

A man with a name

Douglas Lalonde was not just a homeless man killed in a container fire

BY JAMES WELDON, NORTH SHORE NEWS JANUARY 15, 2012



Flowers lie in an alley in the 200-block of Lloyd Avenue, where Douglas Lalonde died Jan. 3.

Photograph by: NEWS photo, Mike Wakefield

ON Jan. 3, Douglas Richard Lalonde received some crushing news.

The 53-year-old carpenter, who had been unable to work for months due to injury, had been denied a disability payment by the provincial government. Deeply upset, he apparently started drinking heavily that afternoon and by early evening had lost consciousness. While he was asleep, an unattended candle set light to a chair, and his cramped living space - an abandoned shipping container in North Vancouver's industrial area - quickly filled with smoke. Lalonde never woke up.

To the people who read about the accident in the newspaper or saw it on TV, Lalonde was an unnamed homeless man who had died in a fire. To his family and friends, he was a talented, deeply loved man whose life ended far too soon.

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The Lalonde family moved to the North Shore from Winnipeg in 1966, when Douglas was nine years old. He graduated from West Vancouver secondary eight years later and quickly took up carpentry, a trade that soon grew into a passion.

"There was nothing he couldn't build," said his older brother David, speaking this week to the North Shore News. "He just had a natural ability for it."

Lalonde was so taken with the craft that he stayed with it for the next 35 years, working locally for the most part as an independent contractor. He was a private man, but also an unfailingly kind one who loved fishing and motorbikes and cars.

"He would do favours for anybody," said John Vanneck, a West Vancouver contractor who worked with Lalonde for 30 years. "He was that kind of person."

Lalonde began struggling with addiction at an early age, starting to drink heavily in his teens and developing a dependence that he was never able to escape. He was in and out of rehab several times over the course of his life, said David, but his habit of internalizing problems meant it was a crutch he could never give up. The addiction never undid him financially, however. Lalonde supported himself into his 50s, holding down regular work, maintaining a home and a car, taking regular holidays, according to his brother.

But about three years ago, old injuries started to catch up with him, and his work began to suffer. In his decades on construction sites, Lalonde had taken his share of serious falls, hurting his back, his legs, his hips. While he had been able to push through the pain when he was younger, the damage to his body started to show as he aged, said David.

By the age of 50 or 51, he could no longer work full time, and when he did show up to a work site, he struggled with a lack of mobility. The problem was compounded when he started to show signs of memory loss, said his longtime workmate Vanneck.

The sudden loss of income seemed to trigger a downward spiral, beginning about two years ago. First, Lalonde was forced to retire his motorbike because he could no longer maintain it. About a year after that, he had to give up his home and turn to social assistance. Last spring, he had to take his car off the road, and in the fall he lost his tools and other possessions when the owner of a storage locker repossessed the contents. Lalonde eventually turned to desperate means to support himself.

"He spent a lot of his days cruising the Norgate area, up and down Pemberton, doing what every homeless person does, collecting bottles on the recycling days," said David.

It's not clear when Lalonde moved into the shipping container. Police believe it may have been about a year ago. Windowless and poorly ventilated, tucked behind a business on Lloyd Avenue, the steel box offered a degree of shelter from the elements. It had a power source, which allowed Lalonde to run a space heater and a TV and a few other small comforts.

David and other family members had no idea he was living there, only learning after Lalonde's death what he went through in the last dark year. Stubborn and proud, he refused to ask for help, and cut off contact with loved ones for much of that period.

For a short time last month, it seemed things were about to turn around. Vanneck, who had intermittent contact with Lalonde, managed to convince him to meet just before Christmas. Vanneck called David, and the three men met briefly at a restaurant Dec. 23.

David convinced Lalonde to come to visit him and his wife Sharon at their North Vancouver home. Early in the afternoon on Christmas Day, he appeared on their doorstep and accepted an invitation inside.

"I told him flat out that we loved him unconditionally, that this was his home from now on, and that we would help him get back on his feet, no matter what it took," said David.

He and Sharon gave Lalonde some fresh clothes, a cellphone and a key to their house. They told him he could come and go as he pleased, that they would cover his room and board until he could support himself again. He seemed to be on-board with the plan, and in the following days, he started to move things into their house from the container.

"He sounded eager to pursue work again," said David. "He wanted his own place again. We wanted to give him the foundation to accomplish that."

Lalonde talked about getting a tool belt and hardhat and looking for a job at the big construction site on Lonsdale Avenue. If that didn't work out, David and Sharon were preparing to find work for him in their tree pruning business. Lalonde stayed with them again on New Year's Day, enjoying a family dinner and breakfast the next morning. He seemed happy, if somewhat reflective, said David.

It was the last time the couple would see him alive.

After leaving his brother's home, Lalonde apparently returned to the container. He was supposed to go to a friend's house the following day for a roast dinner, but on that morning, Jan. 3, he received the news that his application for a disability payment had been turned down, dashing his hopes of a long-term rise in his income. The bad news seems to have triggered an abrupt return to alcohol. It was about this time power was cut to the container, forcing him to use candles to light and heat it.

Lalonde didn't make it to the dinner. Instead, he stayed in his shelter drinking, according to his brother. At some point in the evening, fire broke out, and Lalonde, unconscious by then, died of smoke inhalation.

The news was devastating, said Vanneck.

"The only comfort we have is that we don't believe he suffered or even knew what happened to him," said David.

Adding to the family's grief was the response of the public. While most of the comments posted on news sites were sympathetic, a nasty minority - about 10 per cent he estimates - were vile.

"Some of the comments posted on that page, it really gives you a new perspective on humanity and its cruelty," he said. "The one comment that stood out in my mind was: 'Probably just a another crackhead loser who won't be missed.'"

Looking back, David isn't sure what can be done to help people in his brother's predicament. The problem is complex, he said.

"There's that perspective of just, 'Go get a job, you loser.' But it's not always as clear cut as that," said David. "More focus (should be put on) restoring that dignity and pride and self-worth, so that they can see a future for themselves and set their personal goals again. How you do that, I don't know."

Vanneck was similarly unsure what to suggest as a solution, but both he and David were clear on one point: Before a solution can be found, the public has to start to see people in Lalonde's situation as human.

"Doug wasn't anonymous," said David. "He was a great person, and a contributor to humanity."

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Lalonde (left) visited his brother David and sister Barb at their North Vancouver home Christmas Day. Lalonde, who had fallen on hard times because of addiction, seemed on the point of turning his life around.

Photograph by: submitted, for North Shore News

