

# An Unlikely Civil Servant

by BROCK WEIR

Our communities have no shortage of volunteer opportunities, and, thankfully, we're similarly blessed to have no shortage of people willing to lend a hand when it is needed.

And, if an opportunity aligns with a particular interest or passion held by that eager pair of hands, so much the better!

They can lead to new, fulfilling paths for people and, for those students looking to meet their quota of volunteer hours before graduating high school, potentially new ways of thinking on how their skills and interests can be best used for the greater good as well.

My first year of high school just happened to coincide with the introduction of the community hours requirement where students needed to complete 40 hours of community service before being eligible to receive their Secondary School diploma in Ontario.

Its introduction didn't come without its fair share of grumbles. I don't think anybody necessarily discounted the value and importance of giving back to the community in which they've grown up, or indeed the wider world, but there were some misgivings. Amongst some of my peers, there were slightly tongue-in-cheek remarks on how 'forced volunteerism' wasn't really volunteerism at all. Some griped about the pursuit of such hours cutting into their social time, although in hindsight, given our social lives at the time, that seems like a paltry thing to be concerned about, while others simply had no inclination to do anything at all.

Parents of the day liked the idea, at least at first blush, and although mine didn't go down this particular path, I'm sure some grumbled that taking their kids to these volunteer opportunities was just another extra-curricular they had to make time for, or, worse, that getting them from Point A to Point B would interfere with their own social lives.

There were more questions than answers at this first introduction, including just what types of activities and organizations were eligible for the relevant hours, but we eventually found our footing and, amongst my graduating class, a number of my peers had their post-secondary and career choices influenced by what they experienced simply by giving back.

I found many of my hours through volunteerism with an advocacy organization I joined at the somewhat incongruous age of eleven.

In addition to lending a hand at their events and lending some of my developing writing and graphic design skills to furthering the group, being a part of their operations in a volunteer capacity gave me the great good fortune of assisting some notable people, including Princess Anne, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, and, oddly enough, the cast of *The Red Green Show*.

The first notable I crossed paths with in this volunteer capacity, however, was Hilary Weston.

The Dublin-born Weston, a former fashion model, business magnate (Holt Renfrew), philanthropist, spouse of Galen Weston and a voice in his wide-ranging business empire, was not the most likely candidate to be appointed by Jean Chretien to serve as Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario. After all, she was a member of the so-called jet set whose existing work at the time was keeping her busy.

'Why would she want a government job?' I wondered to myself, a little bit ignorant of the role at the time, as I researched her for one of the many volunteer assignments that came my way.

Evidently though she saw an opportunity and used her term to raise the profile of the office of the monarch's representative in the Province to such heights that few would be left asking that question again.

She seized the opportunity to re-invent the office and give it renewed resonance.

Donating her salary to charity, she trained the spotlight on issues related to women, Indigenous Ontarians, homelessness, hospice care, youth and volunteerism.

As such, when I was introduced to her at the resulting event, I was a ?twofer? on the youth and volunteerism front and she was genuinely interested in the opportunities I had found within the group ? along with the half-dozen others in our semicircle who had done the same thing.

I was saddened to hear of her passing last week at the age of 83, but the fulsome tributes paid to this unlikeliest of civil servants speak volumes on the legacy she has left behind.

?Hilary Weston was a Lieutenant Governor who sought to highlight the exceptional compassion of Ontarians from all walks of life,? said Edith Dumont, incumbent Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, the fourth woman to hold the position and the second since Weston. ?One of her most notable legacy achievements was the creation of the Lieutenant-Governor's Community Volunteer Awards, which honour the otherwise unsung heroes dedicated to serving their communities.

?The first Lieutenant Governor of the new millennium, Mrs. Weston continually dedicated herself to finding new ways of making the role more contemporary, more accessible, and more relevant to the citizens of Ontario. This included marking major holidays and celebrations in communities across the Province.?

Paying tribute to her efforts to support arts and culture in Ontario, and spearheading a campaign which raised a quarter-billion dollars for the Royal Ontario Museum, Dumont continued: ?Mrs. Weston made a commitment to focus on celebrating volunteers, youth and women. From 1997 to 2002, she visited many of the women's shelters in the Province, and many hospices for people in palliative care, across Ontario? Throughout her journey, Mrs. Weston was regularly inspired by the generosity of spirit of everyday Ontarians and sought to foster that shared sense of humanity far and wide, in every one of her engagements, as the Crown's representative in Ontario. Her legacy will remain alive in our collective memory, imbued with deep appreciation and gratitude.?

In the ensuing years, whether in my capacity here with the newspapers, or in my ongoing volunteer work, our paths crossed a few times and almost always related to the relationships she formed in office, the most recent occasion being the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair a few years ago ? and her energy and engagement with these causes, organizations and groups she supported was clear.

Hilary Weston was an unlikely civil servant ? or, more accurately, a servant of the Crown ? but one who re-thought all the office could be and provided a template for her successors, not just in Ontario, but also those who have taken on the role in our nine other Provinces.

She obviously didn't do it for the money or the prestige, as she had both in spades (and that could be a column for another day) but because there was an opportunity to serve her adopted homeland in making a difference and affecting change.

And that is part and parcel as well of just about every volunteer opportunity that comes our way ? whether we realize it at the time or not.