

Lorne Kimber

Here is his life story.

He was standing one day on a floating dock at the dealership, lost his balance, and fell into the Fraser River.

'I realized something was wrong,' he says of the fall. 'I went to the doctor; he said it was stress, that I should quit drinking and change jobs.

'I wasn't a drunk, but more than a social drinker; I Didn't quit alcohol, but I did change jobs.' He was still a good salesman, working in the coffee systems business and as a manufacturer's representative. But his drinking became more of a problem as time went by: 'People at work were noticing,' he remembers.

He was also starting to walk like a drunken sailor when he hadn't had a drink. And he suffered from nausea, aches and pains and muscle spasms but still didn't know what caused them.

He and Angela had a second son, Christopher, born in March 1978. Lorne's disconcerting symptoms continued; his work suffered. He told the people at the office that he had a flu bug he couldn't shake, and that accounted for his poorer performance. One doctor told him it was all in his mind, but two unsuccessful trips to see a psychiatrist proved nothing.

Finally, at the beginning of February 1980, he got his diagnosis: multiple sclerosis (MS), the disease which attacks the myelin sheaths around nerves in the spinal cord. His, the doctors believed, was the chronic, progressive type.

Weeks later, Angela was diagnosed as well, with sarcoidosis, a disease which creates tumours in the chest. A doctor gave her five to seven years to live.

Lorne had trouble walking. 'I never knew when I was going to fall backwards,' he says now. No longer able to work in sales, he went on welfare; the company for which he worked topped up his income with a retainer he thinks it was \$200 a month that continued for a year, until February 1981.

'I turned into an angry young man,' he remembers. 'It wasn't so much the 'Why me?' syndrome as the fact that I hated what the disease was stealing from me.'

Angela was wiser than he was: one day, she sat on him and, struggle as he might, wouldn't let him up. 'Lorne,' she said, 'I'm staying right here until you agree to two things: first, you're going to accept yourself the way you are; second, you're going to accept that you've got MS.'

It worked. 'I've never looked back,' Lorne Kimber says today. 'I became a driven man.'

Driven, that is, to make a better place for himself and others with a disability. He joined an organization for people with disabilities and took advocacy training. But the more he learned, the more he didn't like the system as he saw it. 'It was the old model,' he says now: We're the system, you're the patient; we know best. But the truth was, they didn't know best. I did not want to be patted on the head, treated as an object of pity.'

He preached empathy not sympathy for people with disabilities long before the term 'politically correct' was invented. Lacking confidence in organizations which existed to represent him, he invented his own, the Canadian Association of Disability Communicators, and set up shop as a consultant on disability issues. (It wasn't a money-making proposition: if he got an honorarium it usually went for cabs and other expenses, not into his own pocket.)

By 1983, he was using a manual wheelchair. That was the year an occupational therapist told him he was wasting his time, that he needed to

exercise his brain and become computer-literate. He did, through a course at the Pearson Centre in Vancouver. After that, he says, 'I really took off.'

Lorne soon discovered one of the unpleasant facts about having a disability: lots of people, otherwise well-meaning, act as if you're not really there, or at least not all there. He went in his wheelchair with his wife one day to a department store. A clerk approached and asked Angela, not Lorne, if she could help. 'Yes,' she replied, 'my Husband's looking for a sports jacket.'

'What size does he take?'

'Thirty-eight,' said Lorne.

'Does he prefer grey or blue?'

Lorne had had enough. 'I advised the clerk that I preferred grey and if she wanted to sell me a sports jacket, she'd best address me. She did; I bought.'

A few weeks later, Lorne was in the same store and saw the same clerk. She rushed up to him. 'I just had to say thank you, sir,' she began. 'Now, I'm not afraid to talk to anyone.'

'It was,' says Lorne, 'just a fear of the unknown that kept her from speaking to me. But the problem's all too common, then and now.'

Lorne Kimber's tireless efforts to sensitize people and make provision for disabilities helped him become Chair of 'Expo 86 for the Disabled' and of DICE the Disabled Involvement in Centennial Events committee.

Expo 86, the world's fair in Vancouver, broke some important ground: facilities abounded for people with disabilities and attendants to those people got in for free. On opening day, Angela and Lorne were the first visitors through the gates. Remembering his prank at Expo 67, Lorne and his committee made sure that people with (real) disabilities got to the front of the line and were well-treated.

He got involved as well in a Canada Pavilion project which arranged to pick up the elderly and people with disabilities and transported them to the fair. 'Those drivers were great, they were sensitive to the

people's needs,' Lorne recalls happily. 'That, in reality, is where the idea for Kimber Cabs began.'

Before the idea could get off the ground, tragedy struck: Angela's life expectancy ran out. In the fall of 1986, cancer reached her lungs. She went into hospital December 4, came home again only once, on Christmas Day, and died on January 21, 1987. Realizing he wasn't able to care for them alone, Lorne reluctantly sent his two boys then aged eight and 14 to Alberta to live with Angela's relatives.

A few months later, he hit bottom. But before he did, he put into motion a train of events which led to the formation of Canada's first fully-accessible taxi fleet.

At the time, if a person in a wheelchair couldn't get on a bus or into a car, one option for urban travel existed: B.C. Transit's handyDART system. Lorne was convinced it wasn't enough: 'When I want to go someplace,' he declares, 'I want to be able to pick up the phone, just like you can.'

In 1987, he was riding in a taxi across the Arthur Laing Bridge from Vancouver to Richmond. He knew the driver, a Sikh. 'Well, Lorne,' the man asked, 'what will you be up to next?'

The idea took instant form. 'I'm going to start a cab company to transport people with disabilities,' he replied.

Of course it wasn't quite that simple. Lorne had no money for the venture (and doesn't receive any revenue from it today), just his passion and willingness to work.

It took capital investment: Thirteen Sikhs came up with the cash. And it took the approval of the Motor Carrier Commission. 'The first time I went there,' Lorne recalls, 'the man asked me if I was crazy.' The first fully accessible taxi went on the road in 1990; today there are 18 cabs in the Kimber fleet.

Achievements like this one and his presentations to various groups in various parts of Canada notwithstanding, Lorne was having a rough time by the fall of 1987. 'Basically,' he says now, 'I crawled into a bottle. And

not cheap stuff, either, but Pinch Scotch.' He was putting back one of those bottles each day.

Living in a one-bedroom Richmond apartment in 1991, Lorne had his bed in the living room and was visited by a homemaker twice a day. He was trying to quit drinking but, drunk or sober, he couldn't get into or out of bed by himself. He'd been diagnosed (incorrectly, it appears now) with osteoporosis.

One night, his sister Lorna remembers, her phone rang. She was herself experiencing symptoms of what would turn out to be MS. 'Lorna,' she heard on the phone, 'I can't reach my urine bottle.' She offered to go over and find it for him. 'Oh, you don't have to,' came the reply, 'I can just wet the bed and get cleaned up in the morning.'

She got the bottle; Lorne didn't wet the bed. But the incident illustrates how almost completely dependent a person with a disability can be from a given day forward on others. The homemaker had washed out the urine bottle and left it in the bathroom inadvertently. Without the ability to communicate, Lorne would simply have been forced to wet his bed.

He took his last drink on August 23, 1991. He took stock. 'I realized I couldn't change my fate, he says now, so I changed my attitude.'

He'd always been dead set against the idea of moving into a long-term care facility, but he hadn't been eating properly and was down almost to skin and bones. By mid-1992, he weighed 130 pounds. He made his decision, entering the George Pearson Centre (GPC) in August, 1992.

'I was wrong to resist,' he says now. 'I was and am much better off at the Pearson Centre than living by myself. I have more independence here, not less.' For Lorne and the other residents, it's home. But it's not like most homes. There are no locks for the rooms where he and the other residents spend much of their time.

That may not sound like a big deal, but consider this: to most people, personal privacy is important. At a long-term care

facility, if a staff member forgets to close a door or curtain, a visitor can surprise a resident in the middle of a bath or bowel movement. If the resident can't communicate, as is sometimes the case, the situation is even more difficult.

Lorne Kimber is full of praise for staff members at GPC but that doesn't stop him from expressing strong opinions. Some months ago, gender-neutral bathing (where female staff might bathe male residents, or vice-versa) came up; Lorne was strongly opposed. ³If a woman wants to give me a shower, he says, ³she'd better be in there taking it with me.

The main vehicle for expressing such views is the Residents' Council, formed in 1993. Lorne has been active in it right from the beginning. His spirit is undiminished. I'll play the hand I've been dealt, he says, the best way I know how.

The best way he knows now includes his deep faith. Beginning in 1996, he says, I received unconditional love from having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That was the year he began attending the church called Vancouver South Vineyard on Ross Street. ³God came alive to me through this church. I love the music, Lorne says, and the constant power of prayer. I'm able to share that peace with others around here. When I came to the Pearson Centre I was very scared. That's all gone now. I can always turn to Christ for an answer.

He knows he will never, never, give up, whether He's fighting a bureaucracy or moving two fingers on his left hand. He's determined to live like a human being, participating in society as fully as he's able.

Lorne, says his sister proudly, makes a life for himself.

Amen.