The end: Bruce Harder, 1961-2006

He just wanted to rescue people in trouble. Then came the day of the railway accident

NANCY MACDONALD I Oct 09, 2006

Bruce Bennett Harder was born on Father's Day, 1961, to Dave Harder and Carolee Elliott. He grew up in Carcross, Yukon, a town of a few hundred people halfway between Whitehorse and Skagway, Alaska -- and on Ten Mile Ranch, a nearby hobby farm on the Tagish Road, owned by his family. At the ranch, Bruce, his sister, Lee-ann and his brother, Dale, were home-schooled by Dave and Carolee. "Bruce got as far as Grade 8," says Dale, "and decided that was enough." With his sister and brother, Bruce also learned to ride horses, fish and hunt. It was a great life for a child who loved to be outdoors. Bruce was "always on the back of a horse, in a canoe or hanging upside-down from a tree," says Dale.

His siblings grew up and left Ten Mile Ranch, but Bruce -- who ran a sawmill on the property he came to co-own with Dale -- stayed until 2000, when he moved into Carcross where his wife, Patricia, worked. Still, he ran the sawmill. "He didn't care too much about possessions, about worldly things," says Dale, "but he loved that place."

Bruce was no solitary woodsman. He was the father of six children, aged 14 to 22, two of whom were his wife's from a previous marriage. "There was no favouritism," says his sister- in-law, Cindy Huebscherlen. Bruce treated all of the children as his own. And his community reached beyond his family. As a friend of the coastal Tlingit First Nation, Bruce was officially adopted by the Daklaweidi clan. In Carcross, Bruce became known for his cool head under pressure and his desire to help people. He headed up the volunteer ambulance service, the fire department, the search and rescue team, and the Emergency Measures Organization. He responded to many avalanche rescues and snowmobile accidents.

He was a born teacher, according to Dale, whose helpful nature extended to his new recruits. Bruce would tell his friend Neil Plested about the young people he had brought onto his fire squad. "He needed firefighters," says Neil, "but more than that, a lot of those young fellows he'd recruited needed some direction in their lives, and he wanted to give them something to be excited about, to feel good about."

In 2002, because of the scarcity of timber, Neil says, the sawmill on Ten Mile Ranch was no longer profitable. Bruce became a heavy equipment operator, loading and unloading cars on the White Pass and Yukon Railroad, a rail company connecting Skagway to Fraser, B.C. It was work Bruce could count on. White Pass is a historic railroad built during the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898. Its history, and its route through snow-capped mountains and deep gorges, makes the line a tourist draw.

On Sun., Sept. 3, at 1:30 p.m., Bruce and Neil were part of a four-man crew working on rebuilding the track in a remote area north of Fraser. The train they were on was hauling eight cars filled with gravel when it
jackknifed coming around a winding hill where the land drops 400 feet to Beaver Lake. "We knew we were probably going to derail because we'd lost control," says Neil, who is recuperating at home from his injuries. "We were going so fast."

After the crash, one of the crew members was able to radio for help. Patricia is a member of the Carcross search and rescue team, and she was one of the first to arrive at the scene. She did what Bruce had trained her to do, throwing herself into caring for the injured. Other emergency workers made sure she didn't see her husband, directing her instead to the train's conductor, who along with the engineer was very seriously injured. Both men were airlifted to Whitehorse. It took five hours for the other rescuers to extricate Neil. But Bruce -- who was happiest, according to his brother, when he was helping someone who had been in a bad accident -- could not be saved. He died at the scene. "If Bruce hadn't been involved in the accident," says Neil, "he would have been the guy with the Jaws of Life, cutting me out of the wreck."

Bruce hated hearses, so his body was carried to his Sept. 9 funeral in Carcross in an old-fashioned red fire engine. A lone piper led the way. An honour guard, made up of emergency responders from Skagway to Dawson City followed. In a white tent, set up outside the Carcross Community School gym, hundreds of mourners assembled for the service. It was a traditional Tlingit burial.

As word about Bruce's death continues to trickle into Yukon's remote communities, Dale says he hears from as many as 30 people every day, offering their condolences. "My brother was so quiet in his day-to-day life," says Dale. "I just didn't realize how many people he'd befriended."