

Innovative math teacher helped inspire students

Walter Howard of Kitchener Born: March 11, 1931, in Toronto Died: Dec. 7, 2022, of age-related illness

Waterloo Region Record · 17 Jan 2023 · VALERIE HILL SPECIAL TO WATERLOO REGION RECORD VALERIE HILL IS A FORMER RECORD REPORTER. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT VMHILL296@GMAIL.COM.

To his students, Walter Howard was a no-nonsense math teacher, an educator who expected to get the best from them, and usually did. And there was always that little spark of humour.



He would finish each lesson bellowing, “All right peasants, to work!” The kids groaned, giggled then buckled down to their homework.

To his children Susan and Kevin Howard, Walter was a renaissance man, someone who moved easily between the worlds of education, music, the outdoors and building construction. And his beloved dogs. Nothing was too good for the dogs.

Walter was born March 11, 1931, in Toronto, one of Lot and Jessie Howard’s two sons. His parents, maternal grandparents and various other relatives immigrated to Canada from England in the late 1920s. Lot was a builder and a blacksmith, working mainly in the family’s Toronto Riverdale neighbourhood.

Walter attended Jarvis Collegiate starting at age 13. He entered school with a fully developed reputation as a tough blacksmith’s son, famous for his ability to pound hot rivets with a six-pound sledgehammer in each hand. It was an unusual start for a boy who would become a nationally acclaimed educator.

Walter completed an undergraduate degree in physical engineering from the University of Toronto in 1955 and a year later, he obtained a master’s degree in solid-state physics (the study of solid materials). He married his high school sweetheart Audrey Cumberland in 1955. Audrey became a teacher, vice-principal and later, continuing education co-ordinator at the Toronto Board of Education.

Ready to launch a career, Walter landed a job with A.V. Roe as an instrument engineer, working on the Avro Arrow jet fighter. The advanced aircraft put Canada on the map in aviation technology, but the project was shut down in 1959 by then-prime minister John Diefenbaker.

Several staff left, including Walter, though his departure was after a dispute over salary. He was earning \$65 a week. Walter worked freelance for a time then switched to teaching, joining the math department at Riverdale High School where he stayed four years before moving on to his alma mater, Jarvis Collegiate. He taught for two years then became math department head.

Teaching at Jarvis for 32 years, Walter not only inspired students but entirely changed how subjects in his department were taught. He felt students entering math and engineering programs directly from high school were unprepared for the rigours of post-secondary education, and so he developed a new Grade 13 course, Triple Maths.

The innovative new program integrated the three math courses — calculus, algebra and finite mathematics — into a single, seamless program. For Jarvis students, it was the toughest course in the school. But he was such a good teacher, many went on to Ivy League universities.

Students from across the city would come to Jarvis just for the math program.

Walter's work was recognized with several awards, including the Toronto Sun Teacher of the Year in 1994, the Scientific Research Honor Society Sigma Xi in 1995 and in 1996, the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in science, technology and math. The maths program was highlighted in a special Toronto Star education series in the mid-1990s.

Walter also taught at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, where he provided curriculum and produced a 1,000-page math textbook. When Grade 13 was abolished in Ontario, so too was the Triple Maths program.

Despite his focus on education, Walter was a man of many layers.

“He lived and functioned in the world of intellect yet was practical and down-to-earth,” son Kevin said.

Kevin remembers him as “a complex man” living in a world of complex scientific and mathematical ideas, while also finding pleasure in the simplicity of woodworking and home renovations.

“The underpinning of Wally was that he couldn't live without both,” he said.

Walter, it seemed, could fix anything, added daughter Susan, noting her good-natured father was nicknamed “Jolly Wally.”

“He played classical piano, was a skilled woodworker, a boater, loved his dogs and nature,” she wrote in a tribute. “Teaching however was always one of his greatest passions.”

Walter and Audrey had owned a vacation property near Midland, Ont., for several years, and when Walter retired in 1996 he rebuilt the cottage into a house. The two settled into retirement in the Georgian Bay community. Audrey joined the local

hospital board. Walter provided woodworking courses to customers at the Midland Home Depot, where he also created fun projects for families.

The couple moved to a retirement home in Cambridge in 2018. Audrey died in 2019, after which Walter moved to long-term care in Kitchener. He died Dec. 7, 2022, at age 91.