

Lives Lived

Merritt George Henderson



Husband, father, grandfather, brother, hospital administrator, church and community volunteer, gentleman. Born Aug. 25, 1932, in Inverness, Que. Died March 30 in Mississauga of Parkinson's disease, aged 76.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/merritt-george-henderson/article1348732/>

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Merritt Henderson was the sixth of seven children born to Robert and Annie Henderson.

When the family moved from their Quebec farm to West Flamborough, Ont., in 1948, he was forced to repeat Grade 11 at Dundas High School. His annoyance was forgotten when he met Jean Chisholm, who became his wife in 1956. They were married for 37 years and had three children, Scott, Karen and Shawn.

Merritt's dream to become a big-animal veterinarian was inhibited by family finances. But his older brothers recognized his potential and provided the support for him to become a chartered accountant.

In 1958, an ad led him into the hospital field. He became office manager of a small staff at the soon-to-open South Peel Hospital, later the Mississauga Hospital. Merritt was shocked to learn that while capital expenses were covered, there was no operating money. It was one of many fiscal challenges he handled with aplomb as the hospital balanced its budget for the following 35 years.

Merritt was appointed chief executive officer in 1965. His numerous accomplishments included the speedy evacuation of the hospital during the Mississauga train derailment. Despite his demanding job, he did not shirk community and church activities and spending time with his family.

A soft-spoken man, Merritt was renowned among staff for his personal touch and his uncanny ability to remember each employee's name. He walked the halls regularly to greet staff, patients and visitors to "take the pulse" of the hospital. On Christmas Day, he visited every department.

Merritt lived by the golden rule and saw himself as no more special than any other employee whose job it was to provide the best care for patients. He didn't even have a special parking spot, although he was teased that the letters MGH on the parking garage were really his initials.

Shortly after his retirement in 1994, Merritt found love around the corner in Mississauga's Lorne Park neighbourhood, where he met his second wife, Frances LaVigne. Both had lost spouses to cancer. They married in 1995. Less than two years later, Merritt was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He and Frances packed in as much travel and happy times as they could in the remaining 11 years.

Merritt's illness led to frequent hospital stays. He travelled the familiar halls again, this time in his wheelchair. He urged staff members to use his first name, as he did theirs, but none wanted to call him "Merritt." He was "Mr. Henderson" to them, showing the great respect in which he was held.

Nancy Myers Johnson and Liz Mullan were Merritt's colleagues, and Frances Henderson is his wife.