



## Walter Edward Downes

September 15, 1932 - January 25, 2023

WALTER EDWARD DOWNES

BA (Queen's), B.Ed, M.Ed (UofT), PhD (UOttawa)

September 15, 1932 – January 25, 2023

Walter passed away peacefully on Wednesday, January 25, 2023, at Peterborough Regional Health Centre. He was 90. Walter was an educator, gardener, singer, organist, and cryptic-crossword puzzler, but, above all, he was a devoted family man.

Walter was the youngest child of Walter Henry and Ruby Downes (née Brown), and youngest brother of Vera (Mel Holden), Stanley (Mary), and Ruby (Owen Amundsen), all predeceased.

Walter is survived by his loving wife of 61 years, Kathryn Downes (née Thorn), and by his children, Heather (David Skarsgard) of Calgary, Karen (Peter Heysel) of Peterborough, and Stephen (Claire Todd) of Ottawa. He was the beloved grandfather of Chris Heysel (Breanne), Jack Heysel (Ruby Komisar), Matthew Skarsgard, Fiona Heysel (Alli Christensen), Peter Skarsgard (Olivia Quinn), Liam Downes, and Sarah Downes. He will be greatly missed by his brother-in-law, Allan Thorn (Patricia, predeceased), and by his many nieces and nephews.

Walter was born at home on Sherbrooke Street in Peterborough. Growing up, he was influenced, not only by the scarcity and losses experienced by his working-class neighbourhood during the Depression and WWII, but also by the sense of community created during these lean years. Walter's mother was an accomplished pianist, and his father was a singer and an opera lover. Together, they instilled in Walter an early love of music, and it filled the house during uncertain times.

On the last day of school each year, the family packed up and moved to the family cottage, "Sunset View," on Chemong Lake, not returning until Labour Day. Many generations of Walter's family have been entertained by his stories of accessing the cottage by its single-lane, kilometer-long, floating bridge. Famously, Walter's father always made the family roll down the car windows before crossing for "safety" reasons.

In 1951, while still 18, Walter earned his Ontario Teacher's Certificate and took charge of the one-room schoolhouse at Orange Corners, teaching students in grades 1 through 8. He was terrified, but it was the beginning of a 37-year career in education in the increasingly large classrooms, then college and university lecture halls that followed.

Walter's most important classroom was the one he had in 1957 at Queen Mary Public School in Peterborough. It was here that he met Kathryn Thorn, whose classroom was next door. They were married in 1961 by good friend Rev. Wilf Moncrieff while bats swooped through the rafters at All Saints' Anglican Church. It was surely a good omen for this 61-year partnership. Kathryn and Walter started married life in Kingston, where Walter was principal of Lord Strathcona School and Kathryn taught grade 4 at Kingscourt. Appointments to Ottawa Teachers College, then to Peterborough Teachers College, soon followed. It was a busy time with Heather being born in Ottawa, soon followed by Karen and Stephen in Peterborough. With three children

under age three, Kathryn and Walter built a house in Peterborough and then a family cottage on Baptiste Lake, near Bancroft.

Throughout these years, Walter continued his own studies, taking correspondence, summer, and winter extension courses to eventually earn his BA, his B.Ed and M.Ed degrees, and to begin his doctorate. A year's leave from teaching allowed him to complete his dissertation and earn his PhD in 1974. His young family remember 1974 as a year punctuated by the sound of typing.

From 1974 until his retirement in 1988, Walter was an Associate Professor of Education at Queen's University. As the Founding Director of the Queen's-Trent Concurrent Education Program, Walter worked all but one year of his Queen's career from the campus of Trent University in Peterborough. The exception was a year-long sabbatical in 1982 to Bishop Grosseteste College in Lincoln, UK. While Walter studied the British system of experience-based education, the family lived in a 400-year-old cottage owned by the college, and spent school breaks exploring the UK and Europe. Walter and Kathryn cherished the lifelong friendships that were formed with his British colleagues.

In retirement, Walter found more time for other pursuits. He started each day with the Globe and Mail's cryptic crossword, often delighting in explaining the more thorny clues to his baffled family. He played piano and organ, and sometimes filled in as organist for Sunday morning church services. He read widely and used his training in historical research to trace his family's genealogy back to 1595. Having given up choir singing during the busy years, Walter was proud to join the Peterborough Singers as a charter member, along with its offshoot group, the Pop Ensemble. He and Kathryn played bridge and tended their beautiful gardens, the annuals for which Walter

started from seed each year in the dark days of winter. There were many happy occasions welcoming friends from near and far to their home or to the cottage, and happy UK reunions.

In his retirement years, it's difficult to find a photo of Walter without a grandchild on his knee. He excelled in his role as grandfather and always had time for a story, a card game, or another horsey ride. All of the grandchildren delighted in his favorite nickname for them, Duckworth-Pet-Banana-Muffin. As they got older, they sought him out to talk about music and books, and to share his love of card games and crosswords. His stories have trustworthy keepers. Walter was especially proud to hood three of his older grandchildren as they graduated from Queen's Engineering. It was his life's greatest joy to see all of his grandchildren grow up and they will carry his legacy forward.

The family would like to express their gratitude to the staff of the VON Day Program at Peterborough Square, St. Joseph's at Fleming, and the PRHC ER and Palliative Care Units for their care and compassion.

A Celebration of Life will be held at a later date. In lieu of flowers, donations to the VON Peterborough-Victoria-Haliburton:  
<https://von.ca/en/donate-von> the Peterborough Singers, or a charity of your choice would be appreciated.

# Tribute Wall

LA

“*Kate, Heather, Karen and Stephan, I just became aware of Walter's passing today. I am so sorry for your family's loss. You have so many blessed memories of Walter. Your family has always been so very special to me and I think of all of you often. I cherish all of you and hope for you to have beautiful memories of Walter. He gave so much to all of you and those of us who knew him. Much love to you, Linda Pontbriand Austin*

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**Linda Austin** - July 04, 2023 at 08:34 PM

RP

“*Very sad to hear about the loss of this great man. My deepest sympathies to The Downes Family.*

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**Roger Pierce** - May 08, 2023 at 03:36 PM

EK

“*Sijmen Pieter: I've known Walter since the beginning of the Peterborough Singers. He was a kind, gentle, caring and sympathetic person. My first customer when becoming self-employed. So many flashbacks to meeting Walter and Kathryn at concerts. Our thoughts and prayers are with you, Kathryn and Family.*

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**Esther Kampstra** - February 06, 2023 at 09:55 AM

GM

“*Post from Ev Brooks*

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**Gael Morrison** - February 03, 2023 at 11:22 AM

GM

“ I will miss Walter. I had the privilege of sitting beside him in the bass section of the Peterborough Singers choir practices for many years. It was always interesting to talk with him and to share many musical memories. He was a strong chorister and a fine gentleman. My deepest sympathies to his wife and family.

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**Gael Morrison** - February 03, 2023 at 11:20 AM

GM

“ So sorry to hear that this world has lost a very fine man. I knew him over several decades as a skilled chorister and true gentleman. He was always a delight to talk to. I was fascinated to read his very full and interesting life story. And the photo - that genuine Walter smile. Sympathies to Kathryn and his family.

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**Gael Morrison** - February 03, 2023 at 10:36 AM

JB

“ My sympathy to Walter's family. Walter was my music Master at Peterborough Teacher's College. Besides being a great teacher he was a gentle caring man. I used to see Walter at the gym and he always had a smiling hello and a word or two. The community lost a special man. Rest in peace now Walter knowing that you left an impression on many.

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**Jim Byrnes** - January 30, 2023 at 08:54 AM

KT

“ My deepest sympathies. Walter was a wonderful role model, chorister, and friend. He gave his quiet, steadfast support to me in many areas of my life, as he was an excellent educator, administrator, nonprofit volunteer, and musician, not to mention just an all-around decent and compassionate person. All the Peterborough Singers will miss him greatly. Karen Taylor

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**Karen Taylor** - January 28, 2023 at 12:13 PM

TF

“ Sorry to hear of Walter's death. I did not know him very well but I sure knew him by his terrific reputation as an educator. I taught with Patricia and Alan at ASCVI and have been friends of theirs ever since. I also remember Heather from her cross country running days. Walter's obituary describes him so very well--committed family man, wonderful educator, involved in his community and gardener among other things. In short I see a consummate gentleman who lived his life with purpose and with grace. I know this is not an easy time for the family, but wherever a beautiful soul has been, there is always a trail of beautiful memories. I know each of you will share those memories with each other. Well done Walter on your amazing trip through life.

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**Tom Davis & Family** - January 28, 2023 at 09:15 AM