
Mike Wolfson

Mike Wolfson died on July 17, 2020, after a five-month battle with brain cancer, at age 40.

Mike and I worked together for two years at the unique construction law firm McLean & Armstrong in West Vancouver. This writing is my personal reminiscence about our friendship.

Mike grew up in Vancouver, the son of Harvey Wolfson and Cynthia Pinscombe. He graduated from Kitsilano High School. Mike's father, Harvey, was also a lawyer who is remembered in the previous issue of this magazine: (2021) 79 Advocate 98.



Before becoming a lawyer, Mike worked as an engineer. He graduated from the UBC School of Engineering in 2002 but ultimately decided to leave engineering and pursue a career in law. Knowing Mike, I suspect he was bored with the dryness of engineering and its distance from both ultimate questions about how to live and the immediate turmoils of social and interpersonal politics. One day, a group of us associates were whining about having to attend an upcoming lawyer's party. Mike chuckled, "If you think this is bad, you should try engineer parties."

Mike graduated from Thompson Rivers University law school in 2015. He split his articles between McLean & Armstrong and Gwendoline Allison's firm in nearby Dunderave.

Before being hired by M&A, Mike also interviewed with Jenkins Marzban Logan. John Logan interviewed Mike, and despite having only that brief encounter with Mike, John continued to ask after him over the years. In John's words:

I wanted to hire him, as there was something very nice about him that was very different from the usual candidate I see. I thought he seemed like an "old soul" (someone more enlightened than other people his age) and had a nice, disarming manner, which would be useful if he wanted to pursue a career in dispute resolution. After doing everything I could to interest him in JML, and despite warning him that at M&A everyone wore flip-flops to work, he went to work with you folks.

McLean & Armstrong was equally keen to hire Mike due to his intelligence and technical knowledge. Mike was quickly able to translate his engineering experience into the technical explanation of construction terms relevant to legal cases. He worked on major files involving transmission lines, proprietary wall systems and new school construction, among others.

Mike's colleague Chris Moore recalls working late preparing to cross-examine an expert who had penned an enormous report in an area the client said "only three people in the world understand." Mike and Chris read countless journals over several evenings. Chris has fond memories of eating greasy Chinese food, laughing and learning enough to conduct a four-day cross-examination of the expert.

On first meeting Mike, his personal style, humour, environmentalism and leftism struck me as unmistakably West Coast. His dress was faded baggy jeans, untucked plaid shirt, worn-out shoes and waterproof shell jacket. With an impish twinkle in his downturned eyes, his brown hair always dishevelled, Mike sometimes reminded me of a llama.

Mike rode his "vintage" bike to work over the Lions Gate Bridge to Amble-side. He listened to audiobooks on his commute. In our first discussion, I suggested Mike find the audiobook of Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*. He

did, and our morning discussions about that book, wending through Middle East history and literature, provided the early basis for a friendship. I liked him for his intelligence and was immediately struck by his psychological acuity.

I saw that same psychological awareness in watching Mike move throughout the office. With his retiring style, he had a way of walking around his colleagues and clients, to see a person's character from all sides. In conversation afterwards, Mike would have the most insightful observations. But where was the malice? There wasn't any. That was the revelation. Mike's insights were more in the way of a humorous acceptance of human nuttiness.

Mike preferred things gritty. He had an interest in trains, the expansion of the West and the hobo culture of the rails. We often discussed music: the immortal Bob Dylan and country singer Hank Williams. We both liked the earnest songwriter Jonathan Richman. Upon hearing of Mike's death, I listened to Richman's song "That Summer Feeling" and was moved to think of human impermanence, regret and how we live our lives by habit.

For McLean & Armstrong associates Curtis Simmonds, Rob Dumerton, Mike and me, the financially indefensible morning trip to the coffee shop was a refuge, a time to clown and poke fun. Mike and I got coffee most mornings. He drank drip coffee black. One morning, I went to pay for our coffees, and on this occasion, perhaps the third or fourth time in a row, Mike looked at me with genuine annoyance, "Hey, let me buy you a coffee." The flash of irritation on Mike's face stuck with me. He couldn't abide artificiality between friends.

We'd all go for lunch. More money wasted. Mike had a severe nut allergy. This greatly constrained our lunch options in restaurant wasteland West Van. It usually meant getting sushi. We would rib Mike about how his allergy made him more trouble than he was worth. I got a kick out of his attitude in response, "I've never heard that one before. Christ, you guys are boring." Those were great days, and all of us at M&A felt fortunate, and we all genuinely liked each other.

One nut-free lunch with Mike and Curtis, I had been moaning about my lot in life, and I looked at Mike and said, "I can tell you got a plan, Mike. You're moving to Kamloops, you're going to start your own law firm." I saw the glint of recognition in his eye. He came to my office a week later to announce that he was joining a small firm in Kamloops where he and his wife owned a home.

Leaving McLean & Armstrong was the wrong decision. By noon on his first day of work, I got a text from him, "I got to get out of here". And this is

a good place to acknowledge the kindness shown to Mike by his boss Chris Armstrong who, after letting Mike dangle for three weeks, accepted him back into the firm and even allowed him to work from home in Kamloops. (One of many kindnesses that continued through Mike's illness and even after death.)

Having moved to Kamloops, we saw Mike only periodically. "Wolfson's coming in today" was a welcome announcement to all the lawyers that we would be seeing our lovable almost-mascot.

The other indicator that Mike was in the office was the smell of hot sauce. Mike was merciless in drowning his lunch in hot sauce. It would have been impossible to taste the underlying food. Perhaps that was his intention given that his lunch in those days was often bean and cheese burritos from the 7-Eleven on the corner. No connoisseur, he kept several large bottles of generic-brand hot sauce on his bookshelf. To this day, Mike's hot sauce sits in the M&A kitchen fridge, none having the heart to chuck it.

Just before he left Vancouver for Kamloops, I gave Mike a set of old cross-country ski gear. He told me that he enjoyed skiing with his daughters at Stake Lake in the surrounding hills outside Kamloops. The Wolfsons cross-country skied, and they also enjoyed hiking and camping together.

I had grown up in Kamloops in the '80s, and I appreciated it for its weather and beautiful geography. But Mike was forever telling me how it was now a really hip place. From his city upbringing by intellectual parents, Mike had moved away from the centre. He preferred the life he and his partner, Beth Dilabio, had created in British Columbia's interior. Even in his last weeks, Mike was promising he was going to take me for lunch at a kick-ass ramen spot. I laughed. But I was touched by Mike's belief that we would again be sharing another meal together.

It's impossible to write about Mike without mentioning his wife, Beth, with whom he eloped in October 2004, or his two young daughters, Abigail and Alison Diwolfio (ages seven and five). Mike spoke often of his family. He delighted in talking about the early days of his relationship with Beth. Mike told of American road trips: motels, dead-end bars and chatting up furry old alcoholics. In telling their story, there was no denying the excitement and pride he felt about his relationship with Beth. E-mailing Beth the other day, I told her that Mike had shared those stories with me, and she replied, "Oh man, good times."

And he enjoyed, just as much, telling stories about his two hilarious daughters. After I learned my wife was pregnant with our first child, Mike sat with me almost every morning and told of the madness he had encountered the night before. His daughters are unusually literate, and they share

their father's strong sense of justice and fairness. They delighted in setting Daddy straight. It gave Mike great pleasure to sit in my office and mimic his daughter's stern voices and facial expressions in recounting the various ways that he had been chastised and corrected by his girls.

Or he would share photos, for instance, of the kids laughing hilariously while sitting at a picnic bench eating ice cream. Looking back, I now see that with his stories of the put-upon father or of household pandemonium—he never gave any explicit advice—Mike was initiating me into the world of parenting. He knew he was a good dad, and he knew I was in for the most fulfilling phase of my life in raising my newborn daughter. He came to my office each morning to share his enthusiasm.

Mike's illness was relatively short-lived. I heard from him in February 2020 that he was having difficulty reading and had been experiencing migraine-like headaches. I worried about his career. Within two months, I heard from my old boss Chris Armstrong that Mike had brain cancer and had already undergone two surgeries. The brain tumours were remarkably aggressive and doubled in size quickly. Excised by surgery, they doubled again.

In his final weeks, coinciding with the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, Mike lay in a Kamloops hospital bed. I told Mike, via text, how much his friendship meant to me. Mike paid me a great compliment when he wrote back, "You're authentic. Even children can see that." Focusing on the second part of his statement, I find it telling that Mike would reference, and perhaps privilege, the perceptions of children.

Colleagues Chris Moore and Vince Aldridge drove to Kamloops to visit Mike after he was discharged from the hospital. They sat with Mike's family. Chris Moore was bowled over by Mike's daughters' intelligence. The girls claimed to have read more of the bound volumes in the Wolfson library than Mike had. Chris and Vince could hardly have expected to hear children that age extolling the virtues of polytheism over monotheism and expressing their particular admiration for ancient Egyptian religious beliefs.

Mike was having excruciating headaches, and he was paralyzed on one side. I wanted to be a friend but was also aware of the burden I might be placing on him. There is a strange sense in which the one suffering, dying, has to play a role for others: responsive, grateful, eminently polite. I suggested Mike put my texts, his work and the demands from all other people out of his mind and focus on what was really important: Beth and his daughters. Mike wrote back, "Every second with my wife is like magic."

Premature death is always sad. Of course it is. But this remembrance is being written six months after the event, when the awfulness should have been reflected upon and digested. And I also feel—only now; it takes time

to assess these things—that this man, my friend, was fortunate to have experienced the best parts of life. Mike was proud enough to gain entrance to two exclusive professions (engineering and law), he was curious enough to learn the meaning of art and poetry, he had known a grand romance with a good woman, and he had also known the greatest possible happiness in being a dad. When I remember Mike, I think of his good-natured humour and how he exemplified a civilized way of seeing and being.

It made Mike Wolfson's friendship all the more remarkable.

Eric Lundberg
