

A lifetime of curiosity, the gift of presence

Manuel Matas accomplished much as a psychiatrist, author, artist and photographer, but he excelled at opening doors to discovery

A LIFE'S STORY

A tribute to those who left a mark on our province

JANINE LEGAL

"If we are not fully ourselves, truly in the present moment, we miss everything"

DR. Manuel (Manny) Matas didn't miss anything, taking to heart that quote from Thich Nhat Hanh's *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*.

Matas, who died on Oct. 30, introduced his two daughters to meditation and mindfulness, buying each of them a copy of the book as a way of living part of his spirituality. He was endlessly curious about the mind and the mysteries of reality, present in everything he did.

The second of three brothers, Matas was born in Winnipeg in 1945. While in high school, he was a member of the Manitoba winning team on the TV quiz show *Reach for the Top*.

Continuing to excel, he skipped a grade and finished university so quickly he became the youngest psychiatrist in Canada at the age of 23, after graduating from medicine at the University of Manitoba before specializing in psychiatry at McGill University.

Matas worked in the mental-health field in Montreal, London, and Toronto, before returning to Winnipeg. In addition to applying himself to patient care and teaching residents, he was an active part of the hospital community, taking on administrative roles that included medical director of adult outpatient psychiatry and acting head of the department of psychiatry, later working in private practice.

The accomplished psychiatrist was also an author, portrait artist, photographer and public speaker.

As an elected member of the Portrait Society of Canada, Matas saw a selection of his works exhibited in Winnipeg. A prolific writer, his contributions were published in scholarly psychiatric works, in peer-reviewed medical journals, and included nearly 300 letters to the editor in the *Globe and Mail*. His book, *The Borders of Normal: A Psychiatrist De-Stigmatizes the Paranormal*, was a Whistler Independent Book Awards Finalist and contributed significantly to encouraging discussion on an oftentimes taboo subject.

Amid all his professional commitments and accomplishments, and a long list of personal interests, it was family that lived firmly at the centre of his world.

As the father of two and grandfather of three, Matas was active in and



Dr. Manuel Matas, psychiatrist, author, portrait artist, photographer and public speaker, died Oct. 30. He became the youngest psychiatrist in Canada at age 23.

always mindful of their lives, spending time with them, leaving them with a legacy of unwavering curiosity about life and learning while fostering in them an understanding of, and kindness towards others. In his quest for understanding reality from both a spiritual and scientific perspective, Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time* was one of many must-haves for the avid seeker of truth.

Sylvia, the youngest of two daughters, recalls growing up in a house full of books about everything from politics, science, spirituality and psychology to art and the mystical.

"Because he was such a curious person with a wide range of interests, he opened those doors for me," said Sylvia, who lives and works as an artist.

"He loved art and visual art; he took me to art galleries and the ballet. He exposed us to a lot of different parts of life and interests and encouraged both of us to find our own path. He was an amazing role model in life. He gave us the freedom to evolve. He was very understanding and compassionate of all kinds of people. He had a lot of friends and colleagues, was open to new people, nonjudgmental, creative and curious.

HE'S someone who very much noticed small details and beauty. We'd often call each other if there was a nice sunset. He would describe it in such detail, things in nature, what the shadows looked like. He was very involved with everything that we do, my sister and I, very supportive. As kids he was so involved with us, we were so lucky. We were very grateful."

Oldest daughter Anna, a mother of three and a lawyer who works with abuse survivors, says she relied on her father for his insights in a challenging field.

"This past summer I spent some time picking his brain on issues, like how he managed to work as a psychiatrist for 42 years without developing vicarious trauma or being weighed down by the sadness of his clients," she said.

"I have been so grateful for his advice on how to manage the heaviness of our respective professions. He loved me and Sylvia unconditionally, and supported us in many practical and kind ways. Dad also had a very gentle way of listening and an endless



Matas with his daughters, Anna (left) and Sylvia.

curiosity about people and the world, in general."

Anna said her father was adventurous, taking her to visit her sister in England when she was going to university there and taking Sylvia to visit her in Taiwan when she was there teaching English.

When the news came in 2012 that he was going to be a zaida, Matas was over the moon, Anna said.

"He flew to Toronto when each of his three grandkids was born, and came back for almost all of their birthdays each year. He was a practical, hands-on zaida, in his element picking kids up after school, cooking for all of us or reading bedtime stories. As the kids got older, my dad forged important relationships with each of my kids based on shared interests, and he would investigate anything the kids were into.

"I almost always called him on my way home from work, and we'd talk about the kids and other family members, politics, books, TV and movies — anything and everything."

Caring, thorough, principled and understanding of everyone he met, is how David Matas, a prominent human rights lawyer, remembers his brother.

"The disappearance of Manny is, to all of us who knew him, a big loss, but the reason for that is that to have known him was a big gain," David said.

"I like to think that he has not really disappeared but just changed location. Before he was outside us. Now he is inside us. Externally he is now at rest. Inside us he remains awake and alive. We will not see him again standing in front of us.

"Within us, he is welded to our hearts, our minds, our souls."



Matas was born in Winnipeg, the second of three brothers, in 1945. Top and left: David Matas (left), Manny and Robert Matas.



Matas adored his grandchildren, Esther Mae McCleary-Matas (left), Noa McCleary-Matas and Asher McCleary-Matas. 'He was a practical, hands-on zaida,' daughter Anna says.