

A greeting and a farewell

Written By BROCK WEIR

It is bittersweet working on my first edition as editor of the Caledon Citizen, following Mike Baker as he pursues a new challenge closer to home.

For me, it is the beginning of a new chapter as I look back on the close of another.

In this job, there are occasions when the personal and the professional can collide.

You try to keep the spheres separated as much as possible, but sometimes a collision course is unavoidable. You're cautioned to keep this in check from your earliest days in journalism school and, if you pursue your chosen field, it is drummed into you the moment you walk into the newsroom ? particularly if that newsroom is run by someone who, from the perspective of a then-young outsider long peering in but just getting his foot in the door, is what they term as ?old school.?

It didn't take me long to get this lesson from Ron Wallace, who founded The Auroran, the first newspaper I had the pleasure of editing, 20 years ago last month.

It was a lesson I repeatedly relived over this past weekend when it was clear the time was coming to pay him farewell.

Distilling the life of a person who has had such an extensive and lasting impact on his community is no small task. He was a man who, despite his occasionally gruff exterior, had a passion ? passions ? for his adopted hometown that ran deep, and deeper than he ever truly let on.

If you ever happened to live in Aurora for any span of time, you already know the story.

Perhaps you worked with Ron on the innumerable community groups and projects through which he channelled his energy. Maybe you came to him in his role as a municipal councillor or education trustee with a problem he helped to solve, or, if you offered him a different perspective, were on the receiving end of some of his firmer views.

If you are an avid reader like myself, chances are you got to know him through the R&R Book Bar, a book store which remained in business for more than 20 years, with shorter-lived satellite shops in Caledon and Richmond Hill.

I fall into this latter category as a regular patron from an early age.

This was no ordinary bookstore; it was a social gathering place where you could not only find a book on any subject, but could congregate to exchange news and views.

On my first visit, I was too young to throw myself into the discussion. Instead, I was on a simple mission to get a book; but even on that first visit I knew the place was something special.

Fast forward to the fall of 2009, I was looking for a job in my chosen field after my career took a detour into politics, something all but unavoidable while studying in Ottawa. Two friends with whom I had previously worked, were long-time friends and colleagues of Ron's and let me know he was looking for a new reporter for his hyper-local community newspaper following the passing of its primary reporter, who worked hard at his desk well after his 90th birthday.

As a regular reader of The Auroran after moving back to the GTA from Ottawa in 2007, I wasn't quite sure what to expect when I applied for the job, but apply I did and I was summoned to the office, which was, at that point, was in a very unlikely location.

Combined with the bookstore, the nerve centre of the paper was a windowless space, bar one, suspended above the shop. After ascending the ramshackle stairs, I was ushered into an office that was dominated not by a desk, but hundreds of precariously stacked beer cans spanning both the decades and the globe.

Ron was on the phone at the time, having a very enthusiastic phone conversation with someone involved in one of his many projects. Greeted with a four-finger wave and a gesture to perch on a nearby couch as he wrapped up the call, it was a good sneak peak at the man I was looking to work with.

Driven. Involved. And, as much as he would hate to have me repeat it, passionate.

Working with Ron, you didn't receive an explicit crash course on the issues of the day, but he made them very clear in his own ways and you couldn't help but soak it up like a sponge. In fact, my first assignment was one we both went on and was typical Ron: A visit to a then-recently opened school to interview a woman who was visiting the building ? having first taught in the one-room schoolhouse that preceded its current iteration.

Her trip down memory lane meant a lot to her former students, as well as current students and staff and, by extension, the Aurora community. There was no better introduction to the founding philosophy of this paper ? ?if it matters to Aurora, it matters to us? ? and the philosophy of its founder.

And it is a philosophy I hope I have been able to continue since Ron handed me the helm in 2011 when, upon his retirement that year, he began the fight of his life.

Sadly, this fight robbed him of his ability to speak ? and, oh, the questions I would have asked him had he been able to impart the wisdom that I could see was still there, locked away ? and I can only imagine how frustrating, upsetting, and probably terrifying such an illness was for a man whose lifeblood was communication.

As I sit writing this on Sunday evening, just a few hours after his fight came to an end, I can't help but be thankful that he's been released from its grip and be thankful, as well, for the lessons I learned along the way.

I am sure they will stand me in good stead as I get to know Caledon better ? and it is a journey I am very much looking forward to.

To those who reached out to me after Mike announced his departure, thank you for the warm welcome.

Please feel free to contact me any time at brock@lpcmedia.ca.