

Advocate for Nortel disability pensioners dies

BY KRISTY NEASE, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 17, 2011 8:42 PM



Peter Burns, a disabled former Nortel worker fighting for the financial security of disabled Canadians just like him, died Saturday after a years-long battle with chronic pain, a spinal cord injury and cancer, his dream of changing bankruptcy law to protect disabled workers with employer-sponsored disability insurance not realized.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — Peter Burns, a disabled former Nortel worker fighting for the financial security of disabled Canadians just like him, was sick, but his friends had no idea just how sick.

The father of three, who was in his 50s, died Saturday after a years-long battle with chronic pain, a spinal cord injury and cancer, his dream of changing bankruptcy law to protect disabled workers with employer-sponsored disability insurance (two such private member's bills, S-216 and C-624, were both defeated) not realized.

Burns joined Nortel in the 1990s and worked in systems engineering with Mark Christopher, who soon became a close friend.

“He was a big guy who always had a goofy grin on his face,” Christopher remembers. “He was always smiling.”

When Burns first began to take ill in the early 2000s, “he was always upbeat.” Burns rode his bike to work all the time and Christopher remembers his stretching weirdly. When Christopher asked about it, Burns said he had a “bit” of pain.

That bit of pain turned out to be a tumour on his spinal cord, which progressed until Burns woke up one day and could no longer feel his feet. Christopher said the tumour was removed after a whirlwind of doctor appointments, but a clot caused some spinal damage and Burns woke up feeling nothing.

After another surgery, he woke up feeling pain instead.

Christopher said Burns was paralysed from the waist down for a time, then gradually worked up to walking with crutches, then canes, and finally one cane. His marriage failed and in 2009, Nortel started sinking fast. He fought to make long-term disability sufferers preferred-status creditors, which would have allowed them to collect benefits until 65, but the bills were unsuccessful. People on Nortel’s disability plan remained near the back of the line while senior managers were paid bonuses if they stuck around to dismantle the company.

“He just thought that if people saw or understood the situation, how it was so unfair and inequitable for rank-and-file employees versus executives ... he honestly thought that politicians would set aside their partisanship and enact a law that would protect Canadian citizens and employees,” Christopher said.

“It’s still hard, you know, thinking about him gone. He was such an eloquent spokesman, he was so bright, he knew so much. He had a very intellectual, scientific, investigative mind. ... It’s just a shame we’ve lost him.”

Burns had recently moved back to Kanata and Christopher decided to visit him there over coffee.

“He seemed healthy enough and in reasonable spirits, although he was pretty upset about what happened with the bills getting defeated,” Christopher said. “Whenever I talked with Peter it invariably came up because that’s what he was working on. It pretty much consumed him, all of his energy, and he didn’t have as much energy as you or I because of his disability.

“He had constant pain, constant severe pain. I think it was really taking a toll on him because his face was more drawn than it had been the last time I’d seen him.”

But despite the change in Burns’ appearance, Christopher was completely unprepared for the news that his friend had died, which came via a phone call Saturday from Burns’ former wife.

“It was a real shock,” Christopher said. “It was a total shock to me. I never would have thought that it would happen so soon. I thought maybe five years, 10 years, but not so soon.

“He was really worried about how he was going to survive financially. He talked about that quite a bit, too. The disability payments from Nortel were cut off as of Dec. 31, his medications cost him a lot, plus the cost of renting an apartment, food, utilities and getting to his doctor appointments.”

Christopher said he believes the stress of his situation likely contributed to Burns’s death.

Burns leaves behind three daughters and a girlfriend. His funeral was scheduled for Friday afternoon.

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