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In Memoriam



Dr. Irwin DeVries. "Irwin With Emphasis" (Alan Levine, Flickr, 2019) CC0 1.0 public domain dedication.

Irwin DeVries

Michael Paskevicius

Dr. Irwin DeVries passed away in January 2024 at the age of 69. Irwin had a remarkable impact on those who knew him and made countless contributions to open education, elearning, and educational technology throughout his career. In this memorial article, we honour his career and create space for his parents to share a little more about Irwin's upbringing.

A year following Irwin's passing, we received an email from Irwin's father, Frank, who was hoping that Irwin's work in education might be recognized for the Order of Canada. Researching further, we discovered that there was no

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posthumous option for this award, but discussed ways in which we could further honour Irwin's legacy in the form of a scholarly obituary.

Irwin's parents, Frank and his wife, Celia, cherished their son, and while they did not have deep knowledge of his specific work and contributions to open education, they acknowledged that, "his avowed interest in guiding aspiring Internet devotees around the planet to become accomplished at it, was a noble, altruistic goal; the fact that he was professionally awarded [with the BCcampus Award for Excellence in Open Education] for being very good at that has been a matter of great thankfulness and pride for Celia and me" (DeVries, 2025, personal communication).

Frank was excited about the prospect of sharing Irwin's life story more widely and offered the following narrative of Irwin's upbringing:

> *Childhood sweethearts, aged 20 and 23, Celia and I emigrated from Holland to Canada in 1952, settling in rural Wyoming, Ontario just east of Sarnia. . . . Irwin was diagnosed with acute glomerulonephritis, a kidney disease that would lead to years of hemodialysis, peritoneal dialysis, and three kidney transplants.*
>
> *After five years in Wyoming we moved to Houston, a forestry town in the northern interior of British Columbia. We then moved to Vancouver three years later. There I once noticed Irwin struggling to eke out the melody of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" on his mom's guitar. I threw a challenge his way by promising him his own guitar if he'd master it. His response was a lifetime dedicated to playful music creation (https://irwindevries.bandcamp.com). Irwin was a creative individual and enjoyed poetry and reading. I recall him*

unravelling for me several of what I thought were esoteric lines from "Four Quartets" [by T.S. Eliot], and introducing me to the sublime word-smithing of prairie poet John Newlove. Although we both liked Russian novels, Irwin aspired to read Dostoyevsky with the original Russian text. What to do? Oh, just take a 2-year course in Russian!

*Already for years Celia had mentioned that she would love to have a couple of girls in the family. That had not happened naturally, but there existed a great need for foster parents. With Celia's expressed desire to help especially handicapped or otherwise disadvantaged children, things moved fast, and soon through our home coursed a never-ending stream of multi-handicapped, brain-damaged, blind and other needy kids, and Irwin quickly became mom's special assistant, feeding, cleaning, bathing, teaching and entertaining them. **

Irwin moved back East to Toronto in 1979 to become editor at Addison Wesley, and how especially Celia missed his help! [Irwin] asked us over for a few days, [and] we met with friends of his including Jean whom he would eventually marry, and who in a cross exchange with another couple would later donate one of her kidneys to her sick husband. In the meantime, Celia, in addition to running a busy household, took evening courses to become a fully licensed Childcare Worker and Preschool Supervisor.

The BC government had become aware of Celia's passion for needy children and her desire to have them become as whole as possible. And so it was that Grace McCarthy, then Minister of Human Resources in BC, on June 23, 1979 travelled to Burnaby to

personally hand Celia the prestigious BC Family Achievement Award.

Imbued with his mom's oft-modelled spirit of compassion, Irwin's award-winning work in Open Learning has made the world a more inclusive and inviting place for many.

Throughout the challenges and discomforts that would come his way, Irwin would never complain—he'd take it all in stride. In one of his bouts with health trouble, I said to him, "Irwin, we should pray for a miracle!" Said he, "Dad, I am a miracle!" In view of the three kidney transplants he had plus his heart surgery, he was so right!

Frank DeVries

[*Editorial note: The disability terminology in this account reflects Frank's original wording.]

Despite his health challenges, Irwin went on to have a successful and rewarding career in online and open learning. Starting in 1982 as a course designer for the Open Learning Agency, Irwin worked as a designer, project manager, and media developer for career, technical, vocational, and university distance education courses. He spent several years at the Justice Institute of British Columbia serving as Director, Learning and Information Services. He joined the Chartered Professional Accountants of British Columbia as vice president of Accreditation Programs in 2005. Irwin then joined Thompson Rivers University's centre for Open Learning in 2010 as Director, stewarding curriculum development for Open Learning's online undergraduate and graduate course

portfolio. During this time Irwin undertook a PhD study at Simon Fraser University, completing his dissertation in 2013 titled, "Open Course Design and Development: A Case Study in the Open Educational Resource University". In his later years, Irwin returned to teaching at Royal Roads University as an adjunct professor in their MA in Education program, focusing on critical approaches to using technology in higher education.

Irwin made significant contributions to the Educational Technology Users Group and was part of the Stewardship Committee in 2001 and 2002. In 2017, Irwin was recognized for his outstanding leadership and contributions to accessible and open education with a BCcampus Award for Excellence in Open Education. Irwin was also Co-Editor of the International Journal of E-learning and Distance Education (IJEDE) from 2016 to 2018. Irwin was an accomplished musician and shared his sound experiments online using Bandcamp.

Irwin was a great inspiration, a mentor, a colleague, and a friend to many in our field. We were deeply saddened by the suddenness of his departure as some of us had only just been making plans for new projects and collaboration. We feel very fortunate to have had a chance to work with him.

Irwin will be deeply missed. His contributions and impact on open education, his kind and generous nature, his amazing ability to network people together, his commitment to diversity and inclusion, and his creativity were immense. For further reflections on his work and impact, see Alan Levine, Anne-Marie Scott, and Brian Lamb's commemorative posts for an example.

We celebrate and honour the life and times of Dr. Irwin DeVries, and his significant contributions to Open and Distance Learning in Canada and around the world.

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