

# REMEMBERING BILL DUNCAN



*By Jessica Niereisel, Daughter of Bill Duncan and Kitchener Fire Fighter*

**B**ill Duncan dedicated 33 years of his life to the fire service. On March 25th, 2011, at the age of 56, he died in the Line of Duty of brain cancer as the result of fighting hundreds of fires throughout his career. Bill began his career with the Kitchener Fire Department in 1977. In 1993, he obtained the rank of Captain. He also served as Treasurer of the Kitchener Professional Fire Fighters Association for many years and was President of Local 457 from 2005 to 2006.

Kitchener Fire Chief, Tim Beckett said, "Bill was a valuable member of the Kitchener Fire Department. He showed great leadership both as a company officer and as the Union President. He brought about a balance of doing things right and doing the right things."

When Bill joined the fire service, he was given a pair of rolled up rubber boots, a raincoat, and a plastic helmet that melted in fires. No breathing apparatus was available to wear.

"He didn't regret what he did but he hoped that his illness would raise awareness among fire fighters about the hazards of the job," said Steve Jones, President of the Kitchener Fire Fighters Association.

Bill wanted to impress upon fire fighters, the importance of wearing breathing apparatus and protective clothing long after the flames are doused, as toxic chemicals from building materials linger for days afterwards.

He loved being on the fire department because of the great friendships he had. He wasn't bitter at all that his job would ultimately cost him his life.

"I loved what I did. Unfortunately, it will shorten my life, but I wouldn't change it for anything," he said in an interview in his Kitchener home.

Long before Bill knew a cancerous tumour was growing in his brain, he fought for compensation for the ten Kitchener Fire Fighters who have died from occupational cancer since 1988. Seven of the ten fire fighters fought a 1987 fire at Horticultural Technologies, a plant where more than 200 chemicals were stored. Bill, however, did not fight that fire.

Bill's first hint of trouble was in April 2008, when returning from a non-fire call; he felt tingling down his right side, momentarily lost consciousness and couldn't speak. He never told anyone, including his wife, Donna.

Less than a month later, he experienced another episode, and this time his wife took him to the hospital. Doctors initially thought he had a series of minor strokes. In August 2008, Bill was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, and he did what he did best, continued to live life well; traveling with family and friends, spending time up at the boat with his wife, kids and grandkids, swinging his golf clubs, watching his Leaf's play, and just spending time with those that meant the most to him.

Bill was originally given nine months to live. He fought for almost three years. After brain surgery and over two years of treatments, including radiation and chemotherapy, the tumour shrunk, but unfortunately it returned.

"Bill was a trooper. He just carried on. He never complained," said his wife, Donna.

Bill was a committed husband to Donna, a supportive father to Greg, Ben (Sara), Lori (Ryan), Jessica (Cory) and David, and a loving and fun grandfather to Evan, Lily and Jaxon. His family was his pride and joy.

If you were considered one of his friends, you were among the lucky ones. With Bill, it was always what you see is what you get. He was supportive, always up for a good time and always ready to go to bat for something he believed in.

He had a sense of humour until the very end, even with his health deteriorating so quickly and not having any control over it. He lived a life that we are all proud of and admire. He was someone who just got life and didn't take it for granted.

Bill received full fire department honours at his funeral. In recognition of his sacrifices and many years of service to his community, flags at all Kitchener Fire Halls and facilities were lowered to half-mast, as well as at Queen's Park. Hundreds paid tribute at his funeral.

Bill was a diehard Toronto Maple Leafs fan, and flying prominently on the side of the antique pumper truck that carried his casket was a Leafs flag. His photo was displayed on CBC's Hockey Night in Canada and hockey personality Don Cherry paid tribute, and extolled the virtues of fire fighters. "You can't beat those guys, I tell you. It's a tough one," he said.

In honour of Bill, don't wait until you are retired to start living the good life, hold family and friends close and tell them what they mean to you often - take pleasure in the simple things in life and cheer for the Leafs.

