

CPL celebrates 150th anniversary

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It was a big night for friends, fans and staff of the Caledon Public Library on Friday, Nov. 30.

The culmination of a year-long celebration of 150 years of library service in Caledon was held at Glen Eagle Golf Club complete with gourmet food, drinks, dancing, and of course birthday cake.

The night was overseen by Ken Weber, who, acting as MC, detailed the remarkable history of Caledon's library system.

‘It’s impressive that a community that was almost completely rural developed a system that ranks with any of its size in Canada,’ said Weber, who has spent three terms and 12 years on the Board of Directors, among his other prodigious literary accomplishments, including an induction in 2016 to Caledon’s Walk of Fame.

‘One advantage of being on the board for so many years is that I got to meet so many staff who are just fantastic,’ said Weber. ‘You know, librarians really care. One thing that distinguishes this library is spirit.’

There was certainly a great deal of celebratory and festive spirit in the air. All former and current staff members, board members, champions, and supporters of Caledon’s library dressed up while letting their hair down to enjoy a night on the town while acknowledging the contributions and hard work of their friends and colleagues.

‘It’s been a year to reflect back, but also an exciting year to look forward,’ said Mary Maw, manager of communications and community development.

The first library in what would become Caledon was opened in Bolton in 1840, which boasted 124 books and 24 members. Even though they were difficult to establish in those days, especially in rural areas, libraries, or mechanic’s institutes as they were then called, began to spring up all over the area. Caledon Village established theirs in a railway station; the library in Cheltenham was run by the undertaker.

According to town historian Ken Weber, there were a lot of interesting characters who got involved in the library’s early days, including a doctor with a foul-mouthed parrot who oversaw one of the mechanic’s institutes. These mechanics institutes were organizations founded in the late 18th century to promote literacy among the working class. It wasn’t until the mid 1970’s that they officially become the Caledon Public Library system, which was changing to serve a growing community. The tech boom in the 1990’s led to the library system we know today, and as CEO and Head Librarian Colleen Lipp puts it, the CPL ‘is growing with the needs of the community, and will continue to do so in the future. It’s exciting and a way of celebrating that the libraries have been here for a long time. We’re not going anywhere. We’re changing, we’re evolving, we’re meeting the evolving needs, particularly as it grows.’

Lipp and her team already have a master plan finalized two years ago to improve on the six branches and locker system in Belfountain already offered. ‘My job is really just to say yes to great ideas, but the team I work with has made it easy. Our priority is delivering on that plan to ensure our spaces are improved, modernized, meeting the current needs but also needing to evolve and take on the next big thing.’ Some of these next big things is a new location opening in 2019 in Southfields Village, renovating the Bolton branch, relocating the branch in Caledon East, and offering life-long transition services at the Margaret Dunn location.

‘Libraries today are about so much more than books,’ said Sharon Wilson, a retired branch manager of ten years and the former interim CEO. ‘They are the community connection for kids, adults, seniors, challenged people- for everybody. They are there to help everybody regardless of age or ability. Caledon in particular has won awards, and are so progressive and innovative. It is a great place to work. It’s like a second family’ because all the staff are from the community, and they care deeply about the community.’ Collectively, the current staff of library have 68 years of working experience there between them. Many staffers work there for life, including Public Service Manager Kelly Potter, who started as a library page in 1981. Later, when a position became available in Youth Services staff thought she would be well suited for, she was hired, ‘and then twenty-odd years happened.’ After moving to her current position on the front lines of public service, Kelley is still loving her job, believing that she and her colleagues ‘do a really good job serving our community. The community doesn’t realize all we do?we do so much for all age groups. Equity of access, freedom of information- that’s what we stand for. Libraries are for the underdog. It’s that idea of serving all people, making sure that people have different perspectives than they normally would have. I would never have thought I would have chosen this career path, but I’m very proud of what we do and the effect we have on people’s lives. I really appreciate being able to work in my community and see the real effects.’

Talking with Beatrice Imrie, a former library page at the Bolton branch and two-time winner of the Elizabeth Scavetta Memorial Contest for young writers, which is run through the library recalls fondly her childhood memories of being involved with the Caledon Public Library and its programs. ‘I loved it. It was my first real job’ it was nice to be able to work with like-minded people.

[The library] is an amazing resource to have. It was a big part of my life?I got to do things creatively and have access to sharing them on a broader spectrum than a young person would normally have access to. They are focused on celebrating the young authors and (you) feel the community supports you, and not just your parents because they have to.? Perhaps this early support for Beatrice's creativity inspired her to go on to what she does now, working as an animator on Thomas the Tank Engine and Rusty Rivets.

Mayor Allan Thompson and his wife Anna were present in support of the library, which, the Mayor emphasized in his speech, is always facing challenges with funding. Calling the library system ?the real information highway?, with a shared collection of 500, 000 books, Thompson said he would be looking into the budget in the future. ?Getting the community connected,? said Thompson, ?is part of the library service. It's vital, and will still be vital in a hundred years' time.? CPL's recent successful application for CRA charitable status will make a huge difference to the organization in the coming year, but the library does not just rely on the Town or Federal Government for funds. A dedicated group of individuals called Friends of the Library have to date raised over \$200, 000, going towards all the special programs and upgrades the library offers.

As Caledon Public Library celebrates the 150 years that have passed and the exciting changes in the future, Lipp and her staff want to remind readers and the community at large that if you haven't been to the library lately, come check it out. It's probably very different from what you remember. ?We hope to inspire you,? said Lipp. ?Over the past 150 years there have been many that have come before us, and there will be many that come after us.?

?Caledon is only 45 years old,? adds Weber. ?It's a very large area with diverse communities. The library is one of the things that these communities have in common. The library is an element that holds the Town together.? Here's to 150 years more, Caledon.