

Albach, Gary George

February 8, 1947 - April 4, 2022

We are profoundly sad to announce the death of Gary George Albach, son of George and Gladys Albach (both deceased). Survived and mourned by his wife and soulmate Ann Curry, his daughters Ashleigh Jean (Phil) and Afton Claire (Troy), and his grandchildren Donovan Axel and Sienna Georgia. Fondly remembered by former partners Marion Culham and Dammy Damstrom-Albach, the mother of his children.

Gary was born in Buffalo, but moved with his parents across the Peace Bridge to his mother's home in Ridgeway (Fort Erie) Ontario when he was two. His father, an American artist whose work was just coming to prominence, died in 1949 soon after their move.

Gary attained his BSc from the University of Waterloo, and his MSc and PhD (1975) from the University of British Columbia. His doctoral work on the optical heterodyning of lasers within plasmas was the basis of the first patent to be licenced by UBC. Based on this technology and the work of two other plasma physicists, he started a new company, Vortek Industries Ltd, in 1975. Their goal was to manufacture a commercially viable argon gas one million candlepower super lamp that could light up a large football stadium or a ski hill with just one lamp. This success led to the company being listed in the 1988 Guinness Book of World Records as the inventor of the world's brightest light. These lamps were sold all over the world and were particularly useful to countries and companies who needed to simulate sunlight in space, in order to test on earth the solar panels powering satellites before launching those satellites.

After leaving Vortek in the late 1990's, Gary continued with several entrepreneurial ventures in Vancouver, mainly as the principal in a group of companies that successfully commercialized high power radiant energy technologies for computer chip manufacturing and space power systems.

In 2006, UBC appointed Gary to the newly-formed position of Entrepreneur in Residence with the University Industry Liaison Office, giving him a university-wide mandate to develop programs and policies for faculty members and graduate students that would spur the commercialization of university research. He loved meeting one on one with professors and students to learn about the inventions that had come from their research, and to give them advice on securing patents and development funding, based on his years of experience. Occasionally, however, he had to caution an eager inventor that his/her "anti-gravity machine" might not be commercially viable.

Gary was recruited by the Province of Alberta in 2008 to develop and manage their nanotechnology program. Because of that program's success, he was appointed CEO of Alberta Innovates – Technology Futures, a provincial corporation of 700 employees responsible for funding and product development in Canadian oil, gas, forestry, agriculture, and alternate energy technologies.

Twenty-five years ago Gary's doctor told him to take up running to lower his high cholesterol (which he later found out was hereditary). He did so reluctantly, but soon found that he enjoyed long runs and that the sport was a great stress reliever. He completed numerous half marathons and twelve full marathons, qualifying for and running the Boston Marathon in 2008. His most memorable and difficult run was the Antarctic Marathon of 2016, which he finished in a blinding minus 15 degree C sleet storm while sloshing through ankle-deep penguin poop and dodging angry leopard seals. At 69, he was the oldest runner in the group of one hundred.

After his retirement in 2012 and move from Edmonton to Victoria in 2014, Gary was able to concentrate on a hobby that he enjoyed since childhood - restoring old radios. He was fascinated by electronics as a precocious child, eagerly awaiting the arrival of his monthly Popular Electronics magazine, and by his early teens was fixing the radios of Ontario friends and local farmers. During the past ten years, he restored to museum quality both the electronics and cabinets of over 100 radios, including breadboard radios of the early 1920s, Art Deco Sparton radios of the 1930s, and very rare Emor radios of the 1940s. He served on the executive of the national Canadian Vintage Radio Society since 2014. He was very active within this organization, promoting communication amongst members in every province and publishing technical and humorous articles regularly in the organization's electronic journal. His occasional semi-autobiographical column drew fan mail. Titled "The Old Newbie", it focused on the challenges of restoring radios while living in a condo with a wife who inexplicably disliked the clutter of mountains of radio tubes in her living room and the high pitched whine of old radios being tuned.

One of the great joys of Gary's life was being a father to Ashleigh and Afton. He was immensely proud of them both, and always loved spending time with them, particularly if it was science oriented! He taught them how to build rockets and how to launch them in a field next to the house (hoping no low flying aircraft were overhead!), he showed them how to create a battery with a lemon, and at Halloween he explained how frozen carbon dioxide made wonderfully spooky smoke. Camping trips were also special: Gary read Harry Potter chapters by lamplight in the tent during torrential rainstorms in Alberta, and led the family through the volcanic ash up the side of Mount St. Helen's. Recently, he especially treasured the too-brief time he had with grandchildren Donny and Sienna.

Gary throughout his working life travelled the world on hurried business trips so he particularly enjoyed vacations as a tourist with Ann to over forty countries over the past twenty-five years, including celebrating his 65th birthday in Machu Pichu, sampling caviar and vodka on the TransSiberian Railway journey from Moscow to Vladivostok, cruising both the Amazon and Mekong Rivers, and touring the Nikola Tesla Museum in Belgrade as a special guest.

He was diagnosed with MDS (bone marrow cancer) in 2016, just four months after his Antarctic Marathon, and was given at that time only 18 to 24 months to live. With sheer grit and determination, he endured ineffective chemotherapy treatments, over 300 blood tests, and 140 weekly four to seven hour blood transfusions., The latter extended his life far beyond any time that the doctors considered possible. A considerable feat for someone who hated needles! Our deepest thank-you to everyone who donates blood, to the wonderful nurses in the Medical Daycare/Transfusion Unit at the Victoria Jubilee Hospital, to Dr. Hart at the BC Cancer Agency who advised Gary and Ann to just "go for it" and keep travelling until the weekly transfusions and COVID made travel impossible, to Dr. Green for MAID assistance, and to our many neighbours at Shoal Point in Victoria who have been so supportive during the past five years.

Gary was compassionate, always curious, brilliant, beloved, and in the words of a friend admiring Gary's three Emor radio restorations: "You are an artist, craftsman and talented nerd. These are extraordinary." Gary as well was extraordinary. We will miss him terribly.

A celebration of Gary's life will be held at a later date.