



Painting by Edgardo Lantini, courtesy of BC Cancer Agency

## Don Rix remembered

In November 2009, we lost a giant of BC medicine. Dr Don Rix has left behind a legacy of innovation, courage, and open-heartedness.

**Diana June King**

**D**espite an amazing array of interests and causes, Dr Don Rix's heart was always in medicine. First and foremost, he was a physician, and all his accomplishments stemmed from his love of and pride in medicine.

Over the years Don was many things to many people—philanthropist, entrepreneur, community leader, volunteer, mentor, supporter, and friend.

In the early days, though, he was not always regarded in such a positive light. Some couldn't accept the role of private labs in the health care system,

others found Don's drive abrasive, and still others considered him a bit of a renegade. At the time his inherent business sense was an anomaly in medicine and his motives were sometimes viewed with skepticism. Don's defiance of convention by providing private community lab services rattled some cages.

But anyone who got to know Don soon found out that he was a visionary and a pioneer, that he didn't do anything by the book, and that his motives were very simple: he wanted to make a difference. Throughout his life he looked for gaps and filled them.

That constant drive to build something, to achieve something and to keep at it, no matter what, was one of his special qualities. The road wasn't always an easy one. Don overcame his share of challenges along the way.

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Ms King is currently writing a biography of Dr Don Rix. She knew Don most of her life—first, as a patient of his and Adam Waldie's in the late 1950s, and then as a 35-year employee at Metro-McNair, then MDS Metro and now LifeLabs. She is currently LifeLabs' director of communications and external affairs.

He was driven to be successful, though, and it didn't end with that because when success came, he started to give it back—to share his wealth of knowledge as well as his monetary wealth. For the past several years, that is all Don did.

Time was of the essence for Don—every minute mattered. He was a master at multitasking, keeping several balls in the air, and at the same time focusing entirely on one thing or one person. When he was talking to you, you had his undivided attention.

Don earned his nickname—The Roadrunner—honestly. He had boundless energy and his impatience was legendary, but his impatience was simply a reflection of his intense desire to get things done quickly and move on.

### Don's early years

After obtaining his MD from the University of Western Ontario in 1957, Don came to Vancouver to intern at Vancouver General Hospital. He'd planned to specialize in urology, but got sidetracked by the need to earn a living. Through a mutual friend, Don met Dr Adam Waldie, who had a family practice on 10th Avenue at Discovery and who was looking for a partner.

Don spent the next 5 years—and as he contended, five of the happiest years of his life—in general practice. Don always spoke fondly of those years—particularly of his esteem for Adam Waldie, who he credited with his introduction to community service, starting with door-to-door canvassing for the Salvation Army and United Way. It also included taking food baskets to needy patients or providing students with free medication, because of course, this was pre-medicare.

When Don was asked where his commitment to community stemmed from, he replied, “Without a doubt, Adam Waldie, and I thought the world of him. He just expected it, so I went

along. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

It was during those years in family practice that Don met Michael Smith, who played a pivotal role in

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Don's decision to become a pathologist and get involved in laboratory medicine. Their early conversations about DNA and the future of diagnostic medicine were the catalyst that led to his interest in a fledgling lab company. Metropolitan Biomedical Laboratories was started in 1960 by Sid Zbarsky, a biochemist who taught at UBC, and two other partners, another biochemist and a physician. When Sid's two partners decided to sell their shares in 1962, Don and a colleague bought in. The rest, as they say, is history, although it took some interesting turns, including a sale in 1965 and a buy-back 4 years later.

From the start Don was driven by a vision to provide patients with equal access to lab services across the province. That vision is what made Metro unique, and as LifeLabs it's still the only lab company providing services around the province.

Don always had a soft spot for other physicians, and he demonstrated that loyalty in many ways—first through the establishment of community labs for physicians and their

patients—not just in the Lower Mainland but province-wide. Don told wonderful stories about the work he did with the United Church hospitals in Bella Bella and Bella Coola in the early days of the lab. He was also instrumental in setting up programs to provide quality control and educational support to a number of other small labs around the province.

He bent over backwards for physicians: whenever he saw a gap, he filled it. He started a courier system to pick up samples from doctors' offices and clinics (which had been sent through the mail until then) and deliver them to wherever they needed to be tested—public or private lab; he started a house-call service for homebound patients who couldn't get to the lab for their tests; he provided lab services in areas where people had none—in many cases, at a financial loss.

### Service to medical education

He also had a soft spot for medical students; he would do anything to help a student who shared his passion for medicine. There are countless stories of individuals he supported financially, through mentorship, or by simply connecting them with someone else who could help them. Even as he fought the loss of his voice in the summer of this past year, he spent hours interviewing students for medical faculty seats at UBC.

That was definitely one of Don's fortes—the ability to recognize who needed to meet whom to get something done. He was always on the lookout for opportunities to match people up.

One of his legacies at a number of institutions is the establishment of bursaries for students who need financial help. He insisted that the recipients not be “A” students, because those students would have access to scholarship funds. (When Don sold the lab business in 2006, he gave every

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lab employee \$500. Many advisors suggested he prorate the amount based on length of service and status of employment—casual, part-time or full-time—but Don wouldn't hear of it. His response was, "Everyone's getting the same because it's the casual and shorter-term employees who probably need the money more.")

In the medical community, Don is probably most well known for his support of expanding medical training—both in terms of its content and its accessibility—at his alma mater, the University of Western Ontario (where one of the initiatives he funded was a simulation lab for medical students), BCIT, UBC, and UNBC. Don was particularly thrilled about the establishment of the medical program at UNBC because he felt so strongly that medical education needed to be made available in our more remote communities to help keep trained doctors in those communities. His long relationship with BCIT started with his support of the medical technology train-

ing program, for which he provided practical training at his lab.

### Service to the profession

Within the BCMA Don was a facilitator and an integrator. He believed strongly in relationships—especially with government. His word was his bond and his handshake was a done deal.

Although never elected to the BCMA Executive (he claimed to have run once and lost to Bill Jory by 50 votes), Don was a huge presence within the BCMA. In the 1960s he was the chair of the Communications Committee and the force behind creating a role for a layperson on the committee to help improve internal and external communications; during the 1970s he was on the BCMA Board for 10 years; for the past 20 years he chaired the Finance Committee (many BCMA members will remember his "no more dues" announcements complete with brass fanfare). He was also a strong supporter of the organization's Benevolent Fund.

Always on the periphery of politics and a self-confessed political junkie, Don was never tempted to run for office. He wasn't an orator; he wasn't a schmoozer. He lacked the social ease of many other people of his stature. He always felt he could do more from the outside of organized politics.

### The innovator

Don was fascinated by technology and what it could do. Ironically, he was never fascinated by what it could do for him personally. He didn't use a PDA and rarely wrote an e-mail. He much preferred talking to someone face-to-face than anything else.

He purchased the first diagnostic auto-analyzer for the lab in the early 60s (which cost the same as his first house), and Metro was the first private lab in Canada to computerize in the 70s. People who worked with Don in those days tell many stories of how well-equipped the lab was and of all the progressive things he did for staff.

In a recent interview Don explained some of his reasoning: "In those days, the quality of our work was suspect because we were a private company. So we bent over backwards to prove we were as good as any other lab in BC. If we were required to run a quality check every 10 specimens, we'd do it every five. As for staff? I always believed that if you hired the best, treated them with respect, and offered them educational opportunities, they'd stay and make a career with you. And that's what we wanted—people who would stay and grow with us."

Many of the things Don introduced for employees were way ahead of their time: he brought in a pension plan long before other private companies did, he pushed for a day-care centre and even a credit union and ATMs in the labs, neither of which came to fruition, but his motivation was simply to support staff. He was also well known for encouraging staff to take risks—he created a safe environment for people



*A young Don Rix.*



*Don Rix about to go zip-lining at Whistler.*

to be innovative and try new things.

Don's fascination with technology and avid interest in biotechnology started early, during a time when he was equally fascinated with investing in biotech start-ups and emerging technologies. Over time he became well known as an angel investor, and as many have said, BC's biotech industry would be nowhere near what it is today if it hadn't been for Don.

His decisions to invest were almost always based on the person asking for his support. He looked for passion; he looked for commitment; he looked for integrity. Those were the attributes that influenced his thinking, not flashy presentations. And if you couldn't get your message across within the first 10 minutes, you'd lost him.

### The philanthropist

Unlike many other philanthropists, Don had a broad palette of interests: medicine and science, education, and the arts. Within those areas his giving spanned the gamut: operations, capital, and endowment. During these tough times there are many organizations benefiting from his foresight and insistence on endowments. He was also very astute about leveraging his

money to attract more from other donors or, as he put it, "to encourage others to pony up as well." Within medicine and science his focus was on health care providers, health care consumers, and medical students.

He was an active philanthropist—someone who got involved, who researched, and who did more than write cheques. He gave his time—whether it was to chairing a hospital foundation board, mentoring a medical student, volunteering to answer phones at a telethon, or simply dropping by one of the labs to chat with staff (which he did frequently).

Don was also a risk-taker. He adopted causes that were neither mainstream nor glamorous. He was an early supporter of hospice and palliative care, and he was one of the first people to give money to support the Downtown East Side injection program. In the 1980s he adopted the Ileitis and Colitis Societies because as he put it very bluntly, "No one wants to be associated with bloody diarrhea and stuff like that, and all they needed was some office space and administrative support."

For every public acknowledgment of his philanthropy, though, there are

countless organizations Don helped anonymously and individuals he helped privately. And many of those individuals don't even know they are beneficiaries of his efforts. That's the way he wanted it.

Later in life Don was the recipient of numerous awards for his entrepreneurship and philanthropy, including the Order of BC and the Order of Canada. Of all the awards he received, however, the CMA's FNG Starr Award for distinguished achievement was one of his most prized. It was presented to him in Saskatoon in August 2009 at a time when his health was failing and the trip to accept it was arduous. But he was determined—acknowledgment and respect from his peers meant the world to Don.

What Don wanted most was to make a difference and to set an example in the hopes that other people and organizations would pick up where he left off.

When Don Rix died in early November 2009, people talked about the huge hole his passing left in the community. That's true, but the hole he left in many individuals' hearts was just as big. **BCMJ**



*Don Rix at the Taj Mahal.*



*Don Rix and his daughter Laurie Rix at CMA FNG Starr Award presentation 2009.*