

## Lieutenant-Governor David Onley strove to 'change the conversation' in Ontario

By Brock Weir

As Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, David Onley wanted to spark a discussion when he came to Queen's Park, serving as the Queen's representative in Ontario since 2007.

Having survived polio as a child, he was always a visible and vocal advocate for accessibility during his lengthy career in broadcasting, but when he was first approached in 2006 to let his name stand for consideration as Ontario's next Lieutenant-Governor, he sensed an opportunity to further this personal mandate.

After agreeing to put his name up for consideration, what followed was nearly five months of what Onley described as an 'intellectual wrestling match.'

Did he want to give up what he was doing in broadcasting? Would it be a good move for his family? Would he have the physical stamina to do it? These questions aside, however, he thought he had a good handle on the job. Throughout his career, he actively followed the office of Lieutenant-Governor from the time of John Black Aird. But it was one thing to be an observer, whether professional and casual, and quite another to be grappling with the reality of taking on the office yourself.

'It was a matter of weighing what I thought might be some of the negatives versus what I really hoped I would achieve if I was appointed,' he said. 'In my letter (to let my name stand) I was very specific in saying it was time for a person with a disability who was otherwise capable of doing the job . . . to hold that position and I was that person.'

'By definition, I was going to be creating an awareness just wherever I went, because it would be such a visible visual signal to people, and it certainly has been,' he added. 'I think it has changed the dialogue where at the beginning (of my term) we were talking in terms of accessibility in a physical sense and, in a matter of a couple of years, it transitioned to a whole process for employment for people with disabilities because unemployment levels are so catastrophically higher than it is for the general population.'

Onley said he hopes to have many opportunities to continue this dialogue, now that his term has wrapped up and Elizabeth Dowdeswell has assumed the role of Lieutenant-Governor this week. Queen's Park recently brought out the old desk once used by Pauline McGibbon, Ontario's first female Lieutenant-Governor, for Dowdeswell to get a handle on the job and receive some tips from Onley, in what he described with a laugh as 'Lieutenant-Governor's Summer School.'

He looks forward to taking on a new challenge as an ambassador for the University of Toronto, as well as taking up a post teaching political science at the U of T's Scarborough Campus, where he himself got his own start. Nevertheless, new items are continually being added to his to-do list.

He's also looking forward to the role of Honourary Patron of Canadian Business Sensibility, a new private sector advocacy group made up of companies that put an emphasis on hiring persons with disabilities, to advocate fellow private sector businesses, and governments, to take advantage of what is a vastly untapped employee pool.

In selecting his personal mandate of increasing awareness of accessibility challenges in Ontario, improving the job prospects of those individuals living with disabilities, as well as continuing the successful campaign of his predecessor James Bartleman, focusing on literacy in Aboriginal communities, Onley had to strike the right balance between these goals and his primary duty in representing the Queen.

He was bolded in his efforts, he said, by the fact the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) was unanimously passed by the Ontario Legislature, removing any perception he was taking on a political role in what is officially an apolitical office.

'I thought the levels of protocol were about 18 inches deep, but within a matter of days, I realized they were about 18 feet deep,' Onley observed of his perception of what the office was, versus the reality of when he was actually installed. 'It was somewhat overwhelming when you just realize how many protocol factors were at work determining where you could speak, who you could speak to, what you could speak about, how you had to remain apolitical. As a former reporter and political science student, I was used to making comments about political matters and had to suddenly stop that.'

As he got deeper into his role, Onley said he saw some people in Ontario had some misconceptions 'to a certain extent' about the role of the Lieutenant-Governor, misconceptions he has tried to address head-on in making an effort to 'enhance the relevance' of the office, both to the community and to the 'culture of Ontario.'

Bringing the role to the community is fairly straightforward, he said, but enhancing the importance of the role to culture was a different challenge altogether. He and his wife Ruth Ann strove to become involved 'with communities and groups that either weren't involved at all, or involved marginally.'

'We did that so we could minimize the impression by some, but not many, that this is somehow an aloof office that is somehow

separate from what every day people are concerned about," he said. "Far from it. We have tried to be (as) involved as we can in a whole range of areas.

"I hope (historians) will say I have helped enhance the office, I hope they say I have helped change the conversation or dialogue about people with disabilities from one of just physical access to the important civil right of being able to reasonably aspire to a meaningful job or career," Onley said. "It has been truly an honour and privilege to have this position."

