

# Fritz the Cat takes his final bow

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By sean mcintyre

Michael Levy still finds it hard to believe Fritz the Cinema Cat isn't there when he shows up for work at Central Hall each afternoon.

"Normally I would open the door and he'd be waiting," said The Fritz owner-operator last weekend. "Now you open the door and he's nowhere to be found. It feels very strange."

Not only has the news of Fritz's passing left a sense of emptiness among those who cared for him, but many island residents are wondering if life will ever be the same at Central Hall.

"He was so much to so many people," Levy said. "The response has been incredible. Some people just enjoyed seeing him on their way to and from work."

Just before 6 p.m. on Wednesday, February 21, Fritz, aged 11, wandered into the path of an oncoming vehicle in front of the theatre. Reasons for the incident remain unclear, although some accounts report Fritz was "spooked" off the Central Hall steps.

Fritz was dead by the time he arrived at veterinarian Malcolm Bond's office. "He bled out internally and was dead on arrival," said Bond.

Well-wishers began placing flowers and notes in front of Fritz's modest yet cozy home within hours of his death. Over the weekend, a small plant appeared atop the telephone booth Fritz used to catch the late-afternoon sun. Animal lover Cathie Newman still finds herself in the habit of stopping by the hall some mornings after years of caring for the cinema cat.

"He was my little bit of sunshine," Newman said. "I bet he had more friends than anybody on the island." When Fritz arrived at Central Hall from his kittenhood home on Fort Street near Walker Hook, he bore little resemblance to the cat so many island residents have come to know and love.

Life was tough up north and Fritz eventually decided he'd had enough and began his great southward trek, only to end up at the centre of an island's attention.

Within weeks, community members donated a felt scratching post, a makeshift shelter and wool bedding, and Central Hall's board of directors warmed to the idea of having a resident cat.

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“Part of what made him an integral member of the cinema was that it took some time to develop this relationship,” Levy said. “At first, it was just like there was this cat hanging out and it kept hanging out and that sort of started a whole chain of events. He just showed up and developed this relationship with everybody. After all was said and done and people got used to him, he got used to people.”

Levy named the cinema in the cat’s honour when he purchased the business in September 2006. His decision stemmed more from a desire to capture the Fritz spirit rather than using Fritz as a gimmick to publicize the theatre.

“It was never a type of thing where you ring a bell and expect him to show up,” he said. “This is a defining part of who we are. Fritz showed that we can come together even though we don’t always agree.”

“We do have this spirit and we are not Vancouver, Victoria, Nanaimo or Duncan. We are Salt Spring Island and there are a lot of unique features here.”

Fritz achieved off-island fame in August 2005 when a Richmond animal rights activist attempted to save the feline from what she deemed the cinema’s opportunistic use of the animal to sell movie tickets and concern for his welfare. News of the cat-napping triggered an island-wide search and Fritz was eventually returned.

Levy said he still cannot believe the community’s response to the event.

“This is a little animal and people were willing to go to bat for him. You can only imagine what would have happened if a small child was taken,” he said. “Salt Spring came together to fight for an animal that had no means of fighting for itself when somebody came along and grabbed him.”

Louise Nye, author of the recently published *Fritz the Cinema Cat*, couldn’t help but feel inspired by the feline’s tale.

Fritz, she said, proved happiness could always be found close to home and showed the grass isn’t always greener on the other side of the fence.

“He showed us that something good can come from tragedy,” she said.

Nye is planning to write a sequel titled *Fritz and the Afterlife*.

“I want to show that life can continue, that there is not an absolute end,” she added.

Judging by the community’s response, the island isn’t likely to hear the end of Fritz for some time. The driver behind the wheel of the vehicle has offered to lend her creative talents in the sculpting of a commemorative statue and Levy would like to install a plaque just above Fritz’s home.

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Central Hall Society chair David Holt said Fritz's legacy can hopefully translate into some long-needed action to improve traffic safety at the Central intersection.

"We are all quite devastated," he said. "If anything, this might be the impetus for something positive at that intersection. How hard can it be to put up two more stop signs?"

Organizers are planning what they hope will rank among the island's largest memorial services when the cinema doors are opened for people to bid Fritz a final adieu on March 10.

Humourist Arthur Black will host the event at 2 p.m. and Salt Spring musician Jamie RT will perform a special number in the cat's memory.

"It a time for Salt Springers to get together and remember one of their own. I hope we can really celebrate Fritz's spirit," Levy said. "He defined what it is to be a good community."

Plans to replace Fritz with a theatre cat from Prince George remain premature, Levy added.

While arrangements are underway to rescue Dave the cat, Levy added, there is no guarantee he will take up residence at The Fritz cinema.

"I don't think it's the right time," he said. "We'll have to wait and see what happens."

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