

A Celebration of Life

The Valley Regional Hospital is located in the town of Kentville, Nova Scotia, a rural community with a population of some 6,000 people. The town is situated in the Annapolis Valley, close by the Bay of Fundy. It was here, in the month of October 2007, that a rather unusual event took place.

The town is surrounded by gentle hills, which, in this particular month, were dressed in autumn colours. Deep red, orange and yellow leaves were gradually replacing summer green. When the sun chose to smile upon the undulating countryside, it warmed the air, encouraging a sweet aroma to arise from the fallen, fermenting leaves.

The Bay of Fundy, of course, was a world unto its own. When the tide went out, the water seemed to disappear over the horizon, leaving vast stretches of wet, packed sand, an invitation, as it were, to any unsuspecting spectator to take a stroll. Then, without notice, the sea would return, sweeping all before it. It was here that the real force and majesty of nature could be observed in all its power. At least, there was a patient in the Valley Regional Hospital who saw it this way.

His name was John St. Amand and he resided in Room 613, on the surgical ward. It wasn't difficult to find. During the day, the room was seldom silent. As you approached it from the elevator, you could hear voices in spirited conversation, punctuated, as often as not, with laughter. Seldom was there just one or two visitors. There were usually many, crowded about — some sitting, some standing, some out in the corridor in search of more chairs. The centre of attention was the resident patient, usually dressed in a colourful hunting shirt, navy blue slacks and thick socks. Once a large man, cancer had diminished his physical size but had not dimmed his spirit. His generous laugh was infectious. His tired eyes sparkled behind his glasses. All had come to bid farewell, to offer comfort. They quickly discovered that this room was not a venue for lamentation. Rather, the resident patient was enjoying a celebration of his life, with an appetite for which he was well known.

They came from different walks of life and different regions of the nation. They included family, colleagues from colleges and universities, trade unionists, political activists, fishers, friends, young men and women who had been profoundly influenced by this patient.

They hailed from Nova Scotia towns and cities such as Kentville, Berwick, Stonehurst, Lunenburg, Rose Bay, West LaHave, Blockhouse, Mahone Bay,

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John with Jim and Ian McCrorie

Halifax and Dartmouth. Family and friends came from Brantford, Hamilton, Forrest, Oakville, and Toronto, all in the province of Ontario. A brother and family arrived from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Friends came from Regina. There were telephone calls from Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Hamilton.

John St. Amand had been admitted to palliative care on October 17th, when it was discovered that the cancer was beyond remedial treatment. Shirley Landry, John's sister-in-law, recalls the family meeting with the attending physician. "John had only days and possibly weeks left. Dr. Clark mentioned that he could do a stent but that it may not be advisable as John was already having trouble breathing. He looked at Marilyn (his partner) and said that he had had enough. Marilyn replied '...that it is whatever you want, Johnny. I will be okay with it.' I remember John saying that he had lived a very good life and had had support to do a lot of things he wanted to do. He went on to say that he wouldn't change anything. He had no regrets. He wanted to spend whatever time he had left with family and friends. He did not want any clergy visiting the room to offer prayers. I remember the doctor telling John, after he had advised the family of the disastrous news, that although he had not known him for long, he admired his grace and dignity under the circumstances."

Gail Chalmers, who John affectionately referred to as "my other sister," was present during John's last days and has recorded her recollections of

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them. “I was part of the contingency of family and friends from Ontario and Saskatchewan who spent the last two weeks of October with John. When I think of those last two weeks of John’s life, words such as brave, courageous, funny, involved, all come to mind. John was courageous in the face of death. But for John, it was not a case of “putting on a brave face.” Rather, he just continued to live his life the way he always had. He engaged in conversation with zeal, laughed heartily and relished the reliving of past events and times through his and others’ recollections. We all could just as easily been sitting in John and Marilyn’s living room in Stonehurst as in a hospital room in Kentville.

“Visitors to John’s hospital room knew they were on the right floor when they rounded the final corridor and heard laughter coming from the end room on the right. He greeted each person enthusiastically and with that characteristic big smile on his face. He would start right in, engaging them in conversation and alleviating any awkwardness or sorrow they expressly stated or that he sensed they felt. John was not about self-pity. Rather, John was about putting others at ease. Entertaining any ‘why me’ thoughts or talking about how cancer was stealing his life were never topics of conversation in that room. He wanted to talk with each and every person and find out how and what everyone was doing. The delight in his face was truly genuine. I knew that his room was not like any other hospital room that I had been in and that this was not going to be like any other experience that I had had with dying.

“John took charge of the room, reminiscing, catching up and even advising those who were embarking on new phases of their life or undertaking new projects. His advice included concrete help. He provided names and phone numbers of possible contacts and organizations that he thought could help them on their way. He was as involved in their lives that day as he would have been on any other day.

“I so enjoyed hearing John telling stories from his rich life, in ways that only he could spin them out. The cancer had not dulled his facial expressions, intonations or language. Each twist and turn of his stories was punctuated with the laughter of those gathered in his room and we could not help but urge him on to tell us more. Any time he took a break, there was always someone waiting with a personal story about John and then that would bring more laughter to the room. One of our biggest concerns was making sure that the door stayed closed in order not to disturb others on the floor.

“The large number of daily visitors, with many returning to visit again, was a testament to the kind of man John was and the kind of life he led and continued to lead. Accommodating all of John’s visitors was part of the daily routine of managing the flow of people in and out of his room. To facilitate this movement, his sisters Ruth, Priscilla, Doris-Jean and his brother Dwight

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and I would regularly relinquish our spots and head down to the patient waiting room. This time was usually spent either running errands, as needed, or waiting to return to John's room.

"Any time the sun shone through his room's window, we all helped John bundle up, move into his wheelchair and then we headed for the great outdoors. We either just sat in the warmth of the sun, or walked around the hospital grounds pushing John's wheelchair. October turned out to be a warm month, giving us a number of opportunities to take John outside.

"Each daytime, of course, was followed by a nighttime routine. John often initiated the nighttime hours by working on his obituary. It was clearly important to him to put to paper his indebtedness to those who had shaped his adult life and to spare his loved ones from having to undertake this task. Each evening he would write and each morning he gave his completed work to his sister, Doris-Jean, who would type it, have it printed and then return it to John to continue the process the next evening.

"We often ate supper in John's room. We would bring supper from the hospital cafeteria or a local restaurant. On some days, our supper gratefully came from the food friends brought earlier that day. Because John could take in very little food and the amount continued to diminish as the days went by, we would try to increase the strength that jello alone could provide by supplementing his intake with protein powder. As long as John's strength remained, he was determined to continue his visits with friends."

Patti Jamieson, Dwight's wife recalls: "Our whole family flew from Prince Albert to Nova Scotia when we heard how ill John was. John had said that he wanted to see his family and we were pleased he'd voiced that wish. Our son, Brian, had just turned twenty-one and had quit university part way through. In Brian's words, he was just 'bumming around.' John made a point of saying to Brian and the other young people who were visiting him in hospital that he had not decided how he wanted to spend his life until he was twenty-six years old. What to do with your life was not something you necessarily knew right away. When you decided what you want to do with your life, never think you can't do it because you can. 'Don't for a minute think you can't,' he said, nodding his head two or three times, looking around at the young people who were present.

"Later that day, in our hotel room, Brian said to me: 'Why did we live so far away from John all these years? I missed out on getting to know him.' It was both an accusation and an acknowledgement."

Gail Chalmers continues: "His brother Dwight and his sisters Ruth, Priscilla and Doris-Jean took turns staying overnight in the hospital room with John and Marilyn, helping in any way they could. John did not have many restful nights. Every night, those who were there worked with the hospital staff to ensure that he received the pain medication he needed. Those who

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Outing from the hospital. Back: Dwight St. Amand, Doris Jean St. Amand, Gail Chalmers, Roy Landis, Laurell Ritchie, Carolyn Brimmer, Art Davis. Front: Ruth St. Amand, John and Marilyn

stayed could also count on watching TV with John, late into the night. If a sporting event was on, he was keen to watch it.

“As part of his plan to keep his strength up, every evening he would get up and walk the hospital corridors. Accompanying John on these walks could occur at any time throughout the night and early hours of the morning. When morning arrived, the cot and bed chair would be collapsed, sheets would be folded and put away, and John would prepare for another day.”

The cancer had been diagnosed in August, at the time of the Lunenburg Folk Festival, an annual event that John and Marilyn actively supported. His partner, Marilyn Keddy, recalls:

“John saw his GP and in less than a week, he saw the surgeon in Bridgewater on Friday, August 9th. In his office, prior to doing any examination, he told John and I that he had cancer. We were totally devastated and unable to think straight. The surgeon refused to discuss this diagnosis, saying we would discuss it as things moved along. This left us totally up in the air. Fortunately, John and I were together. The surgeon sent us to the hospital for an x-ray.”

A colonoscopy was scheduled for August 13th. Marilyn’s memory of the event was painful and bitter. “John was in a great deal of distress after drinking the preparation for the colonoscopy as he was unable to pass the fluid and felt very ill. I contacted the surgeon, who met us in the Bridgewater ER.

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John was in a great deal of distress. A rectal exam was done. The surgeon said that John was in the final stages of his illness. I was devastated by the pain John was experiencing. I could not hear nor accept that John was that ill. I felt that the surgeon had no grounds for making such a serious statement without having done more diagnostic tests. It was an insensitive, inhumane approach to delivering such devastating news. John described the doctor's approach to the situation as feudal. The man was to be spared the news and the woman was to look after him and bear the burden."

John was referred to the Nova Scotia Cancer Centre. His niece, Shelley Orr, an RN at the Valley Regional Hospital, accompanied her uncle and aunt. She recalls: "I met Marilyn and John at the hospital on August 27th to meet with Dr. Cwajna, the radiation oncologist. This was a very sad day for everyone. I felt helpless. I knew when I saw my Uncle John in the waiting room that he was very sick. He was totally uncomfortable with walking and sitting. He continued to try and nourish himself with puddings and liquids as Aunt Marilyn assisted with concern and great compassion. The news was not great. We were told that Uncle John's case was palliative. Dr. Cwajna told us that she would be very aggressive if that was what John wanted. She was amazing."

Radiation treatment started on September 4th. Marilyn recalls: "John and I were so grateful to have support from our family and friends. We always had someone with us. I don't know how we would have otherwise managed. The technician who did the markings indicated to John and I that it is rare that people are together for the treatments the way John and I were. It made us both very sad to think that people have to go through such ordeals on their own."

Shelley Orr adds: "Two weeks of radiation, trying to stay positive, exhausted from travelling, always trying to encourage Uncle John to stay away from hospital and remain at home as much as possible. Although he was very scared, he was determined to remain his upbeat self and *look after everyone else!*"

Seventeen days were spent in the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Halifax as a result of rising complications. John returned home to Stonehurst (east of Lunenburg) on September 30th. Shelley Orr: "Uncle John and I had many conversations about his comfort and things he could do to help him relax. I reassured him that he was doing great dealing with the situation and that I was always there for him and Aunt Marilyn."

Marilyn remembers. "While John was at home, he walked three times a day with the dogs, desperately trying to get himself strong enough for chemo. I don't know how he did it as he was failing all the time. I was unable to accept the deterioration of his health at the time. Often I didn't walk with him, but his brother and sisters did when they were here. I was focused on

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South Shore Raging Grannies: Peggie Graham, John, Marion Moore

his diet, trying to ensure that he got what he needed to maintain and build his strength. We were fighting a losing battle but neither of us would give up.”

By October, John required hospitalization. On October 13th, he and Marilyn drove to the Valley Regional ER, in Marilyn’s words, “never to come home together again.” The end was near. After tests and a family meeting with the doctor, John was admitted to palliative care on October 17th. He immediately let it be known that he wanted visitors.

For almost two weeks, a steady stream of kinfolk and friends gathered in Room 613, the topics of conversation reflecting on the rich, remarkable variety to John’s life and their relationship with him. Recollections of John’s time in the South Shore lobster fishery, his teaching days, first at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario, then, much later, his classes in sociology at Saint Mary’s and Dalhousie, his stints as a carpenter’s helper, his work with the trade union movement and the NDP, memories of growing up, and never to be forgotten, the fishing trips in Ontario and Nova Scotia, each one an adventure with good food, fine drink and mischief.

A contingent of the South Shore “Raging Grannies” showed up, unannounced, and filled Room 613 with their irreverent songs. A large poster was put up on one wall and all manner of folk signed it and briefly inscribed their sentiments. His great niece, Courtney Slipp wrote: “Uncle Johnny, I love you more than you can imagine. You’ve taught me so much over these past

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John's great niece Courtney Slipp

years... whether it was the newest political update or Steve Nash's [Canadian basketball player] newest achievements. You are always there to support me and I am sooo lucky to have people like you and auntie M in my life. You're a role model to anyone out there. And I am so proud to say that you are my uncle. I'd tell anyone! I (picture of a heart) U soooo... much, keep strong. I'm here for you no matter what! I love you, good lookin."

Letters arrived. There is one, dated October 18th, 2007 that is typical of many.

John,

I am writing because I don't trust myself to speak.

You have been a presence in my life for 16 years, since I moved to Nova Scotia. We shared many wonderful meals on your deck and in our house... You and Marilyn and other friends... And we have shared so many good laughs.

The two of you were witnesses at my late-life wedding, when we stifled giggles, listening to the Justice's pious pronouncements on marriage while watching his underwear flapping on the line outside his window. Your infectious laugh was always such a treat to hear. You would cock your head in that characteristic "John" way, your eyes widening and you would mimic some outrageous right-wing bit of bullshit. And then you would laugh and make us all laugh with you.

I have watched you fight for justice, over and over again, with gusto, with

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tenacity, without a trace of self-consciousness or self-congratulation, just because it was the natural thing for you to do, the natural way of your large, generous spirit to express itself.

You would do anything, go anywhere for the right cause — teach, demonstrate, raise funds selling junk at a flea market in Italy Cross, or drive around, peppering the countryside with NDP signs. You never spared yourself, you never held back.

I remember years ago, Richard and I belonged to the small farmers' "Freedom to Farm" group, which staged a demonstration in Halifax, complete with a truckload of sheep. A few of us marched round in front of Province House, in the rain, our noses dripping. Then you arrived and joined us, which energized our bedraggled little group. And thanks to the sheep, we made front page in the Herald — with a two-line caption for our cause.

Then, there was the time in Quebec, in 2001, at the two-day demonstration against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, sometimes called NAFTA on steroids. On the second day, the unions organized a march. There were no police present because it was not close to the epicenter. I have never been part of a demonstration as joyous, as creative, as filled with goodwill. And in the midst of that ocean of humanity (90,000 by one estimate), there you were, labouring along with a cane because of knee trouble. Seeing you was so amazing, so moving.

Often we have no idea of the part we play in other people's thoughts. I am a Polish Jew, as you know, a refugee and the child of refugees. John, knowing that you were out there, somewhere, keeping watch in the dark, made me feel safer.

You will always occupy a large and warm place in my heart. With respect and gratitude,

Love

Anna Taylor

John was always anxious to leave the hospital room and go outside, to breathe fresh air and soak in the sun. Ian McCrorie, a young friend from Regina, has recorded one such occasion. "We invited John to go for a drive. He immediately agreed. John had obviously lost weight and strength but his determination and the excitement of a drive is all it takes for him to briefly look like his old self. I dash off to bring the car round, leaving Dad behind with John and his sisters. As I walk out of John's room, I run into his brother, Dwight. We greet as anyone would, not really knowing each other. But if you are friends with John, you are friends with everyone he knows.

"John arrives at the car with his sisters and Dad. We all pitch in to get him comfortable in the car for what I think is going to be a short car ride. With John giving directions, we take off, leaving the hospital and his worries behind.

"We set off for Kentville with John as tour guide. He shows us where

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there is a good pub to go to for a drink, if we need one! We all laugh. It is great to see that he has not lost his sense of humour. John tells us about the 'pumpkin people' who are all over the town. I told him that I had stopped at an intersection, thinking they were real. This makes him laugh, an infectious laugh that I will always remember.

"We drive around Kentville in what turns out to be a loop, returning in the direction of the hospital. I assume we are heading back but John won't have it. 'We have only just begun,' he states. 'We will just keep going this way' in what turns out to be a trip to the Bay of Fundy.

"As we drive along, John doses off. His pain must be great and the medication he is on causes him to fade out from time to time. But he never complains. I ask him if he wants to go back to the hospital to which I get a reply of 'No. We are just getting going'

"I ask him how he got involved in the labour movement, but get no reply. He has dozed off again. He is only out for two or three minutes and when he comes out of it he says: 'I was out of it again, eh?' 'Yes John' I reply, 'but only for a few minutes.' 'Jesus, those drugs are working well,' he remarks, then begins to recount how he got involved in the labour movement.

"We head back to Kentville, drive through the town, then head south to a little bakery that John and Marilyn liked to patronize. It is noon and we stop for a bite. Over lunch John tells Dad and I that he has planned his memorial service and was writing his own obituary. He is calm as can be. It is just another day, it seems, only it isn't. I feel happy for John. He is surrounded by family and so many friends. He tells us all about the people who have come to visit, old comrades in arms. 'You just never know who is coming through the door next' he laughs.

"We finish lunch and proceed to get John comfortable in the car again. I wonder where we are off to next. To my regret but great relief, we are heading back to the hospital. I can see that John is tired and beginning to become uncomfortable. I figure we have outlasted his medication. I can tell that the drive has made his day, remembering days past, enjoying the freshness of a beautiful, fall day."

The end was near. Gail Chalmers recalls:

"I believe that Sunday, October 28th, was John's last full day of visitors. John did not have a peaceful evening and by Monday morning his pain had increased substantially. I remember the doctor asking John if, in his final days, he wanted to be lucid or pain free. John said: 'Max me out!' He had had enough of the pain. We all dedicated ourselves to doing what we could to ensure his comfort in the face of unimaginable and spreading pain."

John died, in the company of his family, on October 31st.

An account of his eventful and remarkable life is to be found in the chapters that follow.