

Eugene Lehman: Much-loved swimmer's race is over

BY BRENDA BRANSWELL, GAZETTE EDUCATION REPORTER DECEMBER 21, 2011



At 94, Eugene Lehman was tutoring students in math, reaching into his backpack for his “weapons of mass instruction.”

Photograph by: Phil Carpenter, Gazette file photo

MONTREAL - When he was a spry 94-year-old volunteering at Montreal schools and still swimming competitively, Eugene Lehman told The Gazette that he had to keep going until he was as old as cross-country skiing pioneer Herman (Jackrabbit) Smith-Johannsen, who died at 111.

Lehman didn't make it to that milestone, passing away at his West Island home on Dec. 15 at 98. But his post-retirement life was a whirl of activity that was remarkable in itself.

He volunteered as a math mentor at Montreal-area schools until 2010 when he had to stop because of failing health.

He won three medals at the FINA Masters' World Championships in California in 2006 where he was the oldest man in the competition.

And he had a thirst for knowledge that included studying Japanese and creative writing.

“What attracted me to Eugene 52 years ago was the fact that he was the brightest person I had ever met, and I still consider that (the case),” said Shirley Lehman, his wife.

A native of Tarrytown, N.Y., Lehman became a military weather forecaster during the Second World War. He obtained his Ph.D in statistics from North Carolina State University in 1961. Nine years later, the Lehmans immigrated to Canada. Lehman taught statistics at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. When he had to retire at 65 – the rule at that time – he switched to the CEGEP system, teaching at several different colleges, Shirley Lehman said.

Her husband had wanted to become an elementary school teacher when he started studying at Yale University in 1929, but an uncle discouraged him. In the late 1980s, he began volunteering in schools.

“He loved sharing all of his knowledge with the children,” Shirley Lehman said.

“The kids loved him,” recalled Jim Daskalakis, a former vice-principal at FACE school.

“They called him Eugene. I’m the only one that called him Mr. Lehman.”

At Willingdon School in 2007, Lehman was still climbing more than 80 steps to a top floor room to teach “Eugene’s Very Enriched Math for Kids.” At the time, he joked about himself: “I’ve been 11 years old for the last half century.”

Former Willingdon principal Ivana Colatriano recalled the first time Lehman introduced himself to her. “He put his backpack on my desk and he said: ‘In here, I have my weapons of mass instruction.’ He carried all his calculators with him.”

He also had a wonderful sense of humour, Colatriano said. When Lehman had surgery several years ago, the school sent him flowers. Lehman emailed a picture of the bouquet to Colatriano.

“We were thrilled that we actually saw what we sent him,” she said. More pictures arrived from Lehman in the following days showing the flowers as they dwindled and wilted. “I thought ... what a sense of humour,” Colatriano said.

Mark Boghen said his son loved Lehman’s math sessions.

“I loved the guy,” Boghen added. “He and I exchanged a lot of emails. You were never sure what language Eugene was going to quote in, in his emails – he might write in the Greek script, he might speak Japanese to you or Indonesian.”

The English Montreal School Board named Lehman its “volunteer of distinction” in 2004. He regularly attended the annual volunteer appreciation event.

“Even if we had the event in the east end, he would take a taxi or bus there and then come to the microphone and ask for a lift home,” said Mike Cohen, a marketing and communication specialist at the board. “Everyone loved him.”

Lehman was also a fixture at the Pointe Claire Aquatic Centre where he swam with the masters swim club since 1985. He underwent an aortic valve replacement in 1997 and kept competing until 2009 when he was 96. He began working with a personal trainer in early 2010 after he had to stop swimming because of health problems.

“He was definitely a celebrity around here,” said Bill Gate, the centre’s manager.

“Everyone knew him because there were always funny stories about him because he was an interesting character,” Gate said.

Lehman would provide updates at the pool about what had happened that day in history, jotting it down on a whiteboard.

Shirley Lehman has a box of her husband’s swimming medals. He set at least one world record when he was in the 90-94 age category, she said

Lehman achieved multiple world records in the masters swimming world, Gate said, recalling how about 100 Pointe Claire swimmers once cheered him on when he broke a record in his 90s. Proud of his achievements, Lehman sometimes wore his medals to the Pointe Claire pool.

“I think he had a fantastic life,” Gate said. “He didn’t stop.”

Lehman is also survived by four children and five grandchildren. A memorial service will be held for him next summer at the Pointe Claire Aquatic Centre, Shirley Lehman said.

“Nothing could be more perfect than that,” she said.

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