

Halifax entrepreneur John Craig was generous by nature



Among their many ventures, John Craig and his wife, Joan, donated \$1-million for an autism research chair at Dalhousie University, the first of its kind in Canada. Courtesy of Autism Nova Scotia/Sherman Hines.

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After building a successful business career in Nova Scotia, Jack Craig turned his attention to philanthropy and became a model in the art of giving back to the community.

Mr. Craig, who died on Oct. 11 in Halifax at the age of 86 after living with Alzheimer's disease for many years, was a leader in Halifax's business community as the owner of Atlantic Tractors and Equipment, the Caterpillar equipment dealer for the Maritimes.

At the urging of his wife, Joan, Mr. Craig developed an interest in music, art and live theatre. Before long, his appreciation evolved into philanthropy. His reach extended eventually to almost every arts organization in Nova Scotia.

"It's always proper, and the thing to do – the desire to give something back," he told The Chronicle Herald in 2000 after being inducted into the Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame.

In 1996, Jack and Joan Craig established the Craig Foundation. For the past two decades, the small private foundation has supported visual and performing artists in Nova Scotia, including organizations such as Theatre Antigonish and Symphony Nova Scotia.

"He had a passion for seeing organizations and individuals succeed," said David Martin, a retired member of Symphony Nova Scotia's board.

In 2001, the Craigs provided \$1-million to establish an autism research chair at Dalhousie University – the first of its kind in Canada. Having raised a son with autism with no support in the community at the time, Mr. Craig and his wife had a strong desire to help other families. They envisioned the autism chair being used to achieve better diagnosis, treatment and early intervention. They also supported the Autism Research Centre at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax.

A year after establishing Dalhousie's research chair, the couple, who have been called the "humble heroes" of the autism community, founded Autism Nova Scotia. Aside from providing support to families and health-care providers, the charity offers several services that previously didn't exist in the province, ranging from summer camps to job and life-skills programs.

"I have never met a more generous couple," said Victor Goldberg, a Halifax lawyer and Mr. Craig's friend. "They epitomized giving back to the community."

John Robert Craig was born on May 26, 1930, on a modest family farm near Cornwall, Ont. He was the second-eldest of the four children of Robert and Jessie Craig. Life on the farm was difficult during the Depression and the war years and his childhood was consumed by farm work, leaving little time for fun.

He longed to escape the seemingly endless work and eventually left the farm to attend the Haileybury School of Mines in Northern Ontario, aiming to land a good-paying job in the mining industry. One evening at a social function, a young woman named Joan Lewis, from Kirkland Lake, caught his eye. The couple eloped and married at a church in North Bay on Oct. 30, 1954.

They moved to South Porcupine, Ont., and from there Mr. Craig travelled around Northern Ontario selling equipment to mining companies. In 1955, the first of their two sons was born. They knew their son, Robert, was different from other babies, but with no supports in the community and no means of diagnosis they were left alone to raise a child they would later determine was on the Asperger syndrome side of the autism spectrum disorder. With Mr. Craig away from home much of the time on sales trips, motherhood was isolating and challenging for Mrs. Craig.

The couple eventually moved to Montreal where Mr. Craig continued his success in equipment sales and where their second son, Michael, was born in 1960. In the city, they found a nursery school designed for children with special needs. But there were still few supports and even fewer prospects for children with developmental brain disorders.

Mrs. Craig remembers being told bluntly by one medical professional that Robert would never amount to anything in life. She couldn't believe that.

"All I knew was that I had to do something for him," she said. With the support of her husband, she became the strongest advocate for their son, who eventually went to university and lives independently.

In 1963, the family moved to Halifax, where Mr. Craig became sales manager for N.S. Tractors and Equipment Ltd. Eight years later, he was the company's president and general manager.

"Jack was a salesman," said John Roy, his accountant and long-time friend. "He was always a salesman."

An astute businessman, with a down-to-earth, caring quality about him, Mr. Craig loved the thrill of business negotiations, Mr. Roy said.

"He was a deal maker with an exceptional ability to judge character," Mr. Goldberg agreed. "He had no airs. He was someone who liked people."

With little more than a \$5,000 life insurance policy to use as collateral, Mr. Craig went to the Bank of Nova Scotia and got a small business loan. With it, he and a colleague bought N.S. Tractors in 1971. In 1985, Mr. Craig became the company's sole owner. Four years later, he purchased Tractors and Equipment Ltd. in Fredericton and in 1992, he merged both companies into Atlantic Tractors and Equipment. Not long after, he sold the company and retired, devoting more time to his philanthropic work.

"In 35 years [of his working life], I don't think he ever missed a complete week of work," Mrs. Craig said. "He was only sick on weekends."

Mr. Craig, well-known for his business acumen, was asked to lead several, often financially strapped, arts organizations. In 1974, he became director of Neptune Theatre in Halifax and served as its president from 1976 to 1978, helping to revive it.

An avid art collector, he joined the board of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and served as chair from 1980 to 1982. In 1985, he spearheaded a fundraising campaign to find a permanent home for the gallery and helped to raise nearly \$12-million, far exceeding the target, said Bernard Riordon, founding director of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

"He was a humble person and a very successful and determined person," Mr. Riordon said. "He had a determination and a compassion for the arts."

The Craigs' financial support allowed, among many other things, an exhibit of the works of Nova Scotia folk artist Maud Lewis to travel across the country, as well as the development of an autism arts program at the gallery.

When the Craigs moved from their stately home in Halifax to a smaller apartment, they donated about 20 works of art to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and another 20 pieces to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton.

In retirement, Mr. Craig indulged his passion for fast cars, something he would never have taken the time to enjoy while running his business, his wife said. He bought himself a Ferrari, a Maserati and several Porsches. For years, he raced his Porsche at Circuit Mont-Tremblant, a 4.25-kilometre race circuit in Quebec, and went as a spectator to the Monaco Grand Prix.

When a picture of him driving his convertible Maserati appeared in 2002 in the Halifax edition of the satirical magazine Frank, he chuckled. Along with his picture ran the headline: "Mystery Middle-aged Maserati Man." The magazine printed a hotline for readers to call if they could identify the driver. Mr. Craig was identified in a subsequent issue. He kept a copy of the magazine for a good laugh.

Generous by nature, he loved to let others enjoy his cars. He lent them to charity events and to friends. When a devastated friend returned one of his sports cars with a scratch, Mr. Craig didn't think twice before responding calmly: "It's only a car."

Once, while travelling from Halifax to New Brunswick on business, he let Mr. Goldberg drive his Maserati, which was equipped with an illegal radar detector. When they heard police sirens and pulled over, Mr. Craig hid the device in the car. Knowing it was somewhere in the car, the police officer asked him to hand it over and proceeded to issue a ticket for speeding and another for possessing an unlawful detector. Years later, Mr. Craig loved to tell the story but was still upset that his radar detector was never returned.

One of his greatest pleasures was meeting Scottish-born Jackie Stewart, the British former Formula One driver. Having met at least five times over the years, the "Flying Scot" eventually came to recognize Mr. Craig, saying: "Oh, you're Jack from Halifax."

For his work and philanthropy, Mr. Craig received honorary degrees from the University of King's College, Dalhousie University and NSCAD University in Halifax. In 1995, he was named a member of the Order of Canada as a patron of the arts; Mrs. Craig was named a member of the order in 2007.

"He was just one of those people who make the world a better place," Mr. Goldberg said.

Mr. Craig leaves his wife, Joan; his sons, Robert and Michael; and his sister, Frances Dunlop.

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