

Geoffrey Ernest Yellow

In the winter, he parked his Harley-Davidson in the living room. When his wife died of cancer, the long rides helped him cope.

by [Michael Friscolanti](#) on Wednesday, June 15, 2011 9:35am - [0 Comments](#)



Illustration by Team Macho

Geoffrey Ernest Yellow was born in Hamilton on Nov. 16, 1955, the first son of Ernie and Frances Yellow (née Tait). His father, an Englishman who moved to Canada after the Second World War, was a millworker at Stelco; his mother, originally from Scotland, worked as a newsroom secretary at the Hamilton Spectator before leaving to raise her children. (John was born next, then Mary.)

Like so many toddlers, Geoff adored the television show Romper Room, which featured “Ms. Lois” reading to groups of children and peering into her magic mirror. “He wanted to be on that show so badly, so I wrote in,” Frances remembers. “Sure enough, we got the call.” The program was taped at a downtown Hamilton studio, but because the Yellows didn’t own a car, Geoff’s dream-come-true required some early morning bus rides. “He thought it was wonderful,” Frances says. “He got to be a TV star for two weeks.”

When Geoff was 11, the family moved to Grimsby, a small town on the tip of Niagara’s wine region. He taught his little brother to fish in Forty Creek and skate without holding on to a chair. When they were teenagers, he took John to his first rock concert: Alice Cooper. “He was three years older, but he never minded me tagging along,” John says. Once, during a visit to the Canadian National Exhibition, Geoff won a giant stuffed giraffe. “People offered him money for it,” says Mary Dancer, his little sister. “But he came home and gave it straight to me. I am in my 40s now, and I still have that darn giraffe.”

In high school, Geoff played trumpet in the band and fell in love with his future wife, Nancy Corbett. They had two kids, Heather and Dave. A plumber by trade, Geoff took a job at the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital, and over the next 26 years would work his way up to manager of environmental services. He literally knew every inch of the building—every nut and bolt, every pipe and vent.

When he wasn't at work—or driving Dave to hockey practice, or taking Heather to band recitals (like her dad, she played the trumpet)—Geoff indulged in his other true love: wheels. He was so fond of his van—a 1976 Ford E-150, black with custom interior—that he co-founded a club for fellow “vanners.” “He met the other guy at a car wash,” his son says. “They didn't know each other, but they both had nice vans, started talking, and decided to start a club.”

As his mother says, Geoff “was a good joiner.” At 42, he earned a spot on the Grimsby volunteer fire department—and was never seen again without a pager on his belt. He also volunteered at the Fergie Jenkins Foundation, where it was Geoff's job to take care of the celebrities who came to town for fundraisers. “Gordie Howe was his first,” says Carl Kovacs, the foundation's president. “Gordie was doing all these appearances, and he said to Geoff: ‘Geez, I need to get back to the hotel and take a shower.’ Geoff said: ‘No you don't. You can shower at my place.’ ”

Nancy died in 2003, five days after Christmas. The melanoma, which she had battled for years, had metastasized to her brain. “In all honesty,” says Tim Kuyvenhoven, a long-time friend, “that broke Geoff's heart. And it never mended.” Although Nancy's death was utterly devastating, Mary says it also gave her brother a fresh appreciation for what matters. He ramped up his volunteer work, spent more time with the children (and later, two grandchildren), and purchased his prized possession: a 2005 Harley-Davidson Electra Glide Classic.

“That bike gave him peace,” says Heather, his daughter. “Sitting in the house with all my mom's stuff was hard to deal with, so he went on a lot of long trips.” Says Frances: “He'd get on that bike, and he could leave all his cares behind.”

Geoff joined the Jordan, Ont., chapter of the Brother's Keepers, an all-firefighter motorcycle club. In the winter, he parked his beloved Harley in the living room so it wouldn't get cold. “One of the kids said: ‘We don't have room for a Christmas tree,’ ” Tim recalls. “He told them: ‘That's the tree. It's got bells and whistles and lights.’ ”

May 7 was Heather's wedding day, an outdoor ceremony at a bed and breakfast. Her father walked her down the aisle. Six days later, Geoff did what he always does on a Friday the 13th: he steered his sled toward Port Dover, Ont., for what is now a traditional gathering of thousands of devoted bikers. He was on his way home, around 5:30 p.m., when a Buick veered into his lane and collided, head-on, with his Harley-Davidson. Geoff was 55.