

Noel Young had vision for daycare [CA] ^[1]

Obituary

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EXCERPTS

A playful, joyful giant of a man, Noel Young dedicated his life to children, their care and their welfare - even though it was all theoretical until the birth of his own daughter just six years ago.

Mieke was an amazing gift, he used to say, and this wasn't theory, nor just the words of the smitten father he was. Four years before she was born, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour and given a few months to live. Perhaps it was his sunny, optimistic nature, perhaps it was something else, but Young married his partner, CBC writer Ann Jansen, after his diagnosis and New Year's Eve surgery, and lived another 10 years. He died March 8 at age 51.

"When he was first sick, we never thought (having children) was a possibility," Jansen said. "But he stayed well and the desire to have children is a very strong one."

And he was someone who had a very strong sense of possibility.

"Cancer wasn't the only thing Noel had that was incurable. His optimism was," said Geoff Williams, a friend from their high school days in Scarborough. "Until close to his death he rarely expressed frustration or spoke of being upset with having cancer."

What did concern him - greatly - was establishing a child care program for school-aged children within a federally funded universal child care system. His vision was a seamless school day for children, in which they could go to one place for school and daycare. He was a founding member of the School Age Care Association of Ontario and the author of a 1994 book *Caring for Play: The School and Child Care Connection*.

He was the sparkplug behind a conference in Toronto six years ago and the driving force behind the association newsletter "Exploring Environments".

"He was very involved in things for children, advocacy for children, not-for-profit children's care," said Martha Friendly, who saw him the day after the federal budget was announced in February. He had been staying in the palliative care unit at Toronto Grace hospital since the beginning of the year and by then was having some trouble speaking, but he wanted to know if the budget included — finally — funding for child care.

Friendly is coordinator of the University of Toronto Childcare Resource and Research Unit, but she was one of a group of parents starting up the Alternative Primary School in about 1982 when she hired Young to help with its faltering daycare. "He was tall — about 6-foot-4 — with a big, bushy head of red hair. I thought `Okay, here's the guy (we need).'"

He was a creative, compassionate, imaginative and inspirational child care worker: he started an outdoor education program in which the daycare kids experienced overnight outdoor camping, he designed a school-aged child care program that focused on what the kids were interested in, including Friday afternoon swim lessons. It was the same when he arrived in the early childhood education program at George Brown College in 1987, ready to shake things up at a school known for its focus on the infant and toddler stages. He envisioned school boards and child care centres working together to provide the seamless day, and it now exists at the early childhood education program funded by the province and run by George Brown at Ryerson public school.

Young also initiated an innovative Canadian social history project, collecting archival photographs and organizing them into stories of child care, health, women's work, poverty and racism he often shared with classes at the college.

"He was trying to engage students in a more meaningful way of learning about history, and for early childhood education students to understand why we have the health care we have," said Pam Doyle, his friend and colleague at George Brown.

He grew up in a family of women. "When he was born, everybody was thrilled," said his sister Betty Veitch. He was the youngest child and only boy, and his three sisters fought over who was going to take him to school on his first day.

Young began working with children at the former Bolton Camp for underprivileged children and at the Eastview drop-in centre in

downtown Toronto while attending the University of Toronto. He graduated - eventually.

Young and Jansen made their home in a co-op near U of T and a Starbucks, where Young used to take his plastic travel mug every morning for a fill-up. He got to know the staff there so well, one of them started babysitting Mieke and another signed up in George Brown's youth services program. "He was a natural mentor," his wife said.

When he moved into the palliative care unit, the Starbucks staff arranged delivery of coffee to him.

His surgery last fall wasn't successful, but it might have given him an extra month or so of life, which he put to use. His was a family devastated by cancer: both his twin sisters died of it (Gwen had breast cancer and Lorraine ovarian cancer). His father had died of pancreatic cancer and his mother died of leukemia. Only Betty Veitch survived kidney cancer.

Trinity Hospice organized a care team for Young that was soon overflowing with friends.

Pam Doyle was a team member. "He still had ideas to the end. He still wanted to get people to work on committees. He said the team was life-giving; we were in awe of him."

When he still could, he did paddling exercises in his bed because he was hoping he might be able to go on one more canoe trip to Killarney. With Doyle, he worked out the details of the Noel Young Award, which will be awarded to a student in George Brown's early childhood education program who has shown a commitment to advocacy and action.

About 450 people attended his memorial celebration at Trinity St. Paul's Church last month.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: advocacy ^[3]

school-age ^[4]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/05/04/noel-young-had-vision-daycare-ca> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-age>