

OBITUARY: Remembering Jonathan Sterne



Abram Sterne, son of Jonathan Sterne, pays tribute to his father, who passed away on 12 April 2013.

Jonathan was born profoundly deaf in South Africa in 1935. Even as a child, he had a love of Israel and being Jewish. He was a regular at Habonim youth groups and toured Israel, never tiring of talking about the wonderful things he had seen there.

He was accomplished in many ways. Perhaps most impressive is that he learned to speak like we learn to read. This is something miraculous for a person with no hearing at all from birth. He learned to associate specific sounds and blended sounds to make words with lip patterns and tongue movements.

His mother, Tikvah, often told the story about how she realised that all her hard work learning to become a teacher of the Deaf had paid off (she was actually a scientist). It was when she heard my father say "Damn it!" – and she understood him!

There were many parts to my father's life. Many people held him in high regard. At work as a Test Engineer, he was often the only one who could fix complex machines and he worked full-time until aged 70 because no-one could bear him to leave.

Jonathan was good at figuring things out. Give him a broken device and he could fix it. He also had an uncanny knack for working out where the problem was in almost any electronic system.

In his retirement he often volunteered his knowledge of computers as well as his ability to fix broken things.

He offered his time to JDA – driving the minibus and collecting Deaf individuals who were not able to come without help. He dedicated much of his later life to the Harrow Association of Disabled People and became a huge asset to them, often putting in 12-hour days.

Jonathan had a soft heart – and a too-trusting soul. He liked to give to other people – and to help others.

Jonathan Sterne was a JDA member and a valued volunteer for both JDA and Harrow Association for Disabled People (HAD).

In November 2010 he received a WRVS (Women's Royal Voluntary Service) Diamond Champions Award for his outstanding volunteer work and was one of a small group of award-winners chosen to attend a special event at Clarence House to meet HRH the Prince of Wales and HRH the Duchess of Cornwall.

◀ Jonathan with Umesh Raichada of HAD and David McCullough, Chief Executive of the Royal Voluntary Service.

As accomplished as he was in so many ways, in the world of feelings he was often at a loss. While he had the power of speech, he often lacked the ability of communication. I think that for Jonathan, doing things for other people was his way of communicating.

Much of Jonathan's family life was difficult and challenging. It was hard for him to know how to be a father, a brother or an uncle in the everyday way.

Family was, however, always important to him. He always visited and kept in touch with cousins across the world. He quickly became emotional when friends and family passed away. But for his immediate family, he did not know what to do – and that made him sad and often alone.

We would like to think that in the two weeks after his stroke, and in the months before that, some attempt was made by him, possibly in some prescient way, to connect with his brother Michael, and his children, through little gifts and attempts to connect in a meaningful way.

When I visited him in the hours before he died so quickly and suddenly, he seemed upbeat – tearful and happy to see me – in a way that I had never seen before. It was almost as if the stroke had opened up an emotional world that desired connectedness – but it was all too soon taken away from us.

It is a blessing that we had an opportunity to have seen that instant of possibility.

My hope is that my children, Jonathan's grandchildren, whom he asked to see hours before he died, will be blessed to have the same love for Israel, the desire to give to others and the ability to fix things.

Jonathan is mourned by Brenda Sterne (his former wife), Michael Sterne (his brother), Elizabeth Clay, Miriam Raby and Abram Sterne (his three children).