

Community reflects on life and legacy of beloved activist and musician Jim McPherson



By Nate Smelle

On Monday, June 27, Hastings Highlands lost one of the municipality's most civically engaged citizens, with the passing of Jim McPherson. While in the care of the "kind and dedicated" staff and volunteers at the Madawaska Valley Hospice in Barry's Bay, McPherson's fight with bone cancer ended peacefully with his wife Marj by his side.

"This was where we wanted to be," said Marj. "When Jim became sick, really sick in early May, I wanted him to be able to be here at the cottage. But, you just need too much support when someone is so ill at the end of their life. So we used the hospice up in Barry's Bay. We were only there for five days but it made a huge difference to both of us."

Born and raised in Hamilton, Jim was a lifelong Tiger-Cat fan and a graduate of both McMaster University, and Niagara University. While studying history at McMaster, he met his wife Marj.

"We've been married almost 62 years now," Marj said. "We started out as friends, and we stayed friends. We had a lot of things in common, in terms of the way we thought about things. I think your chances of a successful life together are better when that's the situation."

In 1969, the McPhersons purchased the property on Papineau Lake that they would eventually make their home. Noting how they would bring their children Fiona and Russell up to the cottage with them as much as possible when they were young, Marj said they began spending most of their summers in Hastings Highlands after buying the property on Papineau Lake. For the first six years or so, she said Jim would teach at a leadership camp throughout the month of August. It was in 2004, following their retirement, Marj said, that they decided to move to Hastings Highlands full-time.

"We looked forward to coming up for the summer every year; and then we finally realized that we really didn't have to go home, and that we wanted to stay here," Marj said. "We had built our year-round log home, so it wasn't that big a deal to decide to move in. We had a few things to do, to make it livable. But other than that, it was ready for us, and we were ready for it."

Throughout his career, Jim was a dedicated teacher, football and gymnastics coach, and advocate for kids with developmental handicaps. Acknowledging that politics was always a big part of their life together, Marj said they both believed strongly that the people should have a bigger say in how their country is run. When Jim witnessed inequality or an injustice taking place, she said he always felt compelled to do something about it.

In 1974, Marj said Jim ran as the New Democratic Party candidate for the federal seat in the former Welland-Thorold riding. As a steadfast believer in the principles of informed democracy, she said he launched a campaign in 2016, aiming to make municipal elections fairer for voters in Hastings Highlands.

As part of this campaign, Jim petitioned council and rallied a team of likeminded community members to demand equality of vote value in the municipality. In the end, Jim's efforts were instrumental in convincing council to abandon the unfairness of the previous system in which council members were elected by ward, and replace it with the more accurately representative "at-large" electoral system.

Jim's friend and neighbour on Papineau Lake, Harold Harris, was part of this coalition of concerned citizens. Pointing out that Jim did most of the work to bring about the change he wanted to see in the community on his own, he said council actually laughed at him, when he initially suggested the municipality switch to an "at-large" voting system. However, despite that ridicule from council, Jim did not stop pursuing his goal of making elections fairer in Hastings Highlands.

Upon researching how to get council to take his suggestion seriously, Harris said Jim presented them a petition containing more than 100 signatures.

"He came back to council and they had three months to make a change," explained Harris. "They had all these experts come in, and all of them said that voting at-large was the way to go. Since then there have been other municipalities that have phoned in to Hastings Highlands to find out how they made the change ? and it was all Jim.?"

Jim didn't limit the use of his ability to mobilize people for the purpose of inspiring political change. He also used this skill to bring people together through music. A lifelong lover of music, he taught himself to play the guitar and banjo. After moving to the area in 2004, Marj said Jim's love of music helped them establish social connections throughout the community. He was the driving force behind the Music in the Library program at the Hastings Highlands Public Library, who regularly performed at community events such as the former Garlic Festival and the Maynooth Farmers' Market.

Denis Richard, another neighbour of Jim and Marj's from the shores of Papineau Lake, was often performing alongside his friend on stage. Reflecting on Jim's passing, he said the loss of his friend "has left a big hole in my life. He was a good friend, good musician, and I miss him dearly."

Indicating that he initially came up with the idea of holding a weekly musical performance at the library, Richard said when he tried to implement it, it went bust. Although it failed at first, he said Jim quickly picked it up and made it a success.

"He was a natural born organizer," Richard told Bancroft This Week. "He could draw people in like you wouldn't believe. Playing music was something that was very natural to Jim. He liked to support people, encourage people, and promote them. He's helped out a fair number of people in the area who were just budding musicians, but have since become quite proficient at playing music... If I was to organize some of the things he did it would be a real effort on my part. But Jim just seemed to pick it up and do it, and it seemed effortless. He also organized a couple Robbie Burns nights that were done with a lot of class and style. How he did that I don't know, but he managed to pull it off.?"

"He had a way of making things happen, and he wasn't one to brag about it or anything like that," added Richard. "He was always very low-key. If he said he was going to organize something, you know it would be done and it would be done well."

When asked about how Jim should be remembered, Marj replied, "He was a very happy guy, and he loved telling jokes. He loved listening to jokes, and he also liked telling stories, which were sometimes embroidered a bit to make a better story. He really enjoyed his friends, and his music. He didn't just believe in education, he believed in self education, and lifelong education. Right up until just a few months ago and he was still looking for a new music to play, new ways of playing instruments. He believed in lifelong learning, no matter what it is you want to learn about. For Jim, there was always something to learn. He strongly believed that if you

see something you don't like it, do something about it.?

Before the end of August, Marj said they plan to hold two celebrations of "Jim's long, productive and happy life." While the family is still choosing a venue for each gathering, she said the first will take place on Thursday, Aug. 4 in Hastings Highlands; and the second on Saturday, Aug. 27 in Welland.