



## **REMEMBERING**

# **James Michael Wilmott Bridges ("Jimithy")**

September 29, 1939 - April 14, 2022



James Michael Wilmott Bridges was born on 29 September 1939 near the Canadian border in the small village of Natural Bridge, near Carthage, New York State, to his Northern Irish born father, Samuel, and his Quebec born mother, Mary. Jim was of Irish, Scottish, French, and Metis heritage. As a very young boy Jim successfully learned to dance traditional Irish jigs in the local pub while adults played the fiddle.

Raised by his mother, Mary, his sister Violet and her husband Leon, and his maternal Metis grandmother, Marie, in both the New York and Quebec countryside, it was his grandmother who instilled a deep appreciation, respect, and understanding of many Metis traditions that would carry him throughout his life. As a small child, when it appeared that Jim might fall victim to polio, Marie turned away from traditional medical practices and cared for him herself. For two years they lived together in her house without electricity in the woods of Quebec. She regularly massaged his weak legs, carried him deep into the woods, and taught him her ways of communicating with nature. She instructed him to listen with his eyes and to see with his ears. Marie told him his Spiritual God was named Onkcanogan, and that Jim could always call out to Onkcanogan for support and guidance in life. After two years of daily treatments, Jim was much better. While his gait was compromised on occasion throughout his life, he never had the need to walk with the aid of a brace, nor was he ever in an iron lung.

Convinced that he was a gifted, unique and special boy with talent and ability, Marie generously paid the tuition, with assistance of a scholarship, for Jim to board at St. Paul's Academy in Oswego County, New York State. As the years progressed, and while at home on holiday during school years, he assisted his father and older brother Thom, in building houses in the suburbs of Syracuse, New York. During this

time he developed an interest in the design, and especially in the finishing crafts of crown moulding and intricate architectural detailing in houses.

After graduation he was accepted into the School of Architecture at Syracuse University and would graduate with a degree in the field that would define his work and talent. His style centre was honed into the traditional and classic. He employed elegant clean lines that had a comfortable and timeless look in his work.

Finding continuous paid employment for creative design limiting in upstate New York at that time, Jim moved to Manhattan and first settled in with friends, then later renting a studio apartment in Greenwich Village.

He found the early 1960's to be an exciting and affordable time to live in New York City and launch a career. Jim was a natural charmer with an infectious laugh. Blessed with a tall, striking, handsome look, strong build, and an incredible energy that blended easily with his Celtic charm and humour, he made friends easily.

He loved music, especially jazz, and was an excellent dancer. During this time he was tapped to teach dancing during occasional free evenings at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio in Manhattan. During the day he accepted small jobs on Manhattan's Upper West Side, adding flashes of crown moulding and trims to apartments that were being converted into condominiums.

At night, when we wasn't teaching dance, he would party with his many friends, which now included a special relationship with American singer Steve Lawrence. On the evening of 23 April 1961, Jim, Steve, and several of their friends helped pack New York's Carnegie Hall to witness and experience Judy Garland's legendary comeback concert.

His circle of friends increasingly grew wider, many of whom would open their homes to Jim to refresh their interiors and give them what would become known as the "Jim Bridges Touch". Over the years his work was referenced in the New York Times Sunday Magazine, Metropolitan Home, Palm Springs Life, The Seattle Times, and in a 2014 televised segment on CHEK-TV in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

By 1969 Jim had had his fill of New York winters and moved his base to Los Angeles, California. He brought his New York talent and skills to a new market and an architectural design that offered him new challenges. After a few initial missed attempts, he eventually and successfully found his stride in the competitive Southern California market. By the end of the 1970's he was splitting his professional time between Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Malibu, and Palm Springs, creating an elegant remodel design with a California twist for actors Jack Klugman, John Travolta, Lee Remick, Doris Day, and many others.

On 25 August 1980, Jim met Michael King St.Clair in Studio City, California. The extroverted Bridges and the more bookish St.Clair found an attraction and connection to each other. For three months they went on several traditional dates and engagements, many set up by matchmaking friends of Jim. Initially, and knowing nothing of his background, Michael asked Jim two questions: did he have an income of any sort, and did he have a faith. Jim answered in the affirmative. By Christmas 1980, Jim promised and ultimately convinced the more guarded, private,

and hesitant St.Clair that their lives together would never be dull nor boring, and he invited him to join his life. St. Clair eventually said yes. Together, and for the next forty-two years they were best friends, life partners and later legal spouses.

In 1986 they moved to Seattle from Palm Springs, where Jim once again introduced the Jim Bridges touch to a new and appreciative client base. The mid 1980's through the 1990's were the beginning of the boom years for the Seattle area as new local start-up firms such as Microsoft, Starbucks, Costco, Amazon, Nordstrom, and others were rapidly growing. Word got around and many of their newly cash-infused senior employees would tap Jim to put the finishing touches on their newly purchased homes in and around Seattle, Medina, Kirkland, Redmond and Bellevue.

Jim and Michael traveled extensively making numerous trips to Europe, especially France and Italy, as well as the United Kingdom to visit friends and look up relatives. They spent the last moments of the 20th century together on board a ship while it passed through the equator towards Australia and New Zealand.

In the fall of 1960 when Jim turned 21 years of age, he registered to vote and proudly voted for John Fitzgerald Kennedy on 8 November of that year. Years later, in 1996, Jim and Michael were invited to participate, view and bid at Sotheby's Auction House in Manhattan, during a four day event, on items from the estate of former American First Lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. While they were not successful in any of their humble bids, they nevertheless found it to be an incredibly surreal and fascinating week-long event to be savoured.

By 2002 Jim began to have serious concerns about the long term direction the United States was taking both in the world arena and especially within its own borders, and how it would affect their future lives together if they were to remain there. They both shared a concern about the increasing lack of respectful inclusiveness in America, the growing divisions, the anger and violence that they could increasingly not relate to nor understand. They decided to act upon these concerns. After much research and discussion, together they made the decision to legally immigrate to Canada. They understood that immigrating to another country was a serious decision and not for the faint of heart. Yet, they also felt there were occasions when it must be acted upon.

They both felt that the confederation that is Canada better reflected their core values. Both had relatives in Eastern Canada and British Columbia, and multiple previous and positive experiences in Canada spanning decades, which made their decision an easy one.

They hired noted Victoria-based immigration attorney, David Ajula to walk them through the process. They followed Mr Ajula's wise council, keeping every appointment, paying every governmental fee, filing every requested document on time, and going through every extensive immigration physical examination that was required of them.

Proudly becoming Canadian citizens and subjects, they were sworn in by legendary Judge Gerald Pash in Victoria on 27 May 2014.

Jim would frequently say, "Immigrating to Canada was one of the wisest decisions

we ever made. We were free. Really and truly free. For us, Canada meant freedom. It still does. We can breathe and exhale here, with less fear of intentional piousness or violent judgment against us. Being Canadian is something we never take for granted."

For many years they lived in Victoria and then in 2012 they moved up island to the South Cowichan Valley near Mill Bay village, where Jim once again gave his signature touch to the interior framework of their new house and their gardens.

Jim was very much a "do no harm" individual with a strong sense of character and blessed with a passionate advocacy for animals and the environment. He was a gentle giant. Despite an initial physically imposing personal presence in his youth, he abhorred violence and bullying in all its ugly forms. He was unique among men.

In addition to travel, Jim was an avid gardener, enjoyed cookery, dancing, a good party, the glory of nature, a nice gin and tonic with a thin slice of cucumber, sharing his family's Metis and Celtic-based stories, loving Mr St.Clair, the Knowledge Network, and spending time with his many friends and neighbours. He was always willing to lend a hand whenever Michael requested, to assist in fundraising or cookery endeavours at St. John the Baptist Anglican Church near Cobble Hill village, where he made many friends.

In addition to Mr St.Clair, he leaves a wide circle of friends and neighbours, as well as family in Canada, Ireland, Scotland, and the United States.

Jim was a member of The Union Club of British Columbia, The Syracuse University Alumni Association, The David Suzuki Foundation, the Mill Bay Village Robbie Burns Society, and was a Friend to the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Cowichan District Branch.

At a later date there will be a joyful celebration of his life in South Cowichan, Vancouver Island, British Columbia. At his request his ashes will be scattered both to the winds and to the sea near Coleraine, County Londonderry, Northern Ireland, and in Glencoe, Scotland.

The family acknowledges the fine staff at Somenos Medical Centre in Duncan, Dr. Graham Blackburn, their family doctor of many years, and his most excellent replacement, Dr. Geoffrey Friederichs. Their combined countless hours, respectful bedside manners, patience with Jim, and their uncompromising professional capabilities that enhanced Jim's quality of life, especially in his last few years, are deeply appreciated by his family.

Full marks to all staff at BC Ambulance and the Mill Bay Village Volunteer Fire Department. The family has lost count of the number of times they were called and responded with their professional support for Jim in all areas. To do their work is a calling of the highest order and their kindness and professional decorum is greatly appreciated.

The support, the dignity, the respect, and the love that Jim, Michael, and their many friends and family have received from the Cowichan Valley Metis Nation is most worthy of high praise. A sincere thank you to Cowichan District Hospital Indigenous Navigator Gloria Harding, for her gentle nature, her professional and respectful educational lessons that she gave to Michael while in hospital that will never be

forgotten. She shared that as gay men, Jim and Michael are given the complimentary title of 'Two-Sprited Men'. The lessons Gloria shared regarding Jim's ancestors that were waiting for his embrace and the process involved have contributed in large part to Michael's healing process and the easing of grief during this time. In honour of Jim's mother and grandmother, Gloria sang 'The Woman's Warrior Song', a song that was gifted to her by Sweat Lodge Elder Martina Pierre.

Praise also given to Cowichan Valley Metis Nation members, the Elder Stella Erasmus Johnson, Brigitte Furlonger, and Wanda Stratford for support and for providing a Metis ceremony at Jim's hospital bedside with prayers, songs, and the combination of sage, sweet grass, and cedar.

Lastly, the family acknowledges Dr. Rimmer and the staff of Cowichan District Hospital in Duncan. This sincere acknowledgment extends to the entire staff involved: those that washed and cleaned the floors around Jim, those that prepared and provided nutritious meals, the nurses, the care aides and the doctors that assisted Jim, Michael and their many friends. We all of us observed their ethical behaviour and the fine professional work ethics of this staff. At every opportunity they exceeded our expectations. If you have made it this far in this obituary, do please note that hospital staff are heroes. As such, a gentle reminder that should you or a loved one ever need their services, a smile, a please and a thank you to all staff will not go amiss.

James Michael Wilmott Bridges showed that life can be an enormous treat. His was truly a life well lived.

A bursary for Jim, in honour of his beloved Metis mother and grandmother will be established with the Cowichan Valley Metis Nation. Additional considerations for remembrances to Jim include: The Mill Bay Nature School; The British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Cowichan District Branch; The David Suzuki Foundation; and The Knowledge Network of British Columbia.

Online condolences may be made at [www.hwwallacecbc.com](http://www.hwwallacecbc.com)

