

Remembering My Dad on Christmas Eve

Gary Bunch, 1938–2024

ADAM BUNCH

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My father was born on his parents' kitchen table on a cold winter's day in 1938. It was the end of the Great Depression and the Second World War loomed; the front page

of *The Globe* that day was filled with warnings: rising tensions with the Nazis, Mussolini and Japan. He would grow up in the wake of those two catastrophes in a family that didn't have much. As a boy, he would often get into trouble with his older brothers and he initially dropped out of high school. But in the end, he would dedicate his life to learning: a professor, teacher, principal and author who became one of the world's leading champions for inclusive education. And he was a father whose stories about growing up in Toronto — along with my mom's — were among the things that first drew me into writing about the history of our city.

Dad was born into quite a Scottish family. He was proud of that heritage, a fan of the bagpipes and Robbie Burns who took us to Highland Games when we were kids. "The Land speaks to my bones," he once wrote, "And they listen." His mother, Maggie Butcher, was born and raised in Aberdeen, the daughter of an English trawlerman who fished the waters of the North Sea. She was just sixteen years old in 1921 when the family sailed for Canada. They lived in Mississauga for a while — in Clarkson Village, the strawberry capital of Ontario — but they soon settled in Etobicoke, right down by the lake.

New Toronto was a new neighbourhood back then, a subdivision carved out of the farmland at the foot of Kipling Avenue, right next to what was then known as the Mimico Lunatic Asylum. The area quickly began to attract industry, sandwiched between the lakeshore and the railroads. Maggie soon got a job making tires at the new Goodyear plant. That's where she met the man she was going to marry.

I'm the fourth Adam Bunch in our family. The first was my great-grandfather. The Scottish lineage on his side can be traced back through the centuries, to the rolling green hills of Angus in the days of witch hunts and Jacobite rebels and wars with the English. He was born in the 1840s on a ship off the coast of Malta while his father was serving in the 42nd Highlanders. He would grow up to follow in those military footsteps while also becoming a famous cricket bowler. He had a wife and children in Scotland, but left her at the end of the 1800s — for reasons that remain a mystery to me — and headed off to start a new life in Toronto, bringing a couple of his kids with him. Here, he worked as an elevator operator, found a new wife, and started a new family. He gave

his eldest Canadian-born son the same name he'd been given: Adam MacIntosh Bunch. My dad's dad.

That was at the dawn of the 1900s. Toronto was a booming metropolis; an industrial hub filled with railroads and coal smoke. The family bounced around the city during my grandfather's childhood — Regent Park, Earlscourt, The Junction... But by the time he turned twenty, they'd settled down in New Toronto. Adam soon found a job at the same Goodyear factory where Maggie worked. While she made tires, he was in the cafeteria.

It must have been love at first sight. They got married less than a week after they met. At first, they kept it a secret. While I imagine their families disapproved of the whirlwind nature of their romance, religion might also have played a role. While the Bunches were Presbyterian, the Butchers were Catholic — and in a city as fiercely Protestant as Toronto, those star-crossed love affairs could tear families apart. And so, on a summer day in 1925, they eloped. They celebrated by going to see a silent film together and then boarded streetcars bound in opposite directions, each heading home to their own family.

They can't have kept their scandalous secret for long. Maggie got pregnant immediately. My great-uncle Reggie was born exactly nine months after the wedding. And while he sadly died just a couple of weeks after his second birthday — the infant mortality rate in Toronto was a heartbreakingly high 8% — they would go on to have a big family: four more sons and a daughter.



Dad (on the right) in 1950ish

My dad was the youngest of them. He was born on that kitchen table in their little house on Sixteenth Street, just a couple of blocks from the Goodyear plant where his parents met. He spent his childhood in New Toronto, and it can't have been an easy time. The Depression was coming to an end, but the Second World War broke out when Dad was just a year old. While his father headed off to war, his mother worked as a machinist in a munitions factory and was left to raise five kids on her own. One of my dad's earliest memories was of a day when he was five years old, playing in the front yard when a stranger walked up to the house. He didn't recognize the man, so he nervously ran inside to warn his mom. It turned out to be his own father coming home from the war, discharged on compassionate grounds just after D-Day so he could help raise the kids.

I grew up hearing stories like that, of my dad's childhood in Toronto; they gave me some of my first glimpses into the history of the city. Of how he had the same swimming coach as Marilyn Bell, or how he used to sneak over the fence to watch ballgames at

old Maple Leaf Stadium. How he was called on to perform a grisly duty after Hurricane Hazel, a teenager helping search for bodies at the mouth of Etobicoke Creek, where a whole trailer park had been swept into the lake. Of rival gangs facing off at the border between New Toronto and Mimico, back in the days when that dividing line was something worth cracking bones over.

Once, on a Father's Day not too long ago, we took a drive through my dad's old neighbourhood. It was a chance for him to share his memories with us before they faded. Most of them were about him and his brothers getting into trouble. He told us about the time they climbed the local water tower, still under construction, and were spotted by the police while they were up there, refusing to come down until the officers were gone and the coast was clear. In some versions of the story, the cops even fired a warning shot. The tower did turn out to be incredibly dangerous; a friend of theirs fell to his death from it a few months later. And that story was far from the only one like that. Once, one of his brothers skipped school to play with a gun in their backyard, sent a stray bullet through a neighbour's window and then — if I'm remembering correctly — tried to pin it on my dad. The story he told most often was about a day — it must have been in the early 1950s — when he and some friends were driving around the neighbourhood aimlessly, as teenagers do, parking here and there, picking up some extra unsold bread from the bread factory where one of them worked... until they were stopped by police. The cops had grown suspicious of their meandering route, started following them, saw them take the free bread, and were sure they'd just witnessed a heist.

Many of Dad's stories hinted at how hard things must have been. His grandmother had once lived in the Ward — the city's most notorious "slum" — and decades later money was still tight. Four kids shared one room, with my dad sleeping across the foot of his sister's bed. And it seems he didn't always fit in with his siblings. He was the quiet and reserved one in a family filled with rowdy brothers who were always dragging him into mischief. And on top of that, from what I understand, my grandfather wasn't a gentle man.

As the family struggled to make ends meet, education wasn't the priority. None of the other kids made it past Grade Nine — and at first, my dad dropped out of high school, too; he was failing his classes. In his youth, he worked as everything from a pin monkey at a bowling alley to a truck driver; his love of roadside diners and greasy spoons is something he passed down to us. But it wasn't long before he was drawn back into school. Not only was he the first in his family to graduate from high school, he would eventually go on to earn his doctorate.



Dad at the Ontario School for the Deaf, Belleville, 1963

He and his first wife, Noelle, travelled the country between schools and universities as he earned his degrees and landed teaching jobs: they lived in Milton, Vancouver, Saskatoon... That's when my four older siblings were born: Martin, Mary, Matthew and Becky. I grew up with stories about their childhoods, too. Mary often talks about what it felt like when Dad got his doctorate, what a big deal it was, and that it's no coincidence all three of his oldest kids would go on to earn their own. It's a testament, I think, to

Dad's love of learning, that something that like could happen just a single generation after he became the first Bunch to reach Grade Ten.

It was by sheer luck that he was drawn into teaching children with special needs. Ready for a job at the end of teacher's college, he happened to see a post on a bulletin board looking to hire a teacher of the deaf. That coincidence changed the course of his life.

I, like Dad, was a quiet kid. So I didn't always have an easy time chatting with him. But when I got older that began to change, as it so often does between fathers and sons. And one of my fondest memories is our drive back from Ottawa after my sister Becky's wedding. As we took the slow, scenic route down Highway 7, he told me the story of his career. I wish I remembered it better than I do. But on that drive, he explained that when he started in 1960, many institutions for people with special needs were still based on terribly outdated ideas. He set to work trying to improve those conditions and would spend the rest of his life fighting for the rights of students with disabilities, including the right to be educated in regular classrooms. "Inclusive education," he once wrote, "is about honouring learning without reservation." He taught at the Ontario School for the Deaf in Belleville, became Assistant Superintendent of what's now called the Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf in Milton, worked closely with the Marsha Forest Centre and Inclusion Press, published books, gave talks, wrote papers, conducted studies, even took part in a G8 conference. "People argue," he wrote, "that well intentioned superficial social justice by a few is simply a drop in the bucket. How else would the bucket get filled?"

By the end of 1980, Dad was back in Toronto again. Now, he was living in Mount Dennis with my mom — a teacher of the deaf herself — and working as a professor at York University. He would be at York for decades, the whole rest of his career, teaching generations of new teachers how to teach — a legacy of caring and inclusive pedagogy that will carry on long into the future. (To this day, when I grade my own students' papers, I have his voice in my head; his progressive views on marking and deadlines must have been informed by his own early struggles in school.) That's the era when he introduced my brother Martin to his future wife — Trish was one of Dad's students — and when my younger sister, Megan, and I were born. We grew up surrounded by

stories about Dad's projects. Not just his advocacy for inclusive classrooms, but his founding of PlayFair Teams, how he helped establish the Urban Diversity Teacher Education Initiative — an anti-racism program — and his passionate support for literacy.

For many years, he was heavily involved with Frontier College. The organization was founded back at the end of the 1800s by a minister from Nova Scotia, Alfred Fitzpatrick, who was determined to bring education to people doing hard labour in remote locations. "Whenever and wherever people shall have occasion to congregate," he declared, "then and there shall be the time, place and means of their education." And so, Fitzpatrick began to teach out of log cabins and tents and sent Labourer-Teachers into lumber camps and railroad crews and gold mines, where they would work all day and then use their free time to teach their fellow workers how to read. Norman Bethune was one of them. So was Dr. Spock. Frontier College is still around today (they changed their name to United For Literacy a couple of years ago) and Dad served as Chair of the Board of Governors. While he was there, he was also involved in the founding of Beat The Street, helping teach young people experiencing homelessness how to read, and then published a book filled with their writing. He pushed the government to make official forms and reports easier to understand. And he helped draw funding and attention to the cause.

He was best known, though, as a leading champion for inclusive education. "Dr. Bunch has been at the heart," one of his colleagues wrote back in 1999, "for over 20 years, of moving our thinking about mental and physical differences from a point of segregation ... to a point of recognizing the value of each of us and the inherent justice of including all people in our schools and other social institutions."

That work eventually took him around the world, advising governments and school boards everywhere from the United States to the United Kingdom to Europe to the Middle East to China to Siberia to India... He was particularly proud of that work, including in Mumbai, where he helped families establish a preschool program in Dharavi — the "slum" made famous by *Slumdog Millionaire*. His friends included everyone from

Bollywood stars to ex-convicts; he met everyone from royalty to Black Panthers to world leaders. (Or, as he would always put it with a twinkle in his eye: “They met me.”)

At home, he enjoyed a much less glamorous lifestyle: he loved a good book, steak and kidney pie, golf and squash with friends...



Dad passed away a couple of weeks ago now. He was 86. It wasn't a surprise and thanks to Mom's heroic efforts he was able to stay at home right up to the end, as comfortable as he could possibly be.

The last book he published came out a few years ago. It was a book of poetry, a compilation of his own work and of Marsha Forest's; she was one of his dearest friends and collaborators, who passed away herself in the year 2000. His poems are filled with his thoughts on inclusion and family and life and death. They've helped me understand him in new and unexpected ways. And even as he suffered from dementia in recent

years, he was still fiercely proud of that book, eager to give copies to just about anyone he met.

One of the poems is called “The Egg & I”:

“I am a different man / to different people. / Shards of my being can be reviewed but never the whole me. / I feel myself divided / and not known as a whole. / Who can put me together? / Not all of the King’s horses / and not all of the King’s men / And least of all, myself.”

Writing this post over the last few days, I’ve felt the weight of it, of trying to sum up Dad’s whole life in just a few thousand words. It’s impossible, of course; it would be for anyone’s. I know he meant so much to so many people in so many different ways.

So, for my part, I’ll remember him sitting in his favourite spot in our reading room, next to the window, with a beat-up paperback war novel in his lap. I’ll remember watching baseball with him on TV, all the Jays’ blue uniforms turned green by our wonky old television set. How he’d come inside all sweaty after mowing the lawn on a summer day. The feel of the stubble on his cheek. The papers he had to grade spread out across our dining room table. The way he would start playing solitaire after a couple of days off work, at loose ends without a project to focus on. The evening he went out to take care of a wasp nest only to return a few minutes later, his hair dishevelled and his glasses askew, having fallen off the ladder, asking us why he went out there in the first place. The trip he and I took to Cooperstown, driving through the spectacular leaves of the Finger Lakes, stopping in Syracuse to watch *Chain Reaction* at a theatre in a mall because we had time to kill and he knew how much I loved movies. I’ll remember Saturday nights on the couch watching British sitcoms with him and Mom and Megan and popcorn. And the way that when he was bored waiting for some school event to start, he’d count all the chairs in the auditorium. How he’d ask us to save the imaginary holes in our doughnuts for him. How we’d dance on his feet when we were little. How he’d sing us to sleep at night with “Hush, Little Baby.”

And I’ll remember him on Christmas Eve. It’s always been my favourite day of the year. It was the big night at our house growing up, with family and friends coming from all

over to spend a wintry evening together. The house was full of the people we loved, catching up, telling old stories, complaining about politics, enjoying each other's company on one of the darkest nights of the year. The tree sparkling. Grandchildren underfoot. Mom making her aunt Ruth's chicken for everyone to share... And Dad. Dad handing out drinks, telling a story, cracking groan-worthy jokes, or maybe just soaking it in for a while. Then, somewhere around midnight, maybe a little later, as people headed off into the cold, he might offer someone a drive home through the snow. On those nights he'd return in the wee hours of Christmas morning with the creak of our big old front door, knocking the snow off his shoes as he took them off and came inside to a house warm and cozy and quiet.

Love you, Dad.

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