



Summerhayes leaves legacy

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Stuart Summerhayes brought his wife Jill a cup of tea in bed every morning for 36 years.

One morning, he was feeling a bit "off" and Jill said it was her turn to make the tea. She made it and brought it up to him in bed, he went to take a sip and instead poured it all over himself. Jill asked him what was the matter?

"He said, 'You don't understand, I don't like tea. I never put more than a tiny bit in the bottom of the cup just so you think I'm drinking it with you,'" Jill said.

"I was very privileged as a wife because he loved me and spoiled me."

The humour that Summerhayes had and his infectious smile ended on Sunday morning when the racewalker and advocate of city arts passed away at the age of 76.

Since the spring, Summerhayes battled inoperable cancer, which originated in the colon and spread quickly to his liver, kidney and lungs. He started chemotherapy, but decided to forego treatment to concentrate on living a fuller life, instead of a longer life.

Jill knew that with Summerhayes's drastic health decline – he was confined to his bed the last week after cancer spread into his bones – his time was running short.

"It was expected but the reality of it hits you," said Jill, trying to hold back tears.

But the memories of Summerhayes – who currently holds 25 Canadian racewalking records, and is a national and world champion – brings a smile to her face.

"I think he had a great sense of humour," she said.

"I think a lot of people knew that he was thrilled to manage to walk a mile in the YWCA's fundraiser in the red high heels (on June 23). The only reason he came in first is because he wouldn't stop for the photo shoot. He said, 'if I stop I will never get going again'. But when he came in first, I think it was Greg Durocher who said, 'the body might be dying, but the competitive spirit is alive and well'."

Jill also noted that Summerhayes was an avid poet, fiercely competitive and would tackle the "cause of the day" with vigor.

"And he could think beyond the present, so he could see the possibilities in certain things. He brought that



Summerhayes leaves a legacy for city. Stuart Summerhayes died Sunday after a battle with cancer but his work to help shape the city will live on. *photo submitted*

kind of focus to everything that he was involved in, in the community.”

Community work is where Summerhayes thrived, as he started the Social Planning Council in the city, was part of the city’s heritage committee and was on the executive board of the Cambridge Centre for the Arts. Summerhayes was also instrumental in pushing the city towards building a theatre complex, which led to bringing in Drayton Entertainment.

“He had a lot of different aspects about him,” Jill said.

Being part of the community is something Summerhayes wanted to do since he moved here in 1978 with his new wife Jill – whom he met in 1974 after the end of his first marriage. He had been in the area before though, living with the Kaufman family of the Kaufman Rubber Co. in Kitchener. That was after he was sent here on a boat from his native England at age six with his sister during the Second World War to escape the German bombing.

He returned to England at age 10 before his family moved to Canada when he was 16. His father ended up working at Kaufman Rubber Co.

Summerhayes studied at the University of Toronto, where he became an Anglican minister, and met Jill. He left the church before coming to Cambridge.

Jill said it was natural for Summerhayes to integrate into the community.

“Often it’s people that aren’t from Cambridge that come in and see what there is about this city that people who’ve lived here always don’t see as easily.”

Though Summerhayes has been awarded for his work in the city and in his accomplishments in sports – he was named to Cambridge Sports Hall of Fame in 2006 – the last award he strived for was to be at his induction into the Athletics Ontario Hall of Fame on Oct. 30.

He had to be carried from his bed to the car by son-in-law Mark Fisher – he also tried to gain some strength by asking for a bacon sandwich the day before, but couldn’t stomach eating it when he got it – and was confined to a wheelchair at the ceremony.

He also asked if he could make an acceptance speech, but told Jill and his family that if he started to slur his words or sounded “too drugged up” to clap loudly so he could stop.

Then he started.

“He said he thought it was bloody silly that he was being inducted. People kept asking him for information and he thought, well I’ll send it them, I’m dying anyway and that’ll shut them up. He was astonished when he got it.”

People stood and clapped, but Summerhayes told them he wasn’t done, so they sat down and he continued.

“He said, ‘No matter what you achieve athletically, one thing that you all have to look forward to is that when you die, you find out how much you’re loved and respected, and that’s the greatest gift you can have.’”

Since then, Jill has heard from several people from the racewalking scene she hasn’t even met who have offered stories about Summerhayes. One, in particular, recounted how he was so happy when he beat Summerhayes for the first time that he told a friend and they said, “Well I should think so, you’re 30 years younger than he is.”

Summerhayes is survived by his wife Jill, sons David (Kelly), Graham (Sharon) and Andrew, stepchildren Alison Turner (Brad Crombie), Helen Turner-Fisher (Mark) and Michael Turner (Rena). Grandchildren Zach, Lukas, Kassie, Claire, Charlotte, Holly, Turner, Gibson, Addison and Garrett.

Cremation has already taken place and there will be a celebration of his life in the Toyota Room at the Cambridge Centre for the Arts, 60 Dickson St., on Nov. 28 at 3 p.m. In lieu of flowers, the family is asking

that donations be made to the Cambridge Community Orchestra.

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