

## Building for the future was Barnes? mission in life ? and in death



Laptop fired up, smart phone abuzz, Gordon Barnes sat up July 17 to jot down a few things from the comfort of his bed.

Some of the notes were reminders of what he had to do over the next few days, others some thoughts on the state of the world.

Preferring to work from the natural light pouring through his window, and illuminated by the screens of his devices on the bedside table, a blazing painting of a sunflower by local artist Helen Lucas, and by a beaming photo of he and his late wife Marie on a nearby dresser, Barnes had fixed himself something of a command centre as he multitasked, taking in the day's events from CNN streaming at the foot of the bed.

An active volunteer, ceramic artist and environmentalist in the Aurora community for the better part of four decades, Barnes always prided himself as being engaged and in-touch with the world around him.

And, in his final days, this was no exception.

The notes he was busily writing were nothing as mundane as a grocery list or the time of a dentist appointment later that week; rather, they were reminders of what needed to be done as the clock ticked down on his life.

It was at this makeshift command centre in his room at Newmarket's Margaret Bahen Hospice that Barnes, who was named Aurora's Citizen of the Year in 2010 in recognition of his volunteer work with the Aurora Farmers' Market and Aurora Community Arboretum, breathed his last on Sunday, July 23, at the age of 90.

When he invited The Auroran to come by with the invitation of an interview last week, he was not focused on the life he had led and the world he was leaving behind; instead, he was focused on the future of the world and ensuring that, as he did in life, was helping build a better tomorrow for the next generation.

Although speaking was difficult, Barnes led the conversation with one of the many notes that were scattered on the table and on his blanket.

?Canada has been good to this immigrant,? said the American-born Barnes. ?Doors have opened and I have been lucky to walk

through the right ones. It's time to stop being a drag on the health system and support universally-available ECE (Early Childhood Education) programs ? they are the country's future and worth investing in.?

Education was always a cause close to Barnes' heart.

Born in Minnesota in 1933, Barnes grew up on a 120-acre cattle farm where he was educated at a nearby one-room schoolhouse.

?Most of my primary education was in a one-room country school taught by Miss Roberts, fresh from normal school,? he said, referencing what is now commonly referred to as teacher's college. ?I was the smartest kid in my class ? of four. I was never taught to read. With a little phonetics and a lot of guessing, I got into high school. Reading and spelling remained a problem through university, and when I learned to read, I had a lot of self-doubt; when I learned about ECE, I discovered what I had missed.

?As a geriatric, I appreciate the care we get. I also believe the smartest investment Canada can make is in the three Rs ? reading, writing and maths. Governments have recently made commitments to ECE and I am making donations to the ECE organizations to help keep governments' feet to the fire.?

When his wife, Marie Aiken-Barnes, an internationally-renowned textile artist died in 2019, her widower put their shared beliefs into action, donating to TVO for what he describes as a ?quarter century of learning.? Marie's works were documented in the Canadian Textile Museum for future generations to glean from and some of Gordon's own ceramic works now call the Gallery of Clay and Glass home for the same purposes.

One of the newer causes to benefit from Barnes' generosity in life and in death is Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a free book-gifting program on both sides of the U.S. and Canadian border ?devoted to inspiring a love of reading in young children.?

Through the program, enrolled youngsters can receive a monthly high-quality, age-appropriate book in the mail, free of charge.

Since the beloved singer-songwriter expanded the Imagination Library to Canada in 2006, more than 3,000,000 books have been distributed across the country through more than 400 local program partners.

?We old farts gained respect on the way going out, but there's no money here lobbying for children because there aren't many voters among them. There needs to be education,? he said, adding this is especially prevalent in a time where having multiple generations living under one roof, sharing wisdom and knowledge, is now more the exception than the rule it was in his own youth.

?The earliest gift you can have with your children is an environment where there are professionals that know how children should be reared, how they should learn to live, how they should learn to think, and how they should learn arithmetic as part of the math stream. It's not a mystery.?

As he prepared for a future he knew he would not be a part of, Barnes had nothing but praise for the staff and volunteers at Margaret Bahen Hospice, located adjacent to Southlake Regional Health Centre, which serves as the only residential hospice for northern York Region.

Moving into their care after a number of years at Chartwell Hollandview Trail, which became his base after selling the Victorian home on Catherine Avenue that served as an artistic showcase for the couple, he recalls a quick trip from the hospital to hospice where was greeted with a cheery, ?Welcome, Gordon!? on the wall.

?It has been beautiful,? he said, hoping his story would both raise awareness of local hospice care as an option for end-of-life care, and raise funds to ensure Margaret Bahen is able to continue serving the community at full capacity. ?Not a lot of people know what options are available.?

But, as he got all his proverbial ducks in a row, not everything was rosy. As an American-born Canadian, he said one of his lingering

concerns was the prevalence of fighting politically versus political collaboration on both sides of the border. The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) was something he also watched with great interest, both positively and negatively.

?I'm just starting to understand what AI is, how it works, and, that said, I wish I had another 20 or 30 years, but you can't have it all!?

Gordon Barnes may not have had another 20 to 30 years ahead of him, but he hoped the work he did while he was still here will endure for 20, 30 years and beyond. As he looked back at the end of his life, the blueprint was simple: having a good start.

For more on the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, [imaginationlibrary.com/ca](https://imaginationlibrary.com/ca). For further information on Margaret Bahen Hospice, including how to support local end-of-life care, visit [www.myhospice.ca](https://www.myhospice.ca).

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter