

Stephen C. “Monk” Williams

Stephen C. “Monk” Williams, 74, died on April 8, 2021 at The Courville, a long-term care facility in Manchester, NH. He had battled multiple sclerosis (MS) for 44 years drawing on an indomitable spirit, great courage and a playful sense of humor, and the help, gladly given, of many caring people. He was the subject of an inspirational biography, *The Monk*, by Brett Garamella published in 2006. It might just as well have been titled, *Always with a Smile*.

Born on July 2, 1946, Steve was brought up in the small country town of Boonville, NY. His father Perry was a lawyer and a developer of Snow Ridge, a ski area in the Tug Hill region known for its heavy winter snowfalls. His mother was Ruth Kelley, a homemaker also involved in managing the ski area. Steve and his older brother Dick learned to ski at an early age and took full advantage of living near the Adirondacks. Steve became an Eagle Scout at a young age.

Steve attended Deerfield Academy and Dartmouth College, graduating in 1968 as an economics major. An excellent student, he was admitted into the Omicron Delta Epsilon economics honor society and named a Rufus Choate Scholar. He was a member of Psi Upsilon fraternity. He cemented his passion for skiing as a member of the Dartmouth Ski Team. Steve trained under legendary coach Al Merrill whom he admired for his pursuit of excellence, integrity and positive outlook. Although hampered by several sports-related injuries, Steve excelled at long distance cross country ski races, where he could happily hammer away in the “pain cave” experienced by endurance athletes willing to push their bodies to the limit. Other people would regard those feelings as suffering.

Steve attended Yale Law School for two years before being lured back to Hanover, NH by Dean of the College Carroll Brewster to be Assistant Dean. Cross country ski racing was in his heart, however, and he continued to train and race with the goal of earning a start at the 1972 Winter Olympics as a member of the US Ski Team. In the winter of 1971, he placed second in the US National Championship 30 kilometer event and raced in Europe with the US Ski Team. When a knee injury kept him from performing his best, his bid to race in the Olympics fell short.

Responding to this disappointment, he became Nordic Program Coordinator for the US Ski Team and later worked closely with Head Nordic Coach Marty Hall as his assistant. A major role was coaching US Team racers at training and competition venues in Europe and Russia. Another was organizing a training camp for the up-and-coming members of the team at Cooke City, MT; they affectionately called themselves “Monk’s Bunch.” Meanwhile, Steve somehow found the time and energy to obtain his law degree from Yale in 1974.

In 1975, Steve became Product Manager of Trak Skis, an innovative manufacturer of cross-country skis headquartered in Ward Hill, MA. He enjoyed working there for several years, including as a representative of the company at the 1976 Winter Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria.

Unexpectedly, in 1977, when he was just 31 and as strong and active as ever, he experienced the first symptoms of MS, mild at first. The disease is one that often becomes progressively worse, in unpredictable fits and starts, and there is no cure. Steve's case would turn out to be severe. Time after time, he would respond to suddenly worsening effects on his speech and motor coordination with intense rehabilitation (speech and physical therapy), and a period of partial recovery would follow. Then there would be another set-back and more rehabilitation, the pattern repeated again and again. Although the MS deprived him of much, it did not affect his intelligence or sense of humor. The central task of Steve's life would be responding to the physical and psychological challenges of MS while striving to live as productive and vigorous a life as possible.

Thinking that a less stressful job might help him better cope with the MS, he moved to NH to work as a tax lawyer at a small firm in Laconia. The conventional strategy for dealing with MS at the time was to avoid physical exercise as much as possible; a competing strategy was to exercise as much as possible. Steve naturally chose the latter course and stayed with it for as long as he was able.

A very happy turn of events occurred in 1980. First, Steve was able to attend the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympics and make available his deep knowledge of Nordic cross country racing to benefit US skiers striving for Olympic glory. He also met Christine Anderson. She would become his true love, life partner and best friend. They married in 1983. He studied at the graduate tax law program of New York University before moving to the Washington D.C. area. There, Steve worked as tax counsel for the U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business under Senator Lowell Weicker until 1987 and subsequently for the pension section of the IRS.

Steve and Chris moved back to NH so Steve could work as a tax attorney at the McLane Law Firm in Manchester. He worked there until 1993 when worsening difficulties with his speech and mobility made employment impossible. In a tragic turn of events Chris died in 1998.

Steve could not live on his own and his around-the-country odyssey began. He first chose to live in an assisted care facility in Farmington, CT, later moving to The Commons, an assisted care facility in Grand Junction, CO to be near his brother Dick. There, thanks to his niece, Wendy Bontempo, he had the good fortune to meet Tyler Jones, an adaptive ski instructor. With the aid of specialized equipment and the help of Dick and Tyler, Steve was able to enjoy outings for alpine skiing, river rafting, bike riding, camping, and water skiing — living a version of the vigorous outdoor life he coveted.

When his brother moved to Tucson, AZ, Steve followed him, residing at Amber Lights, another assisted living facility. But then Dick died. Steve was determined to move back to New England to be near many of his friends and after several more serious set-backs to his health, was finally able to take up residence at The Courville in 2017.

Steve gave everything to battling his MS just as he had given everything to ski racing. At times the battle became a struggle. But at The Courville, his friends noticed that he seemed to have reached an extraordinary level of acceptance of his circumstances. With the full support and involvement of the FOM (Friends of Monk) group, his Class was delighted to give him an Award for Courage in connection with his 50th Dartmouth Reunion in 2018. He responded with his trademark grin and a thumbs-up.

MS had robbed Steve of the pleasure he took in hard physical exertion, his gift for voicing the perfect one-liner and the taste of a cheeseburger and beer. But even as his physical condition seriously deteriorated, his quick wit, and will to live and enjoy life in drastically diminished circumstances, including the hardships of the Covid lockdown, remained unaffected. Steve readily shared those qualities of character with his visitors and caregivers. Visitors, both in person and by Zoom, might start by thinking to cheer him up but would find themselves also cheered up by the visit. He made their lives better.

In addition to his wife, brother and parents, Steve was predeceased by Bozo, his faithful feline companion at The Commons. He is survived by his niece, Wendy Bontempo of Glenwood Springs, CO and sister-in-law Genie Williams of Tucson.

The list of Steve's caregivers who deserve to be remembered with gratitude is a very long one. Foremost among them are his brother Dick, sister-in-law Genie, the staff at The Commons and Amber Lights, Fabiane Hirsch Kruse, his speech therapist in Tucson, a wide circle of friends, and the kind, compassionate, good-humored staff at The Courville.

Arrangements for a celebration of Steve's life are being made. In lieu of flowers, people are encouraged to go for a brisk run, walk, or bike ride and share a joke and a good laugh with someone they know. They might also consider a donation to the Jimmy Heuga Legacy Foundation for MS or to the charity of their choice. Friends of Steve are welcome to read and contribute stories about him at <https://monkwilliams.wordpress.com/blog>