

Jill Wallace leaves behind her loving husband and sons.

Quiet lawyer worked on Nisga'a Treaty, freedom of information legislation



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Photograph by: Family photo, Times Colonist

The heroic work of public servants often goes unrecognized. In the mass of bureaucracy and teamwork, true leaders often slip through the cracks. In the case of public lawyer and former deputy attorney general Gillian Patricia Wallace, her modesty didn't help.

After Jill's death, says her husband Jack MacDonald, her mother was astonished to be inundated with notes, letters and calls from former colleagues. "Because, of course, Jill never talked about herself," says Jack. "And the impact she made on so many people was just amazing."

Indeed, her repertoire of policy work — developed through positions in area such as the Department of Justice, Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and office of the attorney general — helped change the landscape of our rights and freedoms.

Wallace was the lead for the Department of Justice unit in Ottawa that developed federal freedom of information and privacy legislation. The Freedom of Information Act effectively gave Canadians access to government records in a move toward openness and transparency. And the privacy act regulates how government can collect information on its citizens.

"Those federal laws were groundbreaking," says deputy attorney general David Loukidelis. "And she was instrumental in that work."

Deputy minister of labour Rob Lapper entered government to work on aboriginal issues — another area where Wallace made a significant impact. He says Wallace pushed the envelope in developing the Nisga'a Treaty, when other officials were wary.

The Nisga'a Treaty, passed by parliament in 2000, established a system of self-governance for the Nisga'a nation in northwestern B.C. It was the first modern-day treaty in B.C. and came after more than 100 years of efforts by the Nisga'a to establish a decision-making authority recognized by the provincial and federal governments.

"The creation of a new kind of government inside of a treaty process caused a lot of apprehension," says Lapper. "Jill was able to calm that apprehension."

Co-ordination was a talent of Wallace's. "She really brought people together and encouraged them to think creatively about how to achieve the outcomes we were trying to achieve."

Human rights were important to Wallace and she worked hard to right the wrongs committed by authority. She applied those values in her role developing appropriate government responses to historic abuse.

"She was very passionate about compensation for historic abuse, and in particular the Jericho School," says Lapper. "She saw that project through several iterations."

An official investigation into allegations of sexual abuse dating to the 1980s at Vancouver's Jericho High School — the only residential school for the deaf — found evidence of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. The government adopted a "non-confrontational" approach to determining compensation for victims and also created the Residential Historical Abuse Program, which funds counselling for victims.

"Jill was really good at encouraging creativity in finding solutions, rather than strictly following a legalistic bottom line."

Despite working on tough issues, Wallace maintained a rosy outlook. "I don't think I ever went through a day without hearing Jill laugh about something," says Lapper, who counted Wallace as a role model and mentor. "I never figured out how she managed to be all the things she was — a mother, a good friend, as well as mainting that level of professionalism under so much pressure at work."

"Apart from her really consummate skills as a lawyer and public servant, one thing you find from everyone you talk to is that . . . she was a really warm, genuine and very support person," Loukidelis says.

She was easy to fall in love with, says Jack, who "finally" married her in 1975. "She was just so bubbly and welcoming," he says. "Warm and sunny and optimistic."

In retirement, Jill applied the same strong work ethic she held professionally to her many interests and passions, which included cooking, travelling and sports, says Jack.

She managed to touch many lives, especially through her position in the Victoria High School alumni association. Though she moved to Toronto to complete her undergraduate degree and lived in Ottawa with Jack to work at the department of justice, Jill always counted Victoria as home and felt a special connection to the school that nurtured her.

"She lived and breathed Vic High her whole life," says classmate Anne Boldt of the school where Wallace's father also attended and taught. "If it weren't for Vic High, she wouldn't be who she was today."

Wallace left big shoes to fill in the alumni association. Boldt says it's taking five people to fulfil the many duties Wallace carried out with a smile.

Wallace leaves behind her husband Jack and two sons, Andrew and Geoffrey.

"For a little woman, she had a huge life," says Boldt.

Gillian Patricia Wallace was born June 17, 1948, in Victoria and died March 1, 2011, in Victoria.