



Mr. Donald Eugene Reiffenstein (Dad)

June 30, 1926 - July 29, 2025

On June 30, Dad reached his 99th year, a remarkable achievement by anyone's measure. A seemingly age-defying guy, physically healthy and despite losing a few words in conversation, Dad appeared on course to reach an even more memorable 100th year.

Just a year ago he had his driver's license renewed for two more years, much to the chagrin of a couple of 80-year-old sprites at his seniors' living facility who had been denied theirs.

However, age, a finicky master, caught up with him finally, and by his own choice Dad didn't get to the century mark. Content in the knowledge he had achieved most of his life's goals, he decided to exit on his own terms, dignified and determined to the end.

Here is his story.

The eldest child of Walter and Nora Ethel (nee: Thompson) Reiffenstein, Dad's character was formed by growing up during the hard-scrabble years of the Depression in small town Alberta. From those years he resolved to dedicate his life to providing his future wife and children with solid, middle-class lives.

Dad's father was born in Iowa and immigrated to Alberta in the early 1900s, joining a Reiffenstein clan in the town of Standard. While looking for work,

Walter met and married Nora Ethel, a tremendous disciplinarian who knew her own mind, and at the same time, was an extremely loving and amazing woman.

Walter was a rebellious sort, who oft times had little time for stiff-collared rule makers, with a bit of the kid always in him. Once, during a stint as a caretaker at a ranch in Crowsnest Alberta, in a car filled with his grandchildren hanging out of open windows and screaming with delight, he took a careening drive down a back road. As they approached the ranch house, Walter turned to the kids and said, "Your grandmother doesn't need to know about this."

One other adult played a key role in Dad's young life. His uncle Reo Thompson, brother of Ethel, was a big name in radio broadcasting in the 1930s and into the 1960s, in Alberta and nationally. Dad inherited his love of radio from Uncle Reo, love of mischievousness from Walter, and dedication to discipline from Ethel.

Radio was the glue.

Dad knew from an early age that radio would be his destiny. Uncle Reo encouraged and assisted Dad's wish. Dad told his uncle he would use the name Donald Thompson as his radio name, but Reo demurred, suggesting Dad use a shortened name on air. Thus, he became Don Thomas, a name that one day would be extremely well-known in the radio and TV businesses.

But first, Dad landed a job at CKRD Radio in Red Deer in 1948 and eventually parlayed that into a job at CFCN Radio in Calgary.

At CFCN, he rose from staff announcer, to marketing director, to program director, and to general manager of the radio station. His achievements at the radio station are too numerous to list here, but significant ones include: spawning the world's tallest Christmas tree atop Broadcast Hill in Calgary;

being instrumental in employing radio to help the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede reach millions; starting the world-famous Chinook Centre Stampede pancake breakfast, which continues today as the city's largest Stampede event outside of Stampede Park.

On Christmas mornings, he broadcast from the Calgary Children's Hospital, doing a 'play-by-play' of Santa visiting the kids who couldn't make it home for Christmas. He called those broadcasts his most heart-felt moments.

He created a fictional puppy that appeared with him on his radio show, Uncle Don and Skippy, causing many youngsters, including his own, to want to meet 'Skippy'. Dad was the 'voice' of Skippy, and he could still bark just like Skippy many decades later.

Dad had an incredible skill of melding together a rebellious nature, strict use of discipline and, most importantly, using his voice, and charm, to build a successful career. That career took him to Chatham, Ontario, in 1973, after a quarter century at CFCN. At the goodbye party hosted by Calgary's mayor, more than 200 people attended, expressing their appreciation for Dad's accomplishments.

And, in his spare time he and his lovely wife, Mary, became the parents of eight children. Mary Ringheim had caught the eye of Dad in the mid-1940s, and they married in 1949, beginning their family a year later. While Dad worked countless hours to "bring home the bacon", Mary ran the household, at one time having five young ones all under age six to manage. She was the backbone of the family and the mainstay of our childhood.

As kids, we didn't truly understand what Dad put into his career to keep his family living well. When he wasn't up on Broadcast Hill, weekends involved

taking us on 'working' picnics, visiting cousins on the farm, taking two-week vacations in a packed-to-the-roof station wagon to Lake Wasa in BC, where Mom's brother, Lee and family, had a cottage.

Dad took delight in having a few dollars to treat us occasionally to a bucket of KFC or a bag of Dilly Bars at the DQ. He moved us in 1959 from an old rental house in northeast Calgary, to a new development in the southwest part of the city, the first home our parents owned.

As the kids aged and eventually began to make their way, each realized more and more what Dad had put into giving us a good life and some of the sacrifices he made.

Dad also took delight in being a bit of an artisan and visual artist. Quite an accomplishment for someone who was blinded in one eye at the age of 12. He had a talent for woodworking and created gifts for people over the years, such as picture frames, tiny furniture, and even some games. He said wood-crafting was his "exercise" that helped keep him young well into his 80s.

Then there was photography. In 1958, with his brand new 8mm movie camera, he began chronicling his life and the lives of his family and friends on film. Over seven decades he created an enormous "oeuvre" of film and video, a visual testament to his active life.

Dad and Mom lived in Chatham with three of their children for 10 years. The move to Ontario caused his children to scatter across the country. We always stayed in touch with Mom and Dad, especially at Christmas, Dad's favourite holiday, when he was able to share more of himself with family.

Still, his heart was always that of a westerner, an Albertan, and in 1983 he and Mom returned to Calgary, with three of their children remaining in Ontario to start their own independent lives.

In 1993, Dad retired. He and Mom had separated by then and Dad went to live on Vancouver Island where he thrived for 25 years. In 2020 he returned once again to Alberta, to the town of High River, where he lived for the rest of his life, surrounded by family, his true comfort zone.

Back to being 99 years old.

Dad was recently diagnosed with early onset age-related dementia. His memory of events had begun to fade, his ability to converse, a talent that defined his very successful career, diminished. In a surprisingly short period, his health declined. So, typical of the character he inherited from Grandma Ethel, he took charge and decided his time had come.

Dad is no longer with us in body. We miss his easy laugh, wry humour, and time spent with us all. He gave us so much to be thankful for and remember. He lives on through his eight children, 17 biological and adopted grandchildren, and nine great grandchildren.

He had no regrets. When asked by one of his grandchildren last year, would he do it exactly the same way if he could live all over again, he answered unequivocally, "Yes, I would."

At Don's request, no funeral service will be held.

Caring for the family is Lyle Reeves Funerals of High River (Craig Snodgrass) 403.652.4242.

Tribute Wall



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Lyle Reeves Funerals - August 05, 2025 at 11:31 AM