



Ben McIsaac

A Tribute to an SPCA Board Member

Sitting across from Sandra MacIsaac, it's clear that the love she has for husband is profound. On January 6, 2023, Sandra lost the love of her life. Ben McIsaac passed away at the age of 42 at the Halifax Infirmary after a very short, but serious illness. Ben was a beloved husband, son, brother, uncle, and passionate lover of the arts and of his many cats and his dog Adobe.

"I want people to know how loving a person Ben was," says Sandra when asked what she wants people to remember most about her late husband. "His compassion for all living beings was his greatest attribute, and also his Achilles Heel," she notes. Ben cared a great deal about many things, and that came with a tremendous sense of duty to do good in the world. In his short time on the planet, he dedicated so much of himself to giving back to the communities in which he lived and worked.

The intersection between Ben's career in philanthropy and his love of animals started early.

Ben was in his first year of university when he worked part time for the university's student fundraising team and was a natural but did not know yet where his career would take him. In his second and third years of university, he spent the summers working at Camp Tidnish, a camp for people living with physical and intellectual disabilities. Ben's time at Camp Tidnish was formative for him, according to Sandra. She met Ben the following year in 2001 when Ben was already realizing that he could make a difference by encouraging positive change.





This period of his life helped solidify his dedication to working in the non-profit sector, by helping find efficiencies to make a greater impact on the communities being served. With jobs at the Tantramar Theatre, the Parker Street Food & Furniture Bank, Habitat for Humanity, and Bedford Youth Development Association, “Ben was always finding ways to improve processes and streamline things,” says Sandra, “he was a big picture thinker, even back then.”

His career grew to Symphony Nova Scotia, The Canadian Opera Company, and eventually in university advancement at Dalhousie University and University of Alberta. The common denominator according to Sandra? It wasn’t about the operations, but how those operations impacted people and communities. “Ben always saw the people impacted, and wanted to make it better,” she notes. “Everything he did, it wasn’t about him,” says Sandra, “he wanted to help others because it was the right thing to do.”

But having a big heart could be a painful experience for Ben, according to Sandra. Ben would often worry about those he wasn’t able to help, and that would keep him up at night. Ben sought solace and a sense of peace with his greatest companions – his animals. If Ben was at a place where there were animals in the building, there was a strong likelihood that if you found them, you would find Ben.

During Ben’s celebration of life, his younger brother Zac relayed a story about Ben’s first cat, Buddy. Ben didn’t really give anyone in the family the opportunity to say yes or no to a new cat, but instead said “I forgot to tell you, my friend had a litter of kittens and said I could have this one!” His family had no choice but to embrace this cat who clearly didn’t want to embrace anyone but Ben. “Buddy hated everyone but Ben” says Sandra with a laugh. The cat would actively ignore everyone in the house but Ben. When Ben came home from university, she would cuddle with him, purring and sleep on his chest all night. Ben was her person.

Ben’s prolific collection of cats started in high school but carried into his university days. One day, while working at the Parker Street Food Bank, there was a box of kittens abandoned in a box outside the building. They tried to rescue and rehome them, but one small kitten escaped, climbing up under a nearby car. Ben was able to eventually bring her inside to clean the oil off her and warm her up. Once again, a very skittish and antisocial cat – eventually named Kitty - avoided everyone else in the store but took a strong shine to Ben, cuddling with him and eventually making her way home to their tiny apartment.



As the years passed, and Ben and Sandra adopted two more cats. There was a small black-and-white kitten in Sackville, Nova Scotia. He was the runt and the last of a litter needing a home. He had a terrible respiratory issue and kept sneezing. Since it was Christmas they decided to bring him home and named him Ebesneezer, or Sneezy for short. Not too long after, they adopted another small, malnourished, and clearly abused little kitten that they named Oliver. The litter had been taken in by a pet store in Bedford to help find them homes and Oliver wasn't being adopted. "Ben and I had a clear affinity for those animals who no one else wanted," notes Sandra, "and it was even funnier that I was allergic to cats! We later suspected Ben might have been allergic as well."

In addition to the cohort of kitties, Ben and Sandra also adopted a beautiful Doberman named Adobe. Like all the other animals in the house, Adobe took a shine to Ben instantly. According to Sandra, Adobe is still pining for Ben, often sitting in his favourite chair waiting for him to come home. In 2013, Ben, Sandra, Kitty, Sneezy, Oliver, and Adobe made the move to Alberta, where Ben got a role that quickly progressed to Associate Vice-President, Faculty Development & Corporate Foundation Relations. When asked how they managed to move that many animals all at once, Sandra laughs and says "with a lot of patience, a lot of anxiety, and help from family."



While out in Alberta, Ben and Sandra lost their beloved Sneezy and Oliver due to old age. Ben was gutted and immediately began looking around at other animals that might need a loving home. That's when he found Dexter – a 6-month-old orange cat with big polydactyl paws. They named him Dexter due to his extra thumb, plus he is smart, and had razor sharp claws, which reminded them of a very popular TV show by the same name. Dexter soon became a fixture in the home, spending his time cuddling with Ben at all times of the day or night.

Once, when Ben was taking a new employee out for dinner, they asked Ben "what keeps you up at night?" Big budgets? Managing large teams? "My cat, Dexter" was the response. Dexter was a fan of 4:00 am cuddles with Ben. As Dexter was too much energy for Kitty, Ben started looking for more cats as the solution to the problem.



In Alberta, Ben and Sandra adopted another cat, Oscar (The Grouch), who had been in foster care for a year and renamed her Lali. Then came a little tortoise coloured barn kitten named Billie Flower (Billie for short). There was finally balance in the house."

Ben was always checking out local rescue websites," says Sandra, "and I had to tell him at one point that I could not live with 10 cats and more dogs in my home, and either way, the bylaws won't allow more than 5." While a few other attempts to adopt some strays were made, the only additional cat they adopted before returning to Halifax was another orange boy named Spencer who has seven digits on each paw - or "catchers' mitts" as Ben called them.



A few months after returning to Halifax, their oldest and dearest Kitty passed away leaving Ben devastated. As always, his solution was to contact a local rescue who introduced him to a bold little black cat who they named Onyxia (Onnie for short).

While the pandemic was incredibly stressful for many people, Sandra notes that Ben found a lot of joy in being stuck at home in lock-down with his fur-family. "That was his happiest place," she says thinking fondly of the years he had at home with cats crawling all over him during team Zoom calls.

Ben's greatest joy was reading and preparing for work calls with one of the cats or Dobie the dog curled up with him in his chair. "I never saw him more relaxed than when he was with his animals," says Sandra wistfully. "Ben suffered terribly with anxiety and the animals brought him peace and a sense of calm."

It's clear from speaking with Sandra that Ben's love of animals was contagious. Even his father, who was not initially a friend of Buddy's upon first meeting her, ended up being adopted by Buddy after Ben had moved away to Halifax. Ben also helped other colleagues and friends suffering with anxiety or depression to find cats that would help them. Ben knew the value of animal companions and would share that with anyone who was looking for unconditional love and support. For Ben, there was no better way to spend your time than with a cat or dog at your side.



Sandra and Ben's family have plans to continue Ben's legacy of supporting the arts, animal welfare charities, mental health, and education. Ben's love and compassion for others will always be an inspiration to his family, friends, and colleagues across the country. Ben's generosity will live on, and Sandra hopes that his story will help inspire others to give back to their communities and the causes that they are passionate about.

Last year, Sandra, and a handful of her and Ben's close family, travelled to Alberta to visit the Cougar Creek Trail in Canmore. According to Sandra, Ben had a wickedly sarcastic sense of humour, (and his greatest desire was to be buried near big cats). His favourite music video was Island in the Sun by the band Weezer. In the video, the band spend their time playing with monkeys, bears, puppies, and most of all big cats. "He always joked that I should feed him to big cats when he died," says Sandra, "so I took some of his ashes there to scatter in nature." She likes to believe that those few ashes will eventually be part of the soil that nourishes the flowers and plants, making the way up the food chain and eventually be eaten by the cougars – thereby allowing Ben will have his wish.

On her trip, after finding a perfect sunny clearing with low growing plants including wild blueberries, about two kilometers up the mountain, the family stayed a bit to take in the moment and have some lunch. The time was cut short when a mother grizzly bear and her cubs arrived, attracted by the picnic. "Ben would have had a good laugh at that moment," she notes, "and that's how I want people to remember him, I want people to know he created memorable moments surrounded by the people and the animals that he loved the most."

To learn more about Ben McIsaac, please [click here](#).

*"We'll run away together
We'll spend some time forever
We'll never feel bad anymore"*

-Island in the Sun - Weezer