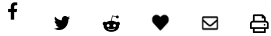


Eternal sunshine

Filmmaker and activist Michael Weir's last days were full of friends. Jane Kansas pays tribute.

By [Jane Kansas](#)



A fortune from a Chinese cookie was glued with some sort of goo to Michael Weir's computer and centred just above the screen. The red ink text was sandwiched between two happy faces. It said: You are heading for a land of sunshine.

Michael Weir died on Thursday, September 22. He was at home in West Chester, Pennsylvania, from whence he had come to Halifax, to study at NSCAD, to work at Planned Parenthood and Stepping Stone, to edit films, to make his own videos, to act up as a gay and AIDS activist.



Rest in peace, Michael Weir

Michael he returned home in 2002. His mother had had a heart attack and he wanted to be closer to his family; in his 12 years here no one from home had come to visit. Michael visited Halifax sometimes and he was here a year ago.

One evening here he climbed into a friend's car. On the front seat was a pack of Canadian cigarettes. Michael said the anti-smoking picture surprised him. "I'd been away from Canada since those packs with the big pictures came on the market," he said. "I suppose they help." Pause. "I saw this grotesque picture of what turned out to be a cancerous lung and looked at the statistic printed beside it; I was caught off guard. As I read it I realized it was referring to me. The statistic was that only 20 percent of people with lung cancer survive beyond three years. I'm not sure what kind of lung cancer that would be—there are different kinds." Another pause. "If you happen to have lung cancer it's a pretty chilling statistic to read."

Which Michael did have. He was diagnosed on the Ides of March 2004. "I had been having back problems since November but I figured it was this new mattress," he said. "I changed the mattress but didn't get better. Then I thought maybe I had strained something at work." He had his spine x-rayed. "The x-ray looked odd and they suggested I get an MRI. It turned out I had a fracture and they didn't know what it came from. Then I had a chest x-ray. They found a mass." Michael had more tests. "Six days later my doctor told me it was cancerous. I held it together pretty good until the nurse asked me for my phone number and I got it wrong. Then I cried."

Michael was immediately scheduled for treatment to reduce the swelling around his spine and thus the chance he might become paralyzed. He moved into a large comfortable house bought by his eldest sister, Sherwin. It was furnished partly with Michael's belongings and many family photographs and partly from what must have been a fun rampaging spree at Pottery Barn, Crate & Barrel and Restoration Hardware.

He wasn't alone: Jill Beaney, friend of long, long standing, lived with him. "I was his lazy husband," she laughs. "We ate. Laughed. Helped each other." Beaney has a big brain, a big laugh, a coffee addiction and a crossword puzzle compulsion.

Michael's house was full the last few days. His beloved cat Spider had died, and two new kittens romped around. Family came from all over, as did friends from Halifax like Tom Romard, a nurse from here now living in New Hampshire.

Very early in the morning on Michael's last day, Ronald and Michael's youngest brother Brian were with Michael. He was falling. The men remembered Michael saying, "I want to die outside and they scooped him up in a quilt, carried him outside and put him in a large jute hammock. It was not yet dawn; both the moonflowers and morning glories were out. Tom and Brian roused everyone in the house. Outside, Jill Beaney climbed into the hammock with her old friend. She laid her hand on his chest and said, "Look, Michael, you're outside." Michael opened his eyes, looked up at the trees and died.

Michael Weir's obituary and information about The Michael Weir Foundation for the Arts is at www.michaelweir.com.

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