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# 'Big teddy bear' had a passion for old tractors

**Doug McLean formerly of Elmira Born: July 21, 1944, in Conn, Ont. Died: Dec. 17, 2023, of cancer**

Doug McLean volunteered for 25 years with the Elmira Maple Syrup Festival

By Valerie Hill

Jan 8, 2024

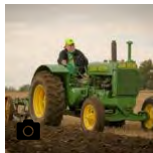
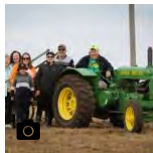
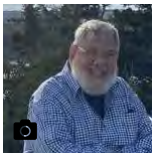
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family photo

Douglas McLean



As the eldest in a family of six kids growing up on a farm near Conn, Ont., Doug McLean had special responsibilities.

“Our mother worked in the barn morning and night, and he was in charge of three of us in the house,” said sister Shirley Small. “I was a baby. He was four.”

It might seem young to become the family babysitter, but Doug was quite mature and he quickly developed tricks to keep whiny babies quiet.

“He’d dip my soother in corn syrup.”

As Small said, from the time he was little, family was deeply important to Doug.

“We looked up to him; he provided balance in our family,” she said.

Doug was born July 21, 1944, the first child of Herb and Luella McLean. On the farm east of Mount Forest, Doug learned lessons about hard work and family.

The farm is still in the family, with a third generation now helping to run it. It remained a central point in his life.

After graduating from high school, Doug was hired by Bell Canada as a linesman and moved to Guelph in 1964.

He married his high school sweetheart Pat Laughlin in 1967 and transferred to Bell’s Kitchener location, where Pat also worked.

“He was fun,” said Pat. “We were young baby boomers, it was a fun time. He always had a smile.”

In 1972, Doug was promoted to the engineering division as a manager; he retired in 2004.

The couple moved from their first home in Kitchener to a large house in Elmira where they would live for 45 years, raising their children Mike and Trish. It would also be where they both got involved in their community.

It began when young Mike joined the house league hockey team and his dad offered to coach. As Mike said, his dad had “some different thinking in how to use players.”

That different thinking and his exceptional skill relating to kids led to several championships over the decade Doug coached.

When Pat joined the Elmira Maple Syrup Festival committee she encouraged Doug to join too.

Doug rarely did anything by half measures, so it wasn’t long before he was running the festival’s collector toy show and serving on the board, including two terms as chair. In all, he volunteered with the festival for 25 years, involving his children too.

“He instilled in me to be active and involved in your community,” said Mike. “It was important to him.”

“Doug rarely missed any of our committee meetings and was looked upon as a source of information regarding the festivals in the past,” said festival committee member Drew McGovern.

With his farming background, Doug was also keen on old tractors, specifically John Deere tractors.

He joined the Friends of John Deere group at Country Heritage Park in Milton and was past president of the Upper Canada Two Cylinder Club.

Doug could fix anything, including tractors as old as he was, Pat said.

Trish McLean said her dad told her stories about when he and his brother Morley saved their money and bought an old jalopy. Completely on their own (their father was not mechanically inclined) they sourced parts, found tools and restored the car. Doug was 12, his brother 10.

“He was persistent,” McLean said. “He always wanted to know: ‘How does this work?’ ”

During the COVID shutdowns, Doug worked on restoring a 1950s John Deere 420 tractor in his garage.

He was “this big, sweet teddy bear, really gentle,” McLean said. “His was really unconditional love.”

It didn’t take much to make him tear up: an emotional commercial on TV, or photos of graves of fallen soldiers she’d taken while touring Holland.

Doug was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2016, and did well under treatment, but the cancer metastasized.

The couple moved to Ancaster in 2021, to be closer to son Mike’s family.

In the fall, knowing Doug was nearing the end, the family hosted a plow day on the family farm in Conn. It was a frequent event for the McLeans but this one was special, Doug’s last. Still, he was able to climb aboard an ancient tractor with his grandson, pulling an equally ancient plow to take one last swipe across a field.

There is a tree planted on the farm, commemorating Doug. A tree lover, he’d been growing saplings for years, transplanting them to the yards of all his family members, as an enduring symbol of love.

By November 2023, there was nothing more medicine could do for him. He died on Dec. 17 at age 79.

Doug’s celebration of life will be held Sunday, Jan. 14, at 1 pm, in Elmira Lions Hall, 40 South St. W, Elmira.



**Valerie Hill**

*Freelance writer Valerie Hill is a former Waterloo Region Record reporter.*