

Obituary

Born: Friday, July 4, 1947

Died: Tuesday, July 23, 2019

Donald F. Burns 1947-2019

“The death of any man diminishes me.” Don Burns often said these words, whether the death was a family member, friend, a celebrity, or a young man gunned down on the streets. These words are particularly true with the passing of Don Burns on July 23, 2019.

Don was born on July 4, 1947. He was one of five children of Donald F. Burns, Sr. and Virginia Flandreau Burns and the husband of Lesley Nelson-Burns.

Don Burns, Sr. was a Navy Commander in World War II and later served on the Maritime Commission. As part of his duties, he researched potential routes for a new Central American canal and moved the family to Panama. Don vividly recalled the trip aboard ship with a stop at Cuba and many adventures in Panama, including how proud he was to present his mother with a fascinating insect he'd caught under the house – which turned out to be a scorpion. Dangerous or not, he was disappointed when she dropped it out of the jar and killed it. Following the adventures in Panama, the family returned to the Washington DC area where Don attended Our Lady of Lourdes and Bethesda Chevy Chase High School.

Don's adventures continued back in the States. At the age of 15 he and a friend skipped school to hitchhike to Florida. Soon after leaving, Don mailed a note written on a napkin to his Dad to let him know they were OK. In North Carolina, the cops hauled them to jail for vagrancy. After a night in jail, they were escorted out of town. They got to the beach to survive on pilfering candy from machines and the kindness of strangers. Cases of bad sunburn turned thoughts to home, and they hitchhiked back. The adventure lasted eleven days. He said when they got back his Dad didn't know whether to hug him or strangle him.

At the age of 17, Don dropped out of high school to raise a family. He began work as a painter and became a carpenter. At the age of 19 bought his first house though his Dad had to be the titled owner until he was 21. Times weren't always easy in construction, and there was a time no one in the family could say the “P” word (Pepeco), but Don has steady work. He said that if a builder went out of business, you could show up with your tools at a site, demonstrate your skill, and find work. Don worked hard, learned skills he valued, and a craft he loved. He eventually went into business for himself.

Don was also a master fisherman. Around the age of 7 his father showed him how to put a hook and a piece of bread on a string. He was as hooked as much as the first bluegill he caught from then on. When he was a boy, he would bicycle down to Swain's Loch where he and a friend assisted Mr. Swain with boat maintenance and other chores – which gave them the privilege of using the boats when they were available. He longed for his own boat, and it seemed like a dream come true when they found an old raft along the river. He fixed it up and put wheels on it so they could move it on the local railroad tracks. He and his friends got it to the river, to discover it didn't float. Eventually, Don was able to buy reliable river transportation; jon boats, bass boats, canoes and kayaks. And when he wasn't fishing from a boat, he was fishing from the bank. He loved the Potomac River. During tough times it was his sanctuary, and it was always his joy.

In later years, Don decided he'd like to return to motorcycling. He'd ridden for a few years but gave it up because of a near accident when his children were young. He bought a motorcycle and Lesley decided she'd give it a try. They started on out a Suzuki and Yamaha, and then found BMW sport touring bikes. From then on, they explored local roads, Skyline Drive and Blue Ridge Parkway most weekends. They completed the End to End trip on the Blue Ridge Parkway nine times over the years and never grew tired of its beauty and joy of a lean in and out of a sweeping curve.

Don and Lesley traveled often, and not just on motorcycles. When they married, he said he'd like to see “real” mountains, the Pacific Ocean, and redwood trees. He joked that Sugarloaf was the highest mountain he'd seen and the furthest West he'd been was West Virginia. Over the years, he saw them all and she saw them anew through his enthusiasm. On their first trip West, they splurged on a night at the Hotel Del Coronado. It happened to be a night with a full moon and high tide. They went out for a walk to see thousands of small fish struggling to the shore. The grunion were spawning. It was amazing, and just one of the countless wonders and adventures they shared.

Don Burns was full of intellectual curiosity. He read about everything and anything, from nature and history to string theory. He had endless enthusiasm for learning and for life. He never held a grudge, always believed the best of people. He wanted to know the story of every person he met. If you knew Don Burns, you were likely his friend, and he probably knew more about you than you knew about him.

Don was ill for a couple of years before he was diagnosed with lung cancer. By the time he was diagnosed the cancer had spread and he decided against treatment that was unlikely to be successful. "I've had a great life," he said. Although he became less active and his world became smaller, he would sit on the porch and soak in the sun and the beauty of the countryside to enjoy every minute remaining. He took joy in visitors and had time to say his goodbyes and share his love with family and friends. It was, indeed, a good life. Our lives are better for having known him and are diminished by his loss.

In addition to his wife, Lesley Nelson-Burns, Don is survived by his three children Joseph Burns, Kelly Roth, Bonnie Burns, eight grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.

In keeping with Don's wishes, he will be cremated and there will be no viewing, interment, or church service.

If you would like to make contributions in memory of Don, please contribute to Hospice of Frederick County, who made his last months pain free and were the most caring medical professionals he'd ever met.

Service Summary

Funeral Service

Location: - *Not available* -