

Submitted to Globe and Mail, Lives Lived

## Donald George Dobie: Past President of Vernon People First, brother, son, friend

Born Vernon, B.C., April 24, 1952

Died Vernon, B.C., November 22, 2006, aged 54, of natural causes

Don was out for Chinese food once with his giant younger brothers Edgar Jr., Dave, Mike and Roger. Across the room a beautiful girl stood up and waved at them. The big Dobies sat up in anticipation. The blonde crossed over to Don's wheelchair, threw her arms around him and gave him a big kiss. "Donald Dobie, I've missed you so much!" she said. After she left one brother asked, "Don, do you even know who she is?" "No ... and ... don't ... tell ... Dad!" said Don.

To anyone who didn't know him, the oldest Dobie boy's body looked impossibly twisted, and his speech was impossibly slow. Don suffered a lack of oxygen during his complicated birth and was left with severe cerebral palsy. His internal organs were so crushed by the sideways spasms of his body that doctors held out little hope for him. His parents Connie and Edgar were told to put him in a "home" where he would live fifteen years at most.

This past November, after a very happy, very busy life, Don died at the age of 54. During his childhood years at home, he was a loyal playmate to his brothers who trusted him with their secrets. He attended My School for 13 years, graduating to a "supervisory position" at Venture Training. When his younger brother Edgar left home to go to university, Don insisted that he should leave home too. The only possible place for him was in the extended care wing of Vernon General Hospital where, with his own white coat and nametag, "Dr. Dobie" was wheeled on rounds with the other doctors. His parents spent years agitating forcefully for the building of a local group home, and one great day Don moved to a brand new wheelchair-friendly house, into his own room decorated with pictures of family members and Pamela Anderson. As the President of Vernon People First, an avid fundraiser and "carwash captain," Don was a lifelong pioneer in encouraging the mentally and physically challenged to live independently in their own communities. Thanks to the Handy Dart wheelchair van he led an active community life himself, often out for coffee or, more likely, a drink with friends and family. He loved being involved in practical jokes, laughing so hard that his wheelchair shook. At a conference at Whistler Don fell in love with Debbie, who also has cerebral palsy. They exchanged rings, and though she lives in Vancouver, Debbie came several times to visit him in Vernon. At parties they danced with each other, their chairs steered by caregivers.

In October 2006 the sudden death of his beloved father Edgar Sr. devastated Don. The two were so close that it was hard to imagine one without the other. Don began to suffer acute anxiety attacks, and during one, his shrunken lungs simply could not bring in enough air. Those close to him felt that his spirit had at last given way; he didn't want to go on without his dad. His funeral was a powerful event. Niece Anna said afterwards, "Don's friends don't mourn politely the way we do. His best friend Arnold howled with grief. He made us all cry."

Don Dobie's extraordinarily rich life is a tribute to the unceasing love and care of his father and mother, his brothers, sisters-in-law, nephews and nieces, his friends and caregivers. But most of all the success of Don's life was a tribute to the life force in Don himself. He may have been limited by his physical bonds, but there was nothing limited about his sense of humour and his stubborn determination to live just like everyone else. There was nothing limited about his fierce and gallant heart.