# Remembering Richard Wagamese

Campden man tells the story of how he touched the acclaimed writer's life

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Leo Rozema, 81, taught eighth grade at Dalewood Public School in St. Catharines back in the early 1970's. He remembers marking a creative writing story by Richard Wagamese, who went on to become a prominent indigenous writer in Canada. - Alexandra Heck/Metroland

CAMPDEN — Leo Rozema didn't even recognize the name Wagamese when he got the phone call 20 years later.

The former St. Catharines schoolteacher knew Wagamese by his adopted name when he taught him at Dalewood Public School in the early 1970s.

Wagamese was an aboriginal student who came from a residential school and was adopted by a Christian family in St. Catharines.

He ran away from his family shortly after and ended up a homeless youth on Toronto's waterfront, selling and doing drugs.

Rozema barely remembered the lanky young boy he taught, and in 1993 wasn't quite sure what Wagamese wanted with him.

"I thought it was a trick, 100 per cent," said Rozema.

Wagamese, who by that time had become an accomplished author and columnist, had just written an autobiography, and he was doing a reading of it on the waterfront in Toronto.

He wanted Rozema to be his special guest.

"I didn't want to go, but my daughter and wife made me go," said Rozema.

As he sat and listened to Wagamese's presentation, he heard the story of a man affected by a childhood in residential schools, of being taken away

from his family, of not identifying or seeing eye to eye with his adoptive family.

Wagamese told of how he was eventually arrested for selling drugs in Toronto and went to jail.

It was when he got out of jail, looking through his belongings that were returned to him, that he came across the creative writing assignment that Rozema gave him.

Wagamese wrote a story about him and his friend, flying around the world in an airplane.

“His story kind of hit me as being really worthwhile,” said Rozema, who remembered marking the paper. “I thought to myself, this is something.”

In his red pen, he flipped over the assignment and scrawled the poem “High Flight”, on the back, from memory.

“It’s a story about the exuberance of flying,” said Rozema, who made a special note to Wagamese about the quality of his story.

Years later, when Wagamese got out of jail and re-read the note from Rozema, it was his ‘ah-ha’ moment.

At the book reading, Wagamese told Rozema that he was the one who inspired him to become a writer.

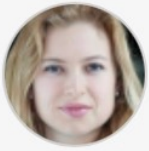
“I was at the top of my self worth,” said Rozema, who remembers thinking to himself: “Wow Leo, how much impact can you have on a person?”

After deciding to become a writer, Wagamese got a job in Alberta as a reporter with the Calgary Herald. He went on to teach literature at the University of Manitoba. He penned over 13 published books like *The Keeper n’ Me*, *Indian Horse* and *Medicine Walk*.

“I lost contact with him after that,” said Rozema, who emailed with him back and forth every once in a while, the last time being over five years ago.

“He’s been on my mind all the time since his death,” said Rozema. “He’s been a very important person in my life.”

Wagamese passed away on March 10 at the age of 61.



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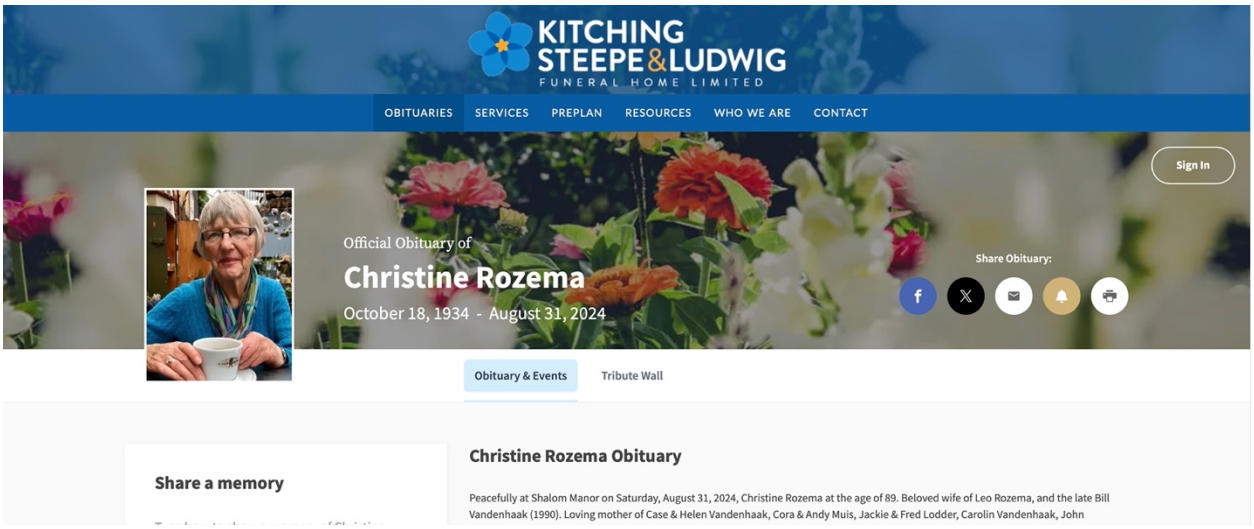
https://www.niagarathisweek.com/news/remembering-richard-wagamese/article_5c5b13f0-4be0-5d60-89c7-ffafa82ee7a6.html




Leo would have been 88-89 at the time of her passing.

https://www.kitchingsteepeandludwig.com/obituaries/Christine-Rozema?obId=32971087