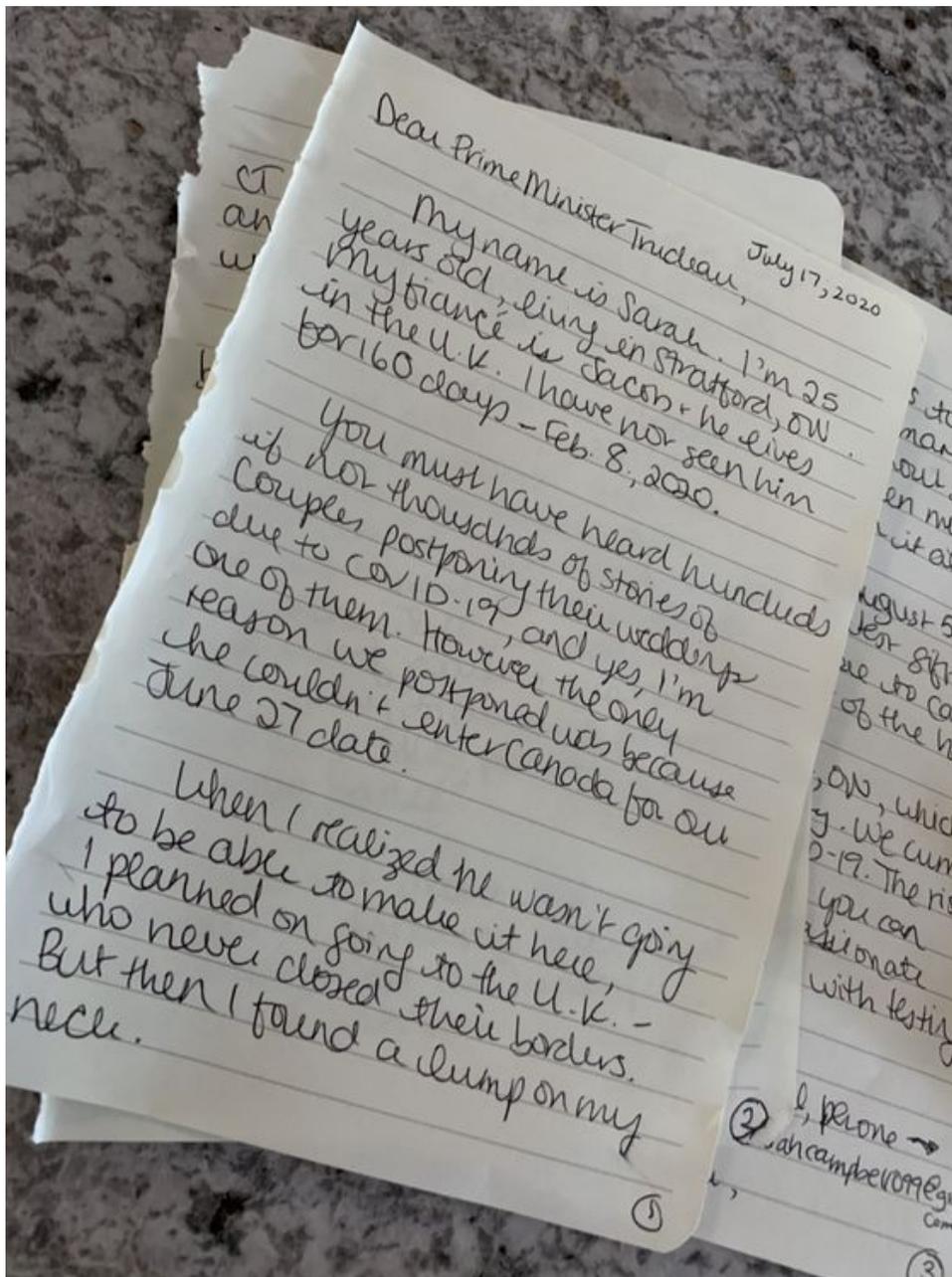
She was supposed to marry British fiancé Jacob Taylor at a Stratford church last month, but theirs was one of many weddings postponed because of COVID-19. It’s a situation shared by hundreds of cross-continental couples, but Campbell, who was diagnosed with cancer five days after her June 27 wedding date, is asking for compassion and not for open borders.

“As encouraging as it was to get all the media attention, it’s been equally as discouraging to see the silence from the government that still hangs over the situation,” she says. “I’ve heard nothing from them, and I continue to reach out.”

So, Campbell writes. To Trudeau. To Bill Blair, the minister of public safety and emergency preparedness. To Patty Hajdu, the minister of health. And to Francois-Phillipe Champagne, the minister of foreign affairs. Each letter is like a diary entry, and each letter is a little different.

She repeats the process each day, and she won’t stop until she’s heard.

“It’s easy to ignore an email, it’s easy to hit delete, it’s easy to hit ‘mark as read’ ... but what is less easy to ignore is somebody who has taken the time to sit down and hand write snail mail,” she says. “When it comes down to it, I refuse to be ignored. I’m a Canadian. The government is supposed to be there to listen to me.”



Campbell has many supporters. Sarnia-Lambton MP Marilyn Gladu backed an official petition that garnered more than 5,300 signatures asking the government to include fiancés and long-term partners among foreign nationals considered immediate family of Canadians to enter the country for reunification purposes. Gladu pressed Blair and other federal ministers early in the pandemic and, by early June, restrictions were eased, though not to the extent asked for by Campbell and many concerned constituents in Gladu's border riding.

Gladu won't be able to formally present the petition until September when Parliament resumes, assuming it does at that point, but her solution includes unmarried partners

applying for a certificate to prove their relationship, much like married couples who can enter Canada to be with their spouse.

“I think we need to make sure whatever the proof is, it’s something easy to understand so we can get consistent with border crossing guards,” Gladu said. “We don’t want people thinking they can come ... then they show up and (the Canadian Border Services Agency) sends them back.”

When asked about Campbell’s story, border agency senior spokesperson Rebecca Purdy told The Beacon Herald the agency doesn’t comment on, or provide information, relating to an individual or specific situation.

“The Government of Canada recognizes the challenges that this pandemic and the temporary border measures have had on families and has been looking at ways to keep families together and support family unity while respecting measured public health controls. We recognize that these are difficult situations for some. However, these are unprecedented times, and the measures imposed were done so in light of potential public health risks and to help reduce and manage the number of foreign travel-related cases of COVID-19.”

Perth-Wellington MP John Nater said he would like the government to expand its definition of immediate family and allow those from abroad into Canada to be with their significant others, provided the foreign country has a safe level of COVID-19 transmission, and anyone entering Canada gets tested and quarantines.

Blair did not respond to multiple interview requests.

“It’s a concern seeing so many families being put in a difficult position,” Nater said. “It’s not one group of families. It’s a number of different types (such as) fiancés, long-term relationships ... and by all accounts they’re very similar to a married couple that is provided an exemption.”

Campbell has joined forces with the Advocacy for Family Reunification at the Canadian Border, a group that has more than 3,000 members and was responsible for creating the

government petition. Co-founder Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon, a Toronto-based physician, was in Ireland in March with his partner of about 17 months when it was announced the Canadian border would close.

Poon's partner passed a COVID-19 test in late March and self-isolated before flying to Canada April 9. Despite taking safety precautions and providing documents such as shared bills, a lease, texts, photos and a notarized letter from an Irish lawyer attesting to their relationship, Poon's partner was denied entry into the country.

"All we are asking for is a transparent, real discussion," he said. "We are not asking for open borders. We are just asking to be together."

Poon pointed to a four-point plan he developed with guidance from Toronto epidemiologist Dr. Colin Furness, which proposes entry of foreign nationals if they sign a legally binding, sworn affidavit, proof of health coverage and travel insurance, same-day COVID-19 testing – paid for by the person entering the country – and a 14-day family quarantine provision.

He expressed disappointment that an exemption was made for National Hockey League players – many of whom are not from Canada – who are allowed to bring their spouses and significant others into their "bubble" in Edmonton during the conference finals and Stanley Cup final, provided they pass the required tests and safety checkpoints before and after arrival.

"That is exactly what we want," he said. "This is a huge affront to our cause, and I truly believe it's not at all clear and transparent with Canadian people."

"To be ignored on this topic is very challenging for us."

In an email to Gladu June 11, Poon suggested the government's definition of immediate family was discriminatory and potentially a violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Ed Corrigan, a London immigration lawyer, said he believes the government's policy is a violation of section 15 of the charter, which protects equality rights. But Corrigan – a

specialist certified by the Law Society of Ontario in citizenship and immigration – said the breach would be saved by invoking the notwithstanding clause, which “allows differentiation that would be acceptable in a democratic society.”

He added: “The purpose of trying to prevent the spread of a pandemic and to save lives would override individual rights.”

Campbell’s surgery was initially scheduled for Aug. 5 in Stratford, but she found out July 17 the cancer has spread across her neck. She’ll now travel to London for a right and left neck dissection and thyroidectomy, which will take at least eight hours.

Until then, she’ll continue to sit at the island in her parents’ kitchen each day and write her story until someone in power listens.

She’s become the reluctant voice of an international movement.

“At the end of the day, I do feel obligated,” she says. “I feel obligated not just for me and Jacob, but I feel obligated for the thousands of couples who are apart. I feel obligated for the woman who is about to go through childbirth on her own without her partner by her side. I feel obligated for the son who is a non-dependent child who can’t be with his mother while she’s dying.

“I feel obligated for these people on behalf of them to fight. When you’ve been given, in the weird sense of the word, the privilege to have this tragic story you hold a lot of weight, you’ve got a lot more push than some of the other people.

“It’s a sad privilege, but it’s also an honour in a weird way because none of this should be happening.”

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