

Alton Legion prepares for the Poppy Campaign ahead of 100th anniversary

By Rob Paul

Every year in November people across Canada can be seen wearing a poppy to honour veterans and remember those who put others above themselves in the name of freedom.

Each year, Legions across the country provide Canadians with poppies through the Poppy Campaign.

Though donations aren't mandatory, the funds go towards local initiatives run by Legion branches to directly support veterans and their families. Throughout the month, Legion volunteers spend time in local businesses, schools, and other community locations to help raising funds through the Poppy Campaign.

2021 marks the 100th anniversary of the Remembrance Poppy in Canada that was birthed in 1921 when Anna Gu erin, also known as 'the Poppy Lady from France,' was inspired by John McCrae's 'In Flanders Field' and decided to distribute the poppy on Armistice Day to raise money for Veterans.

Ever since then, the Legion and its members have carried on the Poppy Campaign to remember Canadian veterans everywhere.

In Caledon, the Alton Legion is the last remaining Legion in Town and has become a key part of the community, standing tall since 1969. Each year, Alton Legion President and Poppy Chairman Larry Welzt spends his time leading up to November 11 ensuring the community has plenty of poppies.

'I'm going to be out all-day Friday (the official start of the Poppy Campaign) delivering poppies and cashboxes to all the various stores I'm allowed in to,' said Welzt. 'I'll be sitting here all afternoon putting poppies in bags and getting them ready for the stores to make sure everything is ready to go by Friday. It's nice to get out there in uniform and getting to chat and be with the community and find out how much they actually care.'

The Poppy Campaign has always had strong support in Caledon, but last year's campaign really emphasized that when the pandemic had little impact on fundraising.

'The support has always been very good, like even last year with the pandemic and the semi-lockdown, we still made as much as we did the year before. I was quite impressed and surprised by the amount of support we got given the circumstances. It really hurt not being able to get into the schools, but even still, last year I was still getting calls from companies asking me to come by and drop off poppies.

'I was amazed last year; I'd normally go out canvassing for two hours a day and I was doing four hours a day and filling two coin boxes and 90 per cent of the money was folded bolts. I just couldn't believe it, by the end of the day I was having trouble stuffing money into the containers.'

Raising awareness for the Poppy Campaign has never been an issue for Welzt and the Alton Legion in Caledon with overwhelming support from businesses and residents every year.

'There's not a lot we have to do to raise awareness because we have so much support,' he said. 'I remember one year I was even late in the day getting going and when I was out people were so glad I was there at all the different locations. Even the first year I did the Poppy Campaign I was in Caledon East at the Foodland canvassing and I had three different people come up to me and want poppies for their businesses. This community is fantastic, and Orangeville has also been really great.'

With the 100th anniversary of the Poppy Campaign, Welzt doesn't expect the pandemic to play too much of a role this year and, per

usual, is anticipating strong support.

?I certainly hope the support continues this year and I think it will because over all of the years, the general public has always been so good supporting it,? he said. ?Like even last year, some places I'd go into to pick up the boxes at the end of the campaign would have more money than normal.?

As important as it is to show support by wearing a poppy in November, Welzt points to what the donations actually go to and how vital the Poppy Campaign is beyond wearing the poppy.

?Out of all the money we raise, we only keep what we need for next year's expenses for buying poppies and what not and over the last four years now we've donated \$12,000 to different things like the Poppy Trust, Leave the Streets Behind, the Hospital Trust, and other things like that,? he said. ?Like buses that Sunnybrook (Hospital) has, the Legion bought those busses. We also started the campaign for Leave the Streets Behind and now we've got almost 700 veterans off the streets and into homes.?