

'Norm on the porch says hello'

Norm Kelly: educator, amateur thespian, 'good best friend'
Despite debilitating illness, he retained his interest in others

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In the late summer afternoons, Norm Kelly was always on the pretty front porch of his flag-strewn house atop a little hill on Linnsmore Cr. in Toronto's east end. He'd be smiling and waving to the people streaming up from or toward the Greenwood subway station, and usually they'd be smiling and waving back.

Many of them stopped to talk to the friendly man in the power wheelchair, probably because it was hard to miss the notice printed on hot pink or neon green or orange computer paper pinned to both sides of the garden pergola right at the sidewalk.

"Norm on the porch says hello," it read. "Please say hello back."

On Fridays, he changed the signs. These ones read: "Please join us for tea and cookies on the porch."

Admittedly most of the people who did join them there were neighbours, but as one of them told Kelly and his wife, Barbara Datlen-Kelly, they hadn't known one another before the couple moved onto the street in 1996. Kelly and Datlen-Kelly invited all their neighbours over for a barbecue the minute they finished their renovations that year. After that, everyone would gather at their home every Christmas for their open house as well as for their annual barbecues.

In 2003, when the barbecues were becoming too big for Datlen-Kelly to handle, they decided to have a dinner party every Saturday night from late June until the Saturday after Labour Day for a rotating cast of 12 to 16 people from all aspects of their busy and varied lives.

"Norm was just a very friendly guy," said Datlen-Kelly. He was more than that.

He was a community builder who not only organized his own funeral, he attended it.

He died at 62 on Sept. 4 of multiple system atrophy, a crippling Parkinson's Plus disorder of relatively late onset, which robs people of their mobility and ultimately of their speech.

Kelly was 54 and a year away from retiring when he noticed he was having difficulty working the computer mouse.

It was a particularly devastating illness for Kelly, who had been a guidance counsellor with the Toronto Catholic District School Board and a real presence at Jean Vanier secondary school where he, 6-foot tall and 250 pounds, danced "The Sugar Plum Fairy" in a tutu at the annual Christmas assembly to cheers and howls from students.

"He was the highlight of the

wheelchair for him to appear in.

"He loved being on stage, everything off stage and everything backstage," said his friend Mary Jane McKeen, who was part of his set painting crew. "I think the theatre gave him focus and kept him going."

He grew up in the Dundas/Dufferin area of Toronto in an apartment over the bakery run by his Scottish parents and began teaching after a one-year post-high school course. He studied at nights, earning a B.A. and eventually a masters' degree in education.

In 1972, he and his then wife, Mary Ellen, and daughter Sheila moved to University City, one of many young families attracted to the innovative townhouse and apartment complex south of Finch Ave., one of the city's first planned communities.

The developers had designed the complex with a vehicle-free promenade to encourage a feel of community, but it was Kelly who made that a reality. For

17 years he was head of the condo board, earning him his nickname the Mayor of University City.

It used to take him an hour to fetch a jug of milk from the store that was five minutes away because he stopped to talk to everyone.

He was always organizing something — winter carnivals, dances and huge Canada Day celebrations. More than 5,000 people used to turn out, recalled former neighbour Terri Hope, making it the second largest July 1 celebration in Ontario, if not Canada.

"Norm was the epicentre. He ran the best all-candidates meetings I've ever been to," she said.

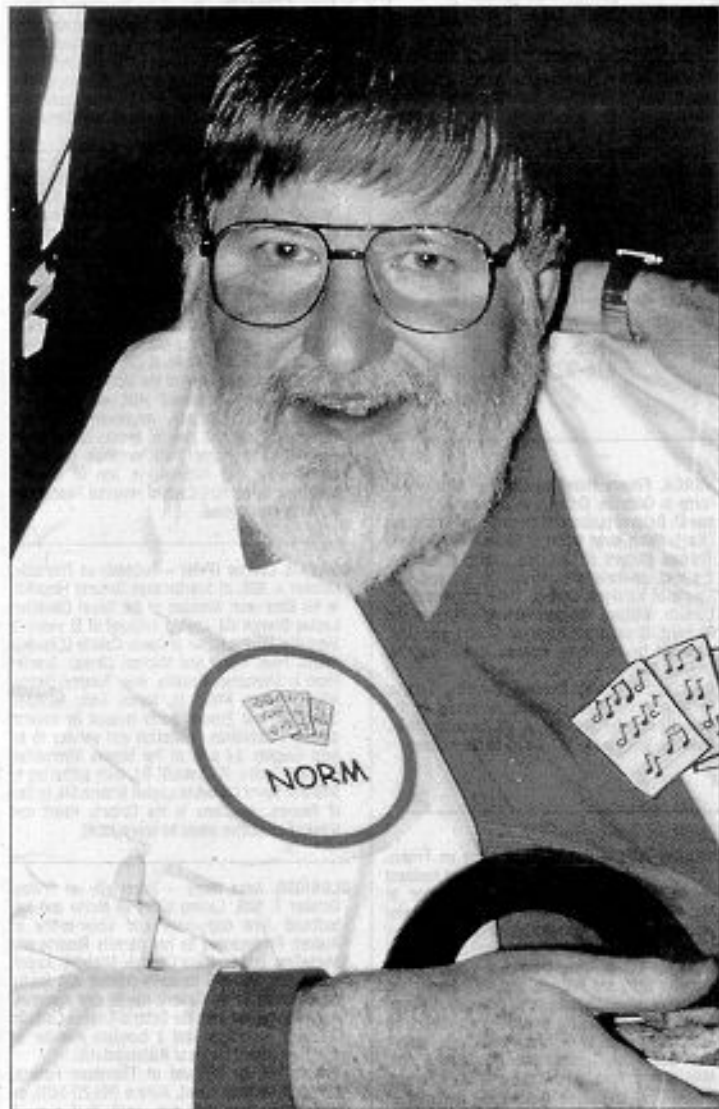
He spearheaded the community's political fight to keep

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show," said Kelly's friend, former school principal Mike Leroux. "But he also had the total respect of the kids."

Kelly also performed in 21 Broadway shows put on by Staff Arts, a group of talented and musical teachers and Catholic school board employees. His first show was *Fiddler on the Roof*; his favourite show was *Gyps and Dolls*, where he was Nicely Nicely Johnson and got to sing "Sit Down, You're Rockin' The Boat."

He had never been a star; "Norm would say he was first on right, back row," said Datlen-Kelly. He was too sick to be in this year's *Beauty and the Beast*, but he was in the four shows before that in his wheelchair. For *Oliver* in 2003, Datlen-Kelly managed to find an antique



Norm Kelly, a former guidance counsellor with the Toronto Catholic school board, died Sept. 4 — but not before arranging to attend his own wake, a neighbourhood party held by his many friends.

nearby lands for parkland and, with Dahlen-Kelly, helped run the Four Winds Sentinel, the longest running community-operated newspaper in North York until it folded after 17 years in 1993.

Married in 1995, he and Dahlen-Kelly had been together since 1979 and had just really moved into their new east-end neighbourhood when he began noticing symptoms. In the win-

ter of 2000-01, he and Hope wrote a letter to 50 friends — “Norm came up with the initial 50 or so names. Who the hell else could do that?” Hope exclaimed — asking for volunteers for a circle of support helping him with speech therapy.

For four years, they kept up that circle. “I probably got more out of it than Norm did,” said his friend Leroux. They’d vary the speech exercises by riffing about

George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice to the tempo of “Who’s On First.” And Terri Hope’s husband Bob searched out naughty limericks for Kelly’s exercises.

“Norm Kelly had this amazing group of friends because he was such a good best friend,” said Bonnie Bereskin, the Baycrest Centre’s speech therapist who helped coordinate the Circle of Support. “It was sort of like putting money in the bank. He had given a lot over the years.”

Bereskin said she’d been worried that people might drop out when Kelly’s condition inevitably worsened. “I thought they would be afraid, but instead they devised new ways of helping him and started doing other things that were needed.”

They organized cleaning crews for the house, brought over casseroles, took him places, and continued the therapy sessions even during the last two months of his life when Kelly finally lost his ability to speak.

“I would say Norm dealt with this in a state of grace,” said Dahlen-Kelly. “He was determined to do everything he possibly could.”

But last year, he decided it was time to move into a nursing home. He put up a sign on the pergola — “I have chosen to go into a beautiful nursing home because I can no longer stay safely at home” — and people were upset when they read it.

But Kelly always knew he would be coming back to the neighbourhood. For his funeral he specified he wanted a street party, the music he had loved to sing, and he wanted the hearse containing his remains to stop by and stay awhile. And that’s exactly what happened.

“As we turned the corner, I could see the tables and chairs on all the driveways. Someone had put big plastic flowers out and I thought Norm would get such a kick out of it,” said Dahlen-Kelly. “It was like he was welcomed back home. It was beautiful.”