

## Lion's Club Service Almost Gone

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By Helen Hinchliff

### **“You don't know what you've got till it's gone!”**

Joni Mitchell was talking about paradise being paved over by parking lots and I'm talking about a time-honoured island service that could well disappear in 2017. But the principle is the same: You may not know what we've got till it's gone. Then, should you need it, you'll have to make do on your own.

Ever since the 1970s, the Lions Club has been helping wheel-chair bound islanders to keep medical appointments in their specially-equipped van. To clarify, the Seniors Services Society provides a similar service for ambulatory islanders who can ride in a car. Senior Services could use additional volunteer drivers (250-537-4604; [saltspringseniors@shaw.ca](mailto:saltspringseniors@shaw.ca)), but the Lions Club is desperate for help with its wheel-chair van program (250-537-2000; [sslions@telus.net](mailto:sslions@telus.net)).

Don Cunningham has been a volunteer with the Lions' program almost from the start but, for the past 17 years, he has been its faithful, stalwart, and *only* driver.

I'll never forget the day 16 years ago when he drove my late husband Donald Simmons to Victoria's Queen Alexandra Solarium to be fitted for a special wheel chair. I tagged along to do the talking because Donald's stroke had rendered him almost speechless. What with ferry schedules and delays at Queen Alexandra, Don devoted his entire day to us. I am still grateful, especially after hearing the details of his current schedule over a second cup of tea at a recent Music and Munch.

Imagine the phone ringing off the hook while Don puzzles over a monthly calendar that is already two-thirds full of commitments. When he first started volunteering as one of three Lions Club van drivers, his client appointments were once or twice a month. More recently, it's three or four times per week and sometimes twice a day. He helps some 25 regular clients get their blood tested in the hospital lab or delivers them to local doctor's offices for medical consultations. But more frequently he finds himself driving clients off-island to see specialists, undergo elaborate tests, or have simple surgeries that are no longer done locally.

Why has Don Cunningham been performing this volunteer gig all by himself for the past 17 years? Could it really be that nobody is willing or able to give him a hand? Or is it because most people are unaware of this vital volunteer opportunity?

There are a few strings attached, of course: you need a class 4 driver's license and a basic first aid certificate. Oh yes, you have to pass a criminal background check and join the Lions Club! How difficult is that?

Don Cunningham can't go on forever and, between you and me, he says he's getting tired. I'm not surprised: He's in his mid-70s and is maintaining a hectic schedule. The Lions Club executive believe he deserves a well-earned rest and have determined that if others don't step up quickly, they will stop sponsoring this program in 2017.

Then what happens?

Thinking back to my late husband's convalescence, I realize that after he had his properly-fitted wheel chair and I had undergone training in how to effect transfers, I took it upon myself to get him to the hospital for blood tests or the Lancer building where his doctor had an office.

Most people may don't realize it, but transfers (that means getting out of bed and into the wheel chair; out of the wheel chair and into the car; out of the car and back into the wheel chair, and so on) can be enormously tiring for someone who has little strength at his or her disposal. They are also a major challenge for the caregiver.

Six transfers in a day were sometimes just too much for Donald, but we could keep his weekly blood testing schedule, because I was strong enough to push him and his wheel chair (a combined 200 pounds) uphill to the hospital from our home on Desmond Crescent (taking breathers at Valhalla and Dagwoods parking lot along the way).

But let's be clear about this: I'd been working out at North End Fitness and was only 60. Don Cunningham's clients are mostly in their 80s and 90s. I don't know a 90-year-old—male or female—who could help a wheel-chair-bound spouse into and out of a car (assuming one of them is still driving).

Everyone wants to live at home as long as possible, but if the Lions Club program disappears in 18 months and if no other organization or agency picks up the slack, we may discover we have more candidates for Heritage Place, Braehaven, or Greenwoods, all of which are close to the hospital. And if any of the rest of us ever needs wheel-chair van service, we may discover that a little bit more of paradise got paved over when we were out to lunch.