



## Tony Birrell

May 28, 1946 - August 9, 2023

Anthony Richard Charles Birrell, “Tony”, age 77, passed away in his home in Peterborough on August 9th. Tony was predeceased by his parents Bruce and Primrose Birrell, his brother Rodney, and his nephew James. He leaves behind his brother Syd, married to Pam, his sister Diana, his niece Rebecca and nephew Ben.

Born in Ootacamond, India in 1946, Tony also lived in England, Singapore, East Pakistan and Canada. Upon graduating from high school, his great passion for boats led him to work at the historic Chris-Craft factory in Niagara on the Lake, until vision problems shattered his dream. At the age of 19, Tony was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa and learned that eventually he would completely lose his sight. He moved to Toronto and worked at Scarborough Centenary Hospital as a darkroom technician, they said the best they ever had, until his job was automated. Tony then learned braille and began training to be a transcriber.

Tony loved music and had a DJ business which played at numerous high-profile venues including the Toronto Yacht Club. He held a Ham Radio license with the handle “Hot Rod Idiot” (VE3HRI) and was involved in relaying messages during emergencies. Safety was always top drawer in Tony’s mind and despite great challenges reading marine charts, he obtained his Power Squadron Certification and was a great safety advocate around his parent’s

cottage on Soyers Lake in Ontario. Tony was very proud of his ski boat with its 65 hp Mercruiser, and it was thanks to Tony that Diana, Sydney and Tony himself became avid and accomplished water skiers.

Tony was agile, athletic, and courageous with a determination that his gradual loss of vision would not keep him from water skiing or snow skiing. He competed in national snow skiing competitions in Banff; one year ranking only one place away from representing Canada at an international competition in Norway for those with challenged vision.

Sadly, Tony's life forever changed as a result of a catastrophic water skiing accident in 1984. At that time, he had more or less completely lost his vision. However, his determination and athleticism kept him very active, and this included waterskiing. An error by a Toronto waterskiing club for the blind resulted in him being towed into the back end of a water ski jump ramp, where he hit the metal pontoon and other bits of the structure at high speed while slaloming. Tony was not expected to live. He was in a coma for six months, in hospital and rehab for six years, and then his family finally won the lawsuit. Meanwhile the courts appointed his brother Syd to be his "committee", an old-fashioned legal term for a combined care of the person and care of the estate position, rigorously answerable to the courts.

Institutional care was absolute torture for Tony as a blind, brain injured, partially paralyzed person, so the family cooked up a plan to buy Tony a house and customize it to his needs, and provide round the clock care for him here in Peterborough, and it worked! The family started a company called Tonycare Inc to deal with staffing. Tony's new life included horseback riding for the disabled, swimming once a week, owning his own dog (his biggest dream), and frequently cruising the Trent Severn Lock system on his 40 ft houseboat that he named "Wave Wanderer". Tony was thrilled to become an uncle, and enjoyed weekly spaghetti dinner with Pam, Syd and their three

children.

For 33 years Tony has been cared for around the clock in his own home by a team of devoted caregivers. All will miss his loving and generous spirit, his unique humour, and the grace with which he accepted his fate.

Celebration of Life Monday August 14th 7pm at Ashburnham Funeral Home,  
840 Armour Rd. [Communityalternative.ca](http://Communityalternative.ca)

Donations in memory of Tony can be made to Hospice Peterborough at <http://www.hospicepeterborough.org/donate/>

# Tribute Wall

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“ *Didn\u2019t know Tony but knew his family who loved him dearly!  
He and James will continue to look over their family who loved them  
unconditionally!* ”

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**Lorraine Swanson** - August 11, 2023 at 08:34 PM