



## REMEMBERING

# Dr. William Albert Whitelaw (Bill)



"Bill will remain in my memory for as long as it lasts as a most kind, gentle, loving, funny, witty, and brilliant person who, for me, exemplifies what it is to be a friend, a gentleman, and a marvellous human being with well-chosen and steadfast priorities that made him so beloved by everyone who knew him." - Tim Yates

Bill Whitelaw died peacefully on Sunday, July 7, 2024, at the Extended Care Unit of the Lady Minto Hospital on Salt Spring Island, BC, following a struggle with dementia. Predeceased by his wife Jenny in 2018, he will be missed by his son Peter and daughter-in-law Helen, his son John and daughter-in-law Tracie, and their daughters Emily and Claire, as well as his brother John's family, his brother Bruce and family, and his many lifelong friends.

Bill was a self-effacing, softly (sometimes too softly) spoken man who was fun-loving and serious, principled and independent, an intellectual and a lover of farce. He was known as a prankster and a supreme storyteller, an adventurer, and a lover and collector of classical music and books. Endlessly curious, Bill dove into birdwatching, mushroom hunting, and wildflower collecting.

He left an indelible mark on those around him. To his children and grandchildren, he was deeply caring and supportive. Despite working long hours, he refused to let his young boys go to bed without reading to them, and each year he concocted a treasure hunt with devious riddles that had to be solved to find their Easter baskets. When his sons were older, he encouraged them to pursue their hearts' desires, as long as they worked hard. Later in life, he welcomed news of his granddaughter's gender transition by cracking a bottle of champagne.

Colleagues and students praised Bill as a wise mentor, a great teacher, and a researcher driven by insatiable curiosity. He was also a merry soul. He was infamous around the medical school for his amusing selection of bow ties, which led to the Dr. Whitelaw You May Be Funny But Your Mother Sure Dresses You Funny award given annually by the medical students. The joy with which he shared news of this "honour" among his friends and colleagues showed that his ego never got in the way of anything he did. One colleague said that "few people have influenced my career and hence my life as much as [Bill]," a sentiment echoed by many.

Bill was born on September 3, 1941, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where his father was stationed during World War II. The family then moved to Vancouver, where he

attended Maple Grove, Point Grey, and Magee schools, and made the first of the many lifelong friends he collected throughout his life. He finished high school at Trinity College School in Ontario, after which he returned to Vancouver to attend the University of British Columbia. After a year, he was accepted to the University of Toronto Honours Math, Physics, and Chemistry program. He thought of this as one of the most challenging academic experiences of his life and was quietly very proud to have graduated from "MPC." After graduation, he attended medical school at McGill University in Montreal, specializing in Internal Medicine.

While at McGill, Bill noticed the beautiful Jenny Mann in the Dean's office and summoned the courage to ask her out. In spite of an inauspicious first date in which he slept through a movie, he secured a second date and survived her opening gambit: a water-bomb ambush. The two fell quickly in love and married on May 16, 1970. Their shared sense of adventure took the couple around the world. The first stop was Uganda, where Bill practiced cardiology and tropical medicine and learned firsthand the reality of life under the dictatorial rule of the ruthless Idi Amin. He and Jenny also learned the pain of loss when their daughter Emma died in a terrible accident, an event which affected them deeply for the rest of their lives.

They returned to Montreal in 1972 so Bill could work on a PhD in Respiratory Physiology. Despite their loss, they had two more children, with the births of Peter and John bringing joy back into their lives. After his PhD, the family moved to Edinburgh, where Bill completed postdoctoral studies in 1975-76.

Following a brief return to Montreal, Bill joined the new Faculty of Medicine in Calgary. During his tenure, he led the Division of Respiratory Medicine from 1978 to 1997, helped start the Foothills Medical Centre Sleep Lab, and was instrumental in achieving Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada approval for the division's training program. He was co-founder of the Calgary History of Medicine Program, which he chaired until 2007.

During their years in Calgary, Bill's sense of adventure and love of nature inspired many outdoor activities. A place he especially loved was his parents' off-grid cabin in BC's interior, which he visited as often as possible, bringing the family up for three weeks every summer. He led Cub Scouts trips, took up whitewater canoeing, hiked regularly, and walked extensively.

Bill and Jenny retired to Salt Spring Island in 2007. Not content to sit on his laurels, Bill joined the Trail and Nature Club, sat on the Lady Minto Hospital Board, and was a Christmas Bird Count section leader. Unfortunately, Jenny suffered a long, slow descent into dementia, and Bill made every arrangement to keep her home and happy as long as possible. When she moved to the nearby Greenwoods assisted living home, he visited every day and often took her for walks and social outings.

After Jenny's death in 2018, Bill continued to stay fully engaged, joining a group of men called "The Old Codgers" for weekly lunches, traveling to visit friends and family, gardening, and reading extensively. Bill also struggled with dementia, so John and his family moved in with him in 2020 so he could stay at home. He was delighted to live with his granddaughters, taking great interest in their activities and pride in their achievements. In early 2024, his health deteriorated, and he was admitted to the Extended Care Unit at the Lady Minto Hospital, where he died

peacefully on July 7th.

Bill and Jenny were lifelong supporters of social and environmental causes. Regular and generous donors to many charities, they also traveled to Nepal, the Philippines, Laos, and China to teach new doctors and help build capacity at local medical schools. Anyone wishing to honour Bill is asked to make a donation to their own favourite charity and to raise a glass in his memory.

