

Obituary: Saanich Coun. Vic Derman, 72, hailed for his work on environment

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Vic Derman died Friday at the age of 72. Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, Times Colonist

Veteran Saanich Coun. Vic Derman, who died Friday, is being remembered as a man of principle and a staunch advocate of environmental issues and sustainability.

Friends and family said the 72-year-old Derman, who served on council since 2002, had been fighting what appeared to be a severe cold for a couple of weeks.

His wife of 30 years, Lauraine, said the family was shocked when Derman died in his sleep.

Derman was born June 1, 1944, and lived in Saanich his entire life.

Derman's only child, 28-year-old Michelle, said her father was a "visionary" who was ahead of his time on climate change issues. He had been bicycling for decades and was ahead of the curve in ditching plastic for reusable materials.

"To me and my mom he was our everything. He was a loving husband and amazing father. He was our best friend. It's hard to imagine life without him," Michelle told the Times Colonist on Sunday. "Everything in life we did together."

"He was very loyal to Saanich and insisted on staying in Saanich," Lauraine said. "He saw Saanich as being very progressive and an opportunity for sustainable living, smart urban growth and agricultural farming."

Derman and Lauraine met in 1986 when both were playing squash competitively. Lauraine hit a stray ball that struck Derman in the face, leaving him with a bruise for several weeks.

"I left my initial mark," Lauraine joked. The two were married in December 1986. Michelle was born two years later.

Lauraine said the family loved to take road trips around the Island with journeys trips to Tofino and Parksville. Last summer, the family went on a month-long cycling trip across Europe.

Derman paid close attention to the cycling networks in Amsterdam and Paris and pushed for Saanich council to move forward on a \$12.5-million plan for bike lanes and pedestrian walkways along the Shelbourne corridor.

Along with Saanich council, Derman also served on the Capital Regional District board since 2005.

"When I think of Vic Derman, two words come to mind: passion and commitment," Saanich Mayor Richard Atwell said in a statement.

"Vic engaged with people in a way that made them feel important and heard. He was a passionate steward and advocate for the environment, and always worked towards making the world a better place.

"In that regard, Vic led by example – something for all of us to aspire to."

Former mayor Frank Leonard said that Derman was "dogged and determined" about sustainability issues, water conservation and climate change, which were his chief considerations when making decisions. Leonard said Derman was predictable because he always stuck to his principles.

"If you had anything to do with climate change, you'd know where he stood on it. He was on that file way before it was fashionable. He'd been riding his bike before there were bike lanes," Leonard said.

"Every policy, from the most important documents in an official community plan right down to a line item in a community budget, he was looking for sustainability."

Coun. Judy Brownoff said while some see municipal politics as a short-term stepping stone to higher levels of government, Derman was in it for the long haul and that was reflected in his long-range planning.

"It was all about the long-term vision," Brownoff said. "It was thinking about the future generations and what they would inherit from us as policy makers."

Coun. Vicki Sanders said Derman was always willing to listen to other points of view but "didn't let up on what he believed in."

Coun. Fred Haynes, who joined council in 2014, said Derman was a great mentor who was always willing to give advice.

"He had ideals that he was tireless in working for," Haynes said in an interview. "He was a high-level thinker on the approach that all levels of government need to look at mitigating what he saw as the catastrophe of climate change."

Haynes said Derman was always willing to stop and talk to residents.

"In a way he spent his life working for the community in one form or another," Haynes said. "He will be missed by the community."

Coun. Dean Murdock said he's still struggling to accept that Derman won't be in his seat at Monday night's council meeting.

Murdock said the two would often get together at the Quadra-McKenzie Starbucks or the White Spot on Quadra Street. Ever the proud dad, Derman would brag about his daughter's academic and athletic accomplishments.

"I've always viewed Vic Derman in many ways as the conscience of Saanich on council," said Coun. Colin Plant. "He would always speak the truth in difficult times. He was a man of integrity. He would walk the walk and talk the talk."

Lauraine and Michelle said they were heartened by the warm tributes that poured in on Facebook on Sunday morning.

View Royal Mayor David Screech said Derman was passionate and committed to making Saanich and the entire capital region a better place.

“His biggest passion was climate change and he felt strongly that we must make every decision with climate change in mind,” Screech said on Facebook.

Lana Popham, MLA for Saanich South, wrote on Facebook that her friendship with Derman began in 2004 when Popham began a campaign for Saanich council.

“Vic took me under his wing and guided me through my first election. His commitment to remain issue based and non-partisan was strong but that never stopped us from touching base on everything political. Thanks Vic, for being a friend, for being a unwavering advocate for climate change mitigation, and for your commitment to Saanich.”

Popham said she will miss their meetings at Red Fish Blue Fish “and our bike rides to get there.”

Before being elected to council, Derman was a teacher at Cedar Hill Middle School, Lansdowne Middle School, Spectrum Community School and Shoreline Middle School.

Former Victoria journalist Sean Holman said Derman was one of the most influential teachers of his life.

Derman’s social studies class “taught generations of students how to organize information hierarchically, which helped me immeasurably as both a thinker and writer,” Holman wrote on Facebook.

Derman was also a “technological innovator, introducing students to multimedia storytelling well before most people even knew what that was,” Holman said.

“At Cedar Hill Junior High School, he championed the purchase of a lab of Amiga computers which he used to teach students graphics, animation and even video editing skills — helping provide a beginning to my career as a journalist. Vic is a testament to the outsized influence teachers can have on their students... The world is a lesser place without him, for he made it greater for everyone.”

Lauraine said Derman had a particularly keen group of students interested in his multi-media lab, which he dubbed the Rat Pack. Some students would get to the lab at 6 a.m. and stay after school to work on projects.

Several of those students went on to be successful filmmakers and were still in touch with Derman.

“Those students continue to connect with him and we’ve seen them flourish in their careers,” Lauraine said.

Derman first became interested in community politics in 1990, when he became an executive member of the North Quadra Community Association. He remained with the association until his election to council in 2002.

The association successfully fought to preserve Christmas Hill after plans were put forward for a major development.

“That was the issue that really spring-boarded us into community politics and municipal politics for him,” Lauraine said.

Derman co-founded the Saanich Community Associations Network, which brought together the 18 community groups in the municipality. He served as the chairman for the network’s first five years.

He was a founding director of The Land Conservancy of British Columbia and was its vice-president for five years. In 2004, Derman initiated and chaired Water in the City, an international conference in Victoria.

In June, Derman was shaken up when a car he was driving on the Patricia Bay Highway was struck by an airborne van after a chain-reaction accident. He was taken to Saanich Peninsula Hospital for observation, along with his passengers, Haynes and Plant.

Haynes said while Derman took the brunt of the impact in the crash, he wouldn’t let that derail their plans to attend the Federation of Canadian Municipalities convention in Winnipeg. “It just goes to show the tenacity that he had.”

Lauraine said Derman was just getting back on his bike after that accident.

The family is planning a celebration of life that will be open to the public. A date for that has not yet been set.

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