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## ARTICLES

### Living His Dash

By Yolanda Brooks

Posted: Monday, November 1st, 2010

Dave Stafford once beat track and field legend Harry Jerome in a 100-yard sprint. He also competed for Canada in long jump at the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1954 when they were held in Vancouver.

While Dave may have slowed down a little since his heyday, he still lives life at a speedy pace.

Since the former Trans-Canada Air Lines/Air Canada employee retired in 1989, he has carved out a new career as a volunteer. At the Wildlife Rescue Association (WRA) in Burnaby, Dave, 76, is the No. 1 animal transport driver. To the kids who go to Disneyland through the Air Canada Dreams Take Flight charity, he is Captain Dreams. And to the Second World War veterans from Brock Fahrni Pavilion in Shaughnessy, he is a friendly face who escorts them around town to attend the Remembrance Day ceremony at the Vancouver Cenotaph.

"For me, the number one thing is people," says Dave. "I love meeting people and getting out there and helping out where I can. I don't mind approaching people and just talking to them because you get to meet and know a lot of different folks that you wouldn't otherwise meet."

After he retired from the airlines, Dave had a number of part-time jobs that ranged from cook to painter. And when provincial and federal elections rolled around, he'd pull on his supervisor hat to set up election stations in schools and hospitals. A role he continues today.

His volunteering career took off in 2004 when he answered a newspaper ad calling for weed pullers around Burnaby Lake. "I was raised during the war, and we all had Victory Gardens. I picked up a love of gardening back then and that flows naturally into some of the things I do now."

From weed busting, Dave got involved in bird banding and building nest boxes with the Burnaby Lake Park Association. When he went to donate some Canadian Tire money to the WRA Care Centre at Burnaby Lake, he was quickly signed up as a pick-up and release driver for the organization, which rescues and rehabilitates injured, sick, orphaned and oil-polluted wildlife.

Since 2008, Dave has clocked more than 9,000 km for the charity. He carries out a rescue roughly once every three days and he travels all across the Lower Mainland in his much-loved antique VVV van to pick up animals in distress. Once rehabilitated, he often returns the animals to their natural habitat.

He manages to catch most animals using just a cage, a towel and his cunning. But he has occasionally had to resort to using other implements. When a family of 10 ducklings fell down a storm drain, Dave came to the rescue with a plastic sieve.

He has also rescued skunks from soccer nets, released marmots at Hope Slide, saved a gull dangling from razor wire in a Vancouver back alley and found a new home for a beaver on a remote Harrison Hot Springs lake. So keen is Dave to fulfill his duties, he once took a date on a skunk release in Stanley Park.

"My date didn't know what I was doing but, luckily, the skunk got out of the cage and disappeared real quick," he laughs.

Dave spent 32 years in the airline industry working in sales and ticketing and his contact with the industry continues as a volunteer for Air Canada's Dreams Take Flight charity that flies 125 physically, socially and mentally challenged kids to Disneyland for the day. As well as helping to organize the logistics, and chaperoning three trips, Dave dons a cape and winged Captain Dreams helmet to spread a little magic during the meet and greet at the start of the trip.

"I don't particularly like the rides because they are not designed to make you feel good, but the kids are so excited," says Dave, a widower, who has three grown children of his own. "It's something that stays with them and we've had kids who've come back years later as adults to volunteer. That's really gratifying."

Another of Dave's favourite volunteer activities is as a helper to the veterans at Brock Fahrni Pavilion, who have a whirl of events on Remembrance Day.

"It is a very emotional day and I look forward to doing it every year," says Dave. "They don't get out often, and it is a really awesome thing to see the reception they get wherever they go."



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Dave comes from a family of joiners and doers, and volunteering is a family tradition. "My dad was a school superintendent, he was a Rotarian, a Mason, and he belonged to the Chamber of Commerce, while my mother was a member of Eastern Star."

H.D. Stafford Middle School in Langley is named in honour of Dave's father, who later initiated the H.D. Stafford Laurels Award for exceptional students at the school. Since his father died in 1978, Dave has regularly presented the award at the school's annual graduation ceremony. His favourite speech "How do you live your dash?" is based on The Dash, an inspirational poem written by Linda Ellis.

"You go to the cemetery and what do you see? There's the date you were born and then your dash and then there's your final resting date. The question is: What does the dash represent? How do you fill in your time because all you've got between your birth and your death is a dash? I try to live my life by making the best use of the time that I have."

NOVEMBER 2010 SENIOR LIVING MAGAZINE VANCOUVER & LOWER MAINLAND

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