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Ray Sloan Embraced Life To The Fullest

By Andy Marshall

Seven years after his untimely death at age 55, the love and respect people had for Ray Sloan are still just about as tangible as the Alberta natural landscape he cared for so dearly.

As husband, father, good friend, wildlife advocate, scientist, fish expert, college teacher, innovator, outdoorsman, hiker, skier, community activist and almost-never-failing affable companion, he attracted the warm regard of others like summer sun on the Rockies.

They can still hear his infectious laughter, the easy banter, the searching discussions on better preserving the wilderness. They see the beard that turned white in middle age, the T-shirt with Ranger Ray on it, the colourful ties, and the look of amusement that rarely left his face. They feel the joy, the passion and the peace he exuded so generously. They remember a man who embraced life to the fullest.

"He was a ray of light and hope ... a lot of things troubled him, but he made the best of everything," says his wife and best friend of 25 years, Christyann Olson, executive director of the Alberta Wilderness Association. "His inquisitiveness and wisdom were a source of learning and strength for others."

Despite a more-than-busy lifestyle, he spent as much time with his family as he could. "Ray taught me a tremendous sense of appreciation of the natural world, that ability to really see what is there," says Christyann from the northwest Calgary home they bought 30 years ago and which she still cannot imagine leaving. "Ray loved the spiritual renewal we enjoyed walking wide, sweeping valleys, climbing rocky peaks and resting under a magnificent tree."

Daughter Heather, now in her third year of teaching at Rocky Mountain House and applying her environmental knowledge to her elementary-age classes, has abiding memories of the numerous family backpacking, canoeing, biking or fishing trips. "I will remember him for the time he spent with us, teaching us about nature and the world."

He also passed on his love of fly-fishing and his zest for adventure to son Russell, now travelling the world. "Dad's love of life and all around him is one of the things I remember most about him."

"He was a principled conservationist. He practised what he preached," says Dennis Leask, another instructor in the Mount Royal College environmental sciences department where Ray was still teaching after 30 years when he died of a brain aneurysm. The two met at the University of Calgary in 1963 – Ray was taking biology and Dennis engineering. Ray later completed his masters at the U of C, specializing in population biology. During the 1960s Ray and Dennis were active hostellers, and later served as "best man" for each other's weddings.

Leask calls him a true pioneer who had a big hand during the late 1960s in the formation of what was then called the environmental quality control program at MRC. Graduates went on to work in all kinds of major industries here, Leask explains. And, while conservationists may bemoan many activities by these industries, things are a lot better – thanks to the influences of Ray and his program – than they would have been without them. "Ray set the trend," he says. Ray was very popular with students and faculty, he adds, recalling the procession of students who came back to chat with Ray years after graduating.

Born and raised in Calgary, Ray likely picked up his avid enthusiasm for the outdoors from an uncle who took him on many hunting and fishing trips west of Calgary. Later in life, Ray influenced hundreds of





students who took his program and who participated in the field labs he set up for decades to further their studies of the beloved fish and their habitats he specialized in.

He formed a close partnership with the Jumpingpound Chapter of Trout Unlimited to develop projects to enhance fish species, particularly in the Ghost/Waiparous area. Trout Unlimited still wants to name a stream after him, according to long-time TU member Marshall Bye. The group gave him the Peter Smallman Memorial Award for outstanding achievement in fisheries conservation.

To offer students this practical exposure in these summer programs, he pursued a variety of funding sources, including corporations. "He was willing to let them say 'no' many times before they finally agreed," jokes Leask. "He was not easily deterred by blockades."

Projects included baseline surveys of various fish, as well as restoration work and habitat improvements that still exist today. To his students' amusement, Ray would sometimes end up on his back in the water. "No wading hazard would deter him," says Brian Lajeunesse in a TU newsletter.

Christyann remembers the big pancake breakfasts at their house before Ray and his students would head out for the streams and lakes. Even if students called late in the evening with questions on an assignment, he gave them his cheerful attention.

Heather notes he was one of the first instructors at MRC to put his courses on-line. "He loved technology ... he was never afraid of trying something new."

He also didn't back off difficult issues. But as Christyann points out, he rarely uttered an angry word. During his term as AWA president 1976-78, he fought hard against ski-hill expansion at Sunshine, for example. As one of the founding members of AWA in the 1960s and a director from 1975 to 1982, he played key roles in many of the other conservation battles, including the designation of the Milk River Ecological Reserve and Natural Area.

He also worked hard for his Calgary community and was a leader in the campaign that successfully persuaded the city not to build a freeway through Bowmont Natural Park. In 1997 Ray received the Calgary Mayor's Award for Environmental Achievement. For his efforts throughout the province, including participation in Alberta's Eastern Slopes and coal policies, he was nominated for a provincial Emerald Award.

In the winter, Ray was a keen skier and volunteered on the Canadian Ski Patrol, in which he became Western Division training officer and acquired the nickname Bull-Wheel Bill one day for failing to dismount from the ski lift at the top of the run and continuing around the cable wheel.

AWA director Vivian Pharis, who first met Ray during their U of C days, is among the many friends who recount his keen sense of fun. She tells the story of the biology students dropping sodium tri-iodide-laced pieces of chalk down the open stairwell at the Science A building into the ashtrays of smoking engineering students on the bottom floor, creating a small explosion and good-natured uproar among all involved. Ray was front and centre in these "assaults" on the alien engineers, says Pharis.

Ray was a member and past master of Zetland Masonic Lodge. He also attended St. David's United Church in Calgary. He liked to read and, with Christyann, attended Calgary Philharmonic concerts.

"He was a well-rounded man," says Christyann. She returns to MRC every year to present a scholarship awarded in his name to outstanding students from the environmental sciences program.

It is perhaps fitting to end with a quotation from daughter Heather on what she remembers most about





this stocky, barrel-chested man who embraced life so enthusiastically. "He gave the best hugs," she says.

