



Saskatoon

Love and music: Why a Saskatoon couple chose to die in each other's arms



Ralph Johnstone and Laura Bach both used medical assistance to die



Dan Zakreski · CBC News ·

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Family say it was love at first sight when Ralph Johnstone and Laura Bach met. (Submitted by Erin Legg)

It's fitting that Ralph Johnstone and Laura Bach's romance played out like the lyrics of a rock and roll song — maybe a power ballad.

They were introduced by Bach's ex-husband, a keyboard player who knew Johnstone through H.E.L. Music Supplies Ltd. on Broadway Avenue, the store Johnstone ran.

"It was love at first sight," said Bach's daughter, Johnna Burlingham. The couple were "joined at the hip" from then on.

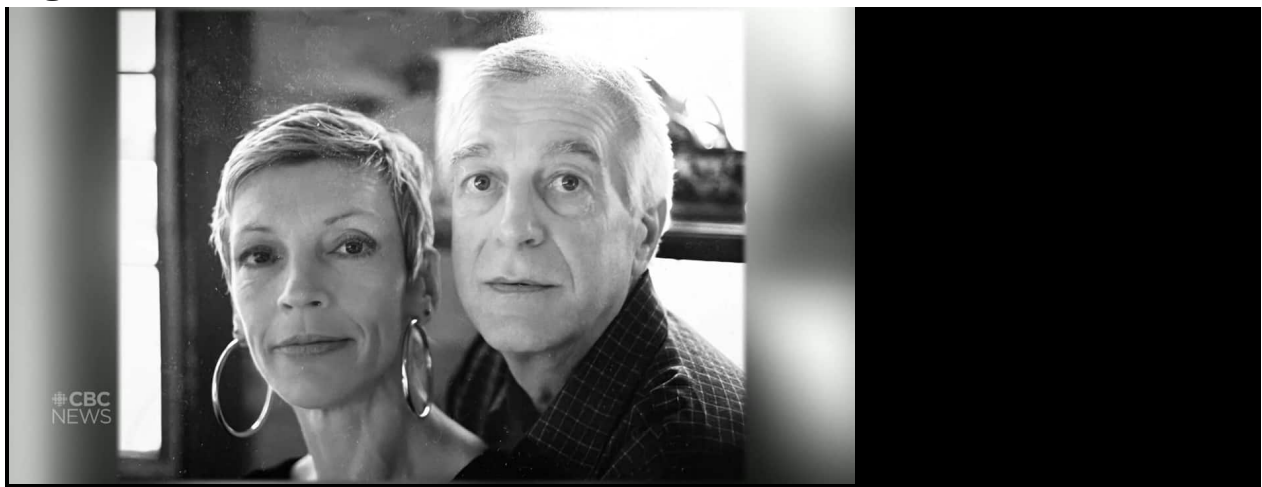
Johnstone worked at the store and the pair would meet for coffee at the Broadway Roastery.

He eventually sold H.E.L. and the couple settled into a comfortable retirement, focusing on projects they enjoyed.

"They were both very into caring for the yard and I know my Mom was always into re-finishing furniture, she would just sand down dressers with so much patience," Burlingham said.

"It was a real passion of theirs to be able to share those hobbies together."

WATCH | Family celebrate lives of Sask. couple that used MAID to die together:



<http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2263917123551>

The family of a Saskatoon couple who used medical assistance in dying (MAID) is sharing their story. The couple is believed to be one of the first couples in Saskatchewan to use the program at the same time. Friends and family are coming together to celebrate the lives of Ralph Johnstone and Laura Bach. Over the past decade, though, their health began to decline. Both struggled with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), an inflammatory lung disease that makes breathing difficult.

Bach also had other conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome, that caused chronic pain, created dietary restrictions and reduced her quality of life.

Then last fall, Johnstone was diagnosed with lung cancer. It was shortly after that he and Bach decided to apply for the medical assistance in dying program (MAID). They wanted to die together..

"As soon as they felt that it was right for them, it was a comfort," Burlingham said.

"I don't think either person could see themselves without the other."

They were both accepted into the program. Ralph, 77, and Laura, 67, died in each other's arms on Aug. 8.

Dying with dignity



The couple's health deteriorated in recent years. (Submitted by Erin Legg)

Ralph Johnstone met with his kids in the fall of 2022, not long after the cancer diagnosis.

"He asked if I'd ever heard of MAID. I didn't know what the acronym meant, but when we started talking about it I said, 'yes, I know about this,'" said Johnstone's daughter, Erin Legg.

"He said this is what we've decided to do when we're at the end."

- **'A good death'**
- **Answering the call for an assisted death has 'taught me more about living my life than dying': MAID manager**

Legg said she and her siblings accepted the choice.

"I think the term 'dying with dignity' is something. There is something special about that," she said.

"When you think of your loved one experiencing a pretty bad cancer, you want them to keep that dignity."

Burlingham said that she and her brother also accepted their mother's choice. At this point, Johnstone was his wife's primary caregiver.

"She'd had health issues over the years and I think the COPD was what really did in her quality of life," she said.

"They were both very active and extremely independent, and it just made sense that they were given the opportunity to be in control until their very last day."

Legg said that she learned of the Aug. 8 date about a week in advance. She said the final week was a memorable and meaningful rush of visiting with family and friends.

"It was like a living funeral, you know?" she said, "I know they had many wonderful conversations with a lot of their loved ones."



Jessie Johnstone cuts his Dad's hair on his last day. (Submitted by Erin Legg)

The couple's children and grandchildren gathered at the house on the chosen morning — a Tuesday, the first sunny day after the August long weekend. The procedure was scheduled for 5 p.m.

Jessie Johnstone bathed his father, cut his hair and made him breakfast. They shared stories in the yard.

Legg said that her Dad dressed in his "Canadian tuxedo," a denim-on-denim combo.

"Laura had a beautiful skirt on and yes, very flowy," said Burlingham.

"My mother always loved the flowy, bohemian clothing and she wanted to make sure her makeup was just how she wanted it."

The couple said their final goodbyes to family, then went into the bedroom they shared.

"My dad was telling stories. He just kept talking. We could hear him outside. We were outside in the backyard and we could hear him just talking away," Legg said.

"He was keeping the physicians entertained."

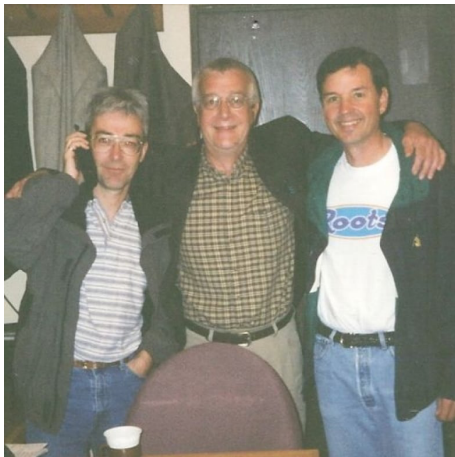
A major key figure

A month after the procedure, a few friends of Johnstone sat reminiscing about Johnstone and H.E.L.'s impact on the local music scene.

Gord Haddock — the "H" in H.E.L. — recalls meeting Johnstone back around 1972.

Haddock's brother-in-law played in a band and they had a manager handling their money. It was Johnstone. Haddock wanted to check him out and make sure it was on the up and up.

"We hit it off right away," he said. "We had a common interest in rock and roll and decided to get together and do something."



Bruce Wilkinson, Ralph Johnstone and Gord Haddock at H.E.L. Music Supplies (Submitted by Gord Haddock)

They created a booking agency and management company, setting up shop in a second-floor space on Broadway, the first of three locations they used in the then-sleepy retail district. They quickly realized from working with bands that musicians couldn't get a very good deal on gear.

"We decided, let's start bringing some music equipment in. We gave them music equipment at discount prices. They, of course, loved that," he said.

Bruce Wilkinson first met Johnstone as a customer and then went on to work at the store. He'd studied engineering in university.

"I didn't want to be an engineer in the world of engineering. I wanted to do something a little different," he said.

"As it turned out, Ralph was needing some help."

Wilkinson worked there 13 years, during the pre-internet heyday of the store. Musicians and music fans congregated at the location.

"I think it was a very unique point in time, because the music store was a sort of focal point where people would hang out and they would get advice and they would learn," he said.

Wilkinson and Haddock said the Broadway of the 1970s and '80s was a far cry from the trendy retail district it is today.

"We used to do things like put huge stacks with Altec speakers right out on the sidewalk and blast rock and roll. I mean, things you would never see today, the cops would be on there in about 30 seconds," said Haddock.



Ralph Johnstone met Laura Bach when he ran H.E.L. Music, a fixture of the Broadway music scene. (Submitted by Erin Legg)

Guitarist and technician Doug Scarrow also met Johnstone in the late 1970s. He said that Johnstone's impact on the Saskatoon music scene cannot be overstated.

"He gave so many musicians a chance ... credit extended and good deals. That stuff doesn't get forgotten," he said.

"He basically trained people to make sure their word was good. A lot of young guys really learned from that and rose to the occasion, because they didn't want to disappoint him."

A celebration of life for the couple is set for Sept. 18 at Amigos.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



[Dan Zakreski](#)

There are those in the anti-MAiD crowd who will be critical of this, suspicious that both Ralph and Laura could meet the criteria at the same time without some fudging. But does their case not illustrate it rightly can and should be about “them” more than any “us”? Who are we to get in their way?

Dan was first a print reporter for the Star-Phoenix. I led my Master’s Thesis (“Adolescent Career Development in Rural Saskatchewan During the Farm Crisis”) off with a quote from him laying out the financial problems of farmers at that time. When I met him in person, Dan was delighted to be included in something “academic.” Dan was and remains a really nice guy, an exceptional (now TV) reporter who has served Saskatoon so well for so long.

Ralph’s son giving his father his last haircut reminds me of my giving my father his last shave (after his passing). I had stopped for an A&W breakfast only to receive a call from LTC telling me my father was dying. I never got there in time: he passed quickly, a heart attack at 95 brought on by COPD. An old farmer who worked in a grain elevator after moving to town, his heart must have been like Secretariat’s to have lasted so long. I say that, like my father, I will always have grain dust in my lungs, summer-fallow in my ears, and grease under my fingernails. I would not have started my life off other than as a “farm boy.” But given what farming has become, I wouldn’t “farm” now if you gave me one. A ranch, maybe, if it came with a rancher’s daughter, border collie & a good horse to ride. “Give me a million dollars and I’ll ranch till it’s all gone.”TJB