

A Tribute



Activist Daniel Hill, centre, flanked by (l-r) his son Dan, wife Donna, and children Karen and Larry, was the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission and Ontario's Ombudsman from 1984-89.

Dad will always 'live within us'

A son remembers Daniel Hill III Activist, storyteller, champion, inspirer

LAWRENCE HILL
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

My earliest memories of Dad have nothing to do with his books, his celebration of black history in Canada, his reputation as a human rights activist, or the editorials assailing or praising him.

They have to do with spelling bees around the kitchen table, peppered with inducements such as "first person to spell 'dysfunctional' correctly gets 50 cents." For a man who spent his life fighting for social justice, he was deaf to financial incentives. When he and Mom drove us across Canada — I was 6 at the time — Dad offered money to the first child who could spot a licence plate from, say, Alaska. Or Arkansas. Or Delaware. That kept us out of his hair for a while.

My father, Daniel Grafton Hill III, left the minutiae of child-rearing to mom. She was the one who drove us to track meets and classical guitar lessons. But when we needed his protection, Dad moved like greased lightning. Once, when I was 12, an art teacher hoisted me into the air and shook me violently. With me in tow, Dad barrelled into the principal's office at 8:30 the next morning and laid down the law. No teacher had a right to touch me at school, he said, and if it happened again, letters "would be flying every which way" to school board officials.

At home, Dad bubbled with charisma and drama. On countless Sunday mornings, he put on a record of Joe Williams fronting the Count Basie band, sang along to "Every Day I Have the Blues," grabbed my mother by the waist and turned our living room into a dance floor.

On weeknights, if he wasn't travelling out of town or delivering a lecture, he gathered Dan, Karen and me at the foot of his bed and uncorked wild stories about Wyatt Earp, the cowboy, knocking off bad guys with his six-shooter. He spun stories about men wrestling grizzly bears and lions sparring with tigers and the whole lot of them scrambling for cover as volcanoes erupted and lava flowed.

Movement defined my father's stories. There was usually a bad guy or, at the very least, an ill-tempered animal with sharp teeth. There was always a protagonist within a millimetre of meeting his maker. Trouble escalated, conflict exploded, and nothing ever quite worked out as I had imagined it would.

While we sat there bug-eyed and entranced by Dad's sound effects, the protagonist always emerged limping and bleeding but carrying on nonetheless. In my father's books, no protagonist ever gave up a fight. On top of the fantasy stories were the

tales Dad brought home from work. "Larry," he often began, "there is a delicate situation at the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and I want to know how you would solve this problem." He would lay it out, step by step, and challenge and cajole me as I tried to construct solutions.

Dad ruled the household with a mix of bravado and intimidation, but he also knew how to motivate us. When I was 7, able to print in block letters but not yet in cursive script, my best friend had a cat with a litter of kittens, and I absolutely had to have one.

"No, son."

"Please, Dad. I really want a kitten."

"I said no. Kittens grow up to become cats, and I hate cats."

"But Dad, I just have to have one. A certain one. Her name is Smokey."

"If you really want that cat, Larry, write me a letter. Tell me whose allowance is going to pay for cat food, and don't forget to set out who will care for that cat, clean out its litter box and prevent it from having babies. Make sure it's well written, with no

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Lawrence Hill, author

spelling mistakes. If you do a good job, I'll give your request due consideration."

I retreated to my bedroom, convinced in every molecule of my body of the importance of my task. If I wrote powerfully, I'd get what I wanted. There was somebody paying close attention to my words. Somebody who cared about what spilled out of my mind, and how it lifted off the paper. Dad loomed large as my living, breathing, critical audience. He forced me to imagine a reader who was smarter than me. Hot damn, did he ever make me want to write.

The day I asked for the cat, I made a beeline to my bedroom and dove into the task of printing block letters on foolscap, determined to mix passion and intelligence into a boiling potion. He had the good sense to reward me with the cat after I penned that letter. It was the first of many letters I wrote to him in my childhood.

Dad was a hard negotiator. He made me read his moods and catch him, magnanimous. I had to show supplication, respect and justification. But he gave me

virtually everything I ever asked for, in print, and he taught me the power of the pen.

Dad also passed along to Dan, Karen and me his love of vernacular. We drank up every syllable of his black diction. In the privacy of our home, a man who slept in and drank beer while his wife worked her butt off to support the family was, in my father's mouth, "a no-account" or "a lollygag." An ill-dressed child was "a ragamuffin." A man who did stupid things was a "willy lump lump." A person who was plain crazy "had a loose chromosome." As he grew older and more infirm, he would say to us, as his own father had said decades earlier, "Prop me up on every leaning side."

One of the best ways to relax and enjoy Dad was to watch him while he watched sports. Evaluating a televised tennis match, he once advised the woman who was close to losing her match: "Honey, roll out the silverware. Your goose is cooked." On Grey Cup days, although neither Dan nor I had any interest in football, we would drive over to sit with Dad just to hear him whoop and holler and shout out lines like, "That man runs so fast he could be blindfolded and made to dance backwards and they still couldn't catch him."

The most riveting television moment I ever shared with Dad was in 1968, during the Mexico City Olympics, when two American athletes raised their gloved fists in a black power salute while standing together on the medal podium. "Donna," he shouted out to my mother,

"come see this. Those white sportscasters are going apoplectic. They are going to crucify those black men. No sirree, they are not going to let them get away with that. Mark my words. Those brothers will go down faster than rocks in the Mississippi River."

Dad's great-grandparents, Richard Hill and Demias Crew, were born into slavery. Richard purchased freedom for himself, his wife and his eight children in 1858. A ninth and last child, Daniel Hill I, was born into freedom in 1860. But his mother died when he was young and the father had no means to raise all the children, and Daniel Hill I — my father's grandfather — ended up being raised and educated and sent to college by a white Quaker family in Maryland.

Daniel Hill I went on to obtain a bachelor of sacred theology degree from Lincoln University. His son — my grandfather — went on to obtain a doctorate in divinity. Daniel Hill I and his son, Daniel Hill Jr., became ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. My father — as a result of his wartime experi-

ence and his reading sociology, including one of his favourite authors, Emile Durkheim — became an atheist.

Just a few weeks ago, while we sat gathered around the family table, Dad burst out in laughter when I reminded him of folk-singer Murray McLaughlin's song "Jesus Please Don't Save Me (Till I Die)." He certainly dropped religion, but he respected its central role in black culture, and he shared his father and grandfather's belief that academic and professional excellence offered the best tools to chisel a rewarding life in a racist society.

By the time I was 3, Dad was telling me that it was my destiny in life to become "a human rights lawyer." He surely calculated that a human rights lawyer would make a good deal more money than a human rights activist, which was his enthusiastic lot in life.

On the job, Dad was driven by a hunger for success, a duty to provide for his family and by a lifelong concern for the underprivileged. He never let his eye stray from people who, as he said, "didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out." Passion ruled every job he took on, including leading the Ontario Human Rights Commission in its infancy, teaching at the University of Toronto, writing the first popular and accessible book about the history of blacks in Canada, co-founding the Ontario Black History Society, advising the provincial government about how to deal with religious cults, and serving as Ombudsman of Ontario.

When my brother Dan announced at the age of 17 that he was quitting high school to become a singer-songwriter, a bout of cruel anger got the better of Dad. He told Dan to be "aware of his limitations" and predicted his utter ruination. A few years later, after the first of many musical hits, Dan sauntered into the house and cockily asked Dad if he needed a loan.

But by that time, Dad had already learned to accept that we would take our own paths in life. And he embraced our choices proudly.

Dad leavened strength with playfulness, and compassion with humour, and became a centre of gravity as our own lives expanded and entered into orbit around him. Dan has written song after song about Dad, about interracial love and about love within families. One of his oldest and most intimate songs, "McCarthy's Day," celebrates the love of our parents. Karen, my sister, travelled throughout Europe with Dad and has felt his presence in the poems and stories she has written. Everything that I am, every book I've written and every character I've brought to the page has been inspired, encouraged or influenced by my father's



Daniel and Larry in the family home, Feb. 5, 2000, the day Dan received the Order of Canada. Daniel Hill died June 26, aged 79.

enclosed by my father.

My parents met and fell in love in Washington, D.C., in 1952. Dad was taking a year off from graduate studies at the University of Toronto and had returned to live with his parents in D.C. and to teach sociology at the nearby Morgan State College in Baltimore. Mom was working for Democratic Senator Herbert Lehman, raising hell in her free time as a civil rights activist and shocking friends and her Republican relatives by living — at the height of American segregation — in an interracial housing co-op.

Dad dropped by the co-op to visit a friend, and met Mom there. "She had bright eyes," he told me. "Her eyes brimmed with intelligence and fire. She was well acquainted with the black experience in America, and that was a good thing, because I didn't want to have to educate her." They couldn't stay apart from each other, but Mom held back a little because she knew that Dad would soon be returning to Toronto to resume his studies. Finally, Dad asked Mom to travel to Canada with him.

"In exactly what capacity?" she asked. Not about to miss a beat in the most important conversation of his life, Dad proposed. She accepted. Many people, black and white, objected to the marriage. My parents didn't care. They married in my grandfather's chapel on the Howard University campus on June 8, 1953, and loved each other utterly to the very end.

Even as diabetes ravaged every organ of his body, Dad never lost his desire to live and to love my mother. He lost one leg. And then the other. And his prostate. And the use of his kidneys. And

most of his eyesight. But he bounced back time and time again, and from his wheelchair or bed would tell me, "I'm sticking around so I can take care of your mother." In the final years, I often slipped into Dad's room and found him and my mother snuggled together in a single hospital bed, arms around each other. They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary on June 8 of this year, just 18 days before Dad died.

Some adults hurt because they never knew their parents. My brother, sister and I are saddened beyond all reckoning precisely because we knew him so well, identified so utterly with his personal and professional passions, and felt so entirely understood, loved and driven by Dad as we have carved out our own lives. Our loss is greater, for having lived with his love so long and so thoroughly.

Like the millions before us who have lost loved ones and found the courage to go on building good lives, we now have to learn to live without our magisterial patriarch. We have lost the man who drew us into debates during every meal we shared, showed us how to shower a partner with 50 years of love, and displayed generosity and warmth as he inspired hundreds — if not thousands — of other Canadians who were building careers in human rights and studying black history. In another way, we haven't lost him at all, because he lives within us.

We love you, Dad. We are giving you due consideration. We always will.

Lawrence Hill has written several books, including the best-selling novel *Any Known Blood*.