



# BROOKE FORBES, RADIO PRODUCER

## 1940-2006

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Brooke Forbes believed passionately in public radio and in its responsibility to seek out and broadcast the stories of minorities and the underprivileged.

"She made sure we told stories about people on the wrong side of the power equation," says George Jamieson, a TV news assignment editor who once worked with her as a producer on the CBC flagship public affairs show *As It Happens*. "If they needed a voice, she'd make sure they got it."

During a quarter century with CBC Radio, Ms. Forbes was a producer at *As It Happens*, *Sunday Morning* and *The Sunday Edition*. She was also instrumental in setting up and running a CBC summer camp aimed at teaching the basics of radio to students from minority groups.

Co-workers say she strove to produce radio features that would both entertain and educate listeners, and that her encyclopedic knowledge of music helped provide the perfect accompaniment for any report. They remember her as a person who stopped smiling only to laugh and who loved listening to and telling stories. She was intensely proud of her mixed ethnic heritage and often talked about how a particular issue was seen by her Jamaican, Scottish and Jewish families.

In late 2004, she was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and had to quit work to undergo painful treatments. It was a bitter blow for someone in the communications industry who also loved to socialize. But she lived much longer than the doctors predicted, says close friend and fellow radio producer Karen Levine. "She was very stubborn about staying alive."

Brooke Forbes' championship of equal rights and her love of music were rooted in her Toronto childhood. Born early in the Second World War, she was a "red diaper baby" - the child of two committed and activist socialists. She also mingled at an early age with her parents' friends in the arts and entertainment industries. Her Scottish-born father, William B. Forbes, was a union organizer and journalist. He edited *The Clarion* and the *Canadian Tribune*, both left-wing newspapers, and later became publisher of *Canadian Printer & Publisher for Maclean Hunter*. Her mother, Hazel Forbes (nee Moyston), was

director of publicity at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre theatre and once took a year off to work in London and Paris for the New China News Agency.

Her maternal grandmother, Daisy Moyston, born in Jamaica with a Jewish father, ran a rooming house on Toronto's Bernard Ave. that was frequented by actors and writers. Visiting there as a child, Ms. Forbes sat on the knee of Paul Robeson, the black singer and actor who eventually had his U.S. passport revoked because of his left-wing activities. Years later, she produced a CBC radio documentary on Mr. Robeson's life.

She attended Harbord Collegiate in Toronto, but took her final year of high school at Neuchatel, Switzerland. On her return to Canada she spent a year at the University of Toronto and played guitar and sang at popular Toronto folk clubs including the Purple Onion, the Bohemian Embassy and the Village Corner.

In 1962, while working in the coat check at the O'Keefe, she met violist Leslie Malowany, who was playing in the theatre's orchestra.

They were married in London and lived there three years, then moved to Montreal, and, in 1975, to Vancouver. While her husband played in the symphony orchestras of all three cities, she was busy looking after a family that grew to four children.

Ms. Forbes had neither experience nor training in radio when she started her career in her late 30s. "She taught herself to edit, tape, write scripts and chase stories," says her daughter Megan Forbes.

She worked first with CFRO, the volunteer station of Vancouver Co-operative Radio, where she hosted a morning show. Moving to CBC Vancouver, she served as associate producer of Variety Tonight, which was carried nationally, and of Daybreak, a local morning show.

Hal Wake, who worked with Ms. Forbes in co-op radio, says she made the studio her home and on one occasion, a Christmas broadcast, turned her living room into a studio, hosting her show over the background crackle of a roaring fireplace.

"Brooke was the proverbial 'breath of fresh air' in current affairs, because she didn't fit the earnest journalist profile, at all," says Linda Negrave, a co-worker at CBC Vancouver. "She was much too colourful [in both her dress -- she loved bright purples and pinks -- and her take on the world] well-rounded and well-read, with an extensive knowledge of the arts, and just a hoot, who loved to laugh and refused to take anything too seriously."

In the mid-1980s, after going through a divorce, Ms. Forbes moved to Toronto where she held key public affairs positions with CBC Radio. While there, she lobbied for increased diversity and convinced the CBC in 1990 to start a one-week summer radio camp for high-school students from four designated groups: women, aboriginals, people

of colour and the disabled. She organized and taught at it for six years until the network pulled the funding.

Aisha Wickham, who attended one of the camps, is now Canadian talent development manager with FLOW 93.5 radio in Toronto. "It had a strong impact on my decision to pursue a career in radio," she says. More recently Ms. Forbes taught radio skills to a group of First Nations teenagers as part of a Vancouver program called Rookie Radio.

On the job, Ms. Forbes was both professional and popular. "She was the kind of person you wanted to tell things to, knowing she could share a tear or a laugh without embarrassment or judgment," says Michael Enright, host of CBC's Sunday Edition.

One of her particular interests was black history in the United States and Canada, says Mary Lou Finlay, former host of As It Happens. "She wanted the rest of us to know a lot of stories about African-Canadians we didn't know, and some she didn't know until she'd discover them."

She served as a volunteer director of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations in the 1980s, helping organize a media-monitoring program. "We were doing very serious work," says Carol Tator, who worked with her on the project. "But she made it fun."

After and between her cancer treatments, Ms. Forbes lived at home seeing only family members and close friends. But she kept in touch with a wide network of admirers through The Brooke Blog, a website created by her son Matthew Malowany. And she made it clear she wanted more than good wishes from those who kept in touch.

"I ask for gossip and you rush out and look under every rock you can find," she wrote on her son's website last December. "Matthew says on the blog, I prefer mail, suddenly the mailman is loaded down. When I say, no e-mail is fine, the box is almost full every day."

Brooke Forbes was born in Toronto on Sept. 29, 1940.

She died at her Toronto home on April 22, 2006, 16 months after being diagnosed with esophageal cancer. She was 65. She is survived by a daughter, Megan; three sons. Caedmon, Matthew and Paul; and a sister Wendy Forbes. Friends in Vancouver have set up the Brooke Forbes Legacy Fund (604-877-7241) to carry on her work teaching radio skills to minority youth.