

Second Citizen of the Year helped 'Boat People' plant roots

By Brock Weir

Aurora's Second Citizen of the Year, Annabelle Black, wasted no time in setting roots in the community after moving from her native Saskatchewan.

In less than a decade, her tireless community service for men, women, and children, earned her the accolade. Living and working alongside her husband dentist Dr. Wilf Black, and their children Heather and Bruce, theirs was very much a community partnership until his death.

As a practicing dentist, they spearheaded programs with public health authorities to go out into the schools to teach kids about oral health. Yes, Ms. Black was armed with the ubiquitous set of plastic teeth and oversized toothbrush so nobody missed the action.

While Wilf was content with his dentistry practice, she was not content to simply spend her time as a dental hygienist in the business. Her faith and her desire to get involved compelled her to do more in the community.

'Wilf didn't ever try to hold me back and he wasn't a bit resentful of how I was carrying on,' she says of her increasing community involvement.

She recalls a swanky fundraiser held at St. Andrew's College in the 1970s hosted by then mayor Dick Illingworth with Lieutenant Governor Pauline McGibbon as guest of honour to raise money for the Aurora Public Library.

'We all went because we wanted to see and be seen,' she says with a laugh. 'I was being presented to the Lieutenant-Governor by the mayor and [Illingworth] tried to introduce Wilf and had a mental block and couldn't think of his name. Wilf said, 'Your Honour, I am Mr. Annabelle Black' and Mrs. McGibbon's husband said, 'I know just how you feel!'

'It takes a big man to say something like that and the McGibbons got such a charge out of that.'

Their team effort continued in their work at Trinity Anglican Church. Her faith, she says, is basic to everything she does in her life. But she does not subscribe to the belief that God is limited to the four walls of the church.

'It doesn't happen down at the end of the street where the spire is,' she says.

One of the places it happened was on a blustery winter night in 1979 when the Blacks and eleven other Trinity members made last-minute preparations for new arrivals, while other made the trek to Pearson International Airport.

They had sponsored a family of Vietnamese refugees who had fled, becoming colloquially known as 'boat people.' The group made sure they had fresh clothes, food, and a place to stay, enrolled them in local schools, and did their utmost to integrate them into the community.

Exhausted that first night and at a loss, they took the whole gang over to Moon Garden for dinner where the ice was broken and strong bond that continue to this day were forged. The families all remain in touch and, in fact, had a multi-generational reunion at that very restaurant last December, continue to attend each other's weddings and celebrate their collective milestones.

'That's a piece of God's work,' she says. 'Those were people in need. There were people in the church who didn't want anything to do with it and thought it was a bad idea. It's a great joy to me that we can still be friends after all these years and everything we have been through together.'

'They still love and respect those sponsors that brought them here.'

As the bonds between the proud new Canadians and their sponsors went from strength to strength, Annabelle's world was dealt a

blow in 1998 when Bruce was killed in a car accident leaving three young daughters and a widow who found out two weeks after the funeral she was carrying their son.

Widowed in 2002, she later rekindled a romance with a former fellow dentistry student who was also widowed.

?We had a little romance in 1955, but you can't rush into these things! she says of Ray, a fellow Saskatchewan who married a friend of hers after they finished school and eventually retired to California.

They divide their time between Aurora and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and while glaucoma has put a damper on some of her activities, she's not done trying to shake up organizations for the better. Her next target? The Aurora Seniors' Centre. The objective? Starting a storytelling group.

Having experienced a storytelling circle with friends in Oshawa, she says it would be an ideal activity for people with limited or impaired vision who might not be able to take part in crafts, movie nights, or the local library. She's made the pitch and now she's working on a formal proposal to make it happen.

?That club as 1,400 members and all of us old crocks have stories to tell, let's face it!?