



Mr. Ronald Lakes, November 22, 1942 ~ February 24, 2023

Ron Lakes, beloved husband, peer, colleague, and friend passed away at Royal Inland Hospital on February 24th, 2023. Ron began his career as a “tutor” with Open Learning with what was then known as the Open Learning Institute on January 1st, 1980. For more than half his life (43 years), Ron worked tirelessly in support of student success and the access mission of OL. (See <https://inside.tru.ca/2018/06/01/40-years-of-open-learning/>) Over those decades, he also won the admiration, respect, and friendship of countless staff and colleagues.

When Ron moved from Burnaby to Kamloops with the creation of Thompson Rivers University, he spent his days, including the vast majority of weekends, in the office marking assignments, responding to student inquiries, and personally introducing himself to the hundreds of students each year who took his courses. It was not surprising that Ron received recognition for his efforts from students who consistently gave him 97-99% approval ratings. In 2008, he received TRU’s Distinguished Service Award, followed by the [Teaching Excellence Awards for Open Learning Faculty Members](#) in 2009. In accepting this award, Ron summed up his teaching philosophy as putting himself in his student’s shoes.

Ron’s empathy was not relegated to students, or even humans. Before TRU introduced policies that banned pets in the workplace, Ron’s area of the floor was often dog central. All dogs, including my own, would eagerly anticipate Ron’s arrival as all knew his pockets contained an endless supply of treats. It was also not uncommon to show up in the office during the weekend only to be greeted by one of his personal guard dogs named Girlie. Despite the name, Girlie displayed a fierce and decidedly unladylike protective loyalty that was fueled by mutual love. His dogs also allowed Ron to build up his side hustle – selling new batches of puppies to happy staff members and their families.

Ron was a self-proclaimed rebel who relished the opportunity to break rules with a smile and a joke. Whenever there was a staff social event, Ron would be first in line to get some food and partake in conversation. “Free food,” he was fond of saying, “has no calories!” One could often hear his laughter as he told a story or a joke to anyone who would listen. When it was hockey jersey day at TRU, Ron and a co-worker walked around campus wearing his vintage Detroit Redwings jersey. Three people asked for a picture with him that day. It became a joke for years that people thought he was Gordie Howe. While he may not have been the real Gordie Howe, he was always authentic. It was his natural interest in people and enjoyment of listening and sharing that many considered him as extended “family”.

It is hard, if not impossible, to capture his spirit and what he meant to so many. Whenever I would ask Ron how he was doing, his response was always the same – “Excellent!” It wasn’t just a word, Ron felt good when he was useful, when he could help, when he was with people who knew and cared for him. While Ron was always “excellent,” there were some days that confirmed there were degrees of excellence. When his long-time work and home companion, Girle, passed away Ron simply couldn’t speak for days. He never did recover from that loss as any mention of her would invariably draw tears to his eyes. Despite such losses and the trials of life, Ron never stopped caring. For many staff, he was the

embodiment of Open Learning Faculty Member (OLFM) care and impact, for others he marks the end of an era. He believed in the vital role OLFMs played in student success, and the need to act with integrity. While it is true that the rate of change means that many who inhabit the desks and offices of Open Learning have no clear memory of Ron, it is more true that a great many do both at TRU and across Canada. In his last days Ron continued to ask about his students and kept his sense of humour with healthcare staff (he loved to tease the nurses). He is missed. Rest in peace, Ron, you have made a profound difference for so many.

I would like to thank Sarah Langlois, Don Stanley, and Matt Dyck for their stories and insights. Please reflect on and share your stories about Ron – and don't forget to also share some food and a joke.

Thanks, Ron!

Don Poirier
AVP-Open Learning