

BROCK'S BANTER: Remembering John Abel

By Brock Weir

It wasn't that long ago when he just stopped what he was doing, looked down, widening his eyes just a little bit, and then proceeding with just a little bit more tentativeness than he had just moments before.

It wasn't a unique reaction. Many people in his new position had already done the same, more have done the same since.

But, from that deliberate start just over eight years ago, he soldiered on. Gradually becoming more comfortable in his role ? and the little silver digital voice recorder I took out of my pocket just seconds before those bespectacled eyes widened, so much so that just a few weeks ago he remarked with no small degree of pride about how comfortable he now was with his natural candour as soon as I hit the dreaded red ?Record? button.

John Abel was a newbie at that time. Although he was well known to local families through his involvement in sports activities with local youth, he was, as far as politicians go, a veritable greenhorn.

Despite his initial nerves in that first interview as he began his first, and ultimately successful stab at securing a seat around the Council table, he acquitted himself well. Articulating his positions clearly and showing signs of that strength of character that was to become, in my opinion, one of the hallmarks of his eight years on Council, particularly when he occasionally decided to go against the current of prevailing opinions around the Council table.

It is this backbone, along with a deep devotion to this community and an inimitable sense of humour and kindness that I am remembering this week as the community grapples with the reality of John Abel's untimely death last Thursday afternoon, aged just 64.

In a way, it seemed almost fitting that our politician-reporter relationship came full circle in what sadly turned out to be our final formal interview together. Although we spoke to each other a few more times in person after that, including his last Council meeting on November 27, and just after he finished giving testimony as a witness in a civil matter on November 30, just hours before his eight years as Aurora's Deputy Mayor formally drew to a close, and less than 48 hours before he collapsed at his home on December 2, our last telephone conversation has added poignancy in retrospect.

?It was probably one of the most rewarding and enriching experiences in my life, being an elected official,? he said at the end of the chat, before turning his attention to his relationship with the press. ?I just never thought I would be doing any of this, being elected and how much I learned about my community and myself.

?I don't know if you remember the first time you had a recorder going,? he continued. ?I was quite nervous. Now I am quite candid, knowing we all have a role in this.?

Did I remember the first time I had that recorder going? In all honesty, it was hard to forget. He was indeed nervous, and, indeed, he did become quite candid. If you went to John Abel with a question, you could always be sure, thanks to this candour, that he would actually tell you exactly what he thought on a subject, rather than simply tell you what you want to hear.

That caused some consternation in some quarters, but that might have been the secret to John Abel's electoral success in his back to back Council runs. People knew who he was, knew what they were going to get, and, of course, they liked what they saw.

John Abel wore his heart on his sleeve outside of the political arena as well.

He was an unabashed lover of all things musical. Whether you popped into the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, took part in the Terry Fox Run, went into Aw, Shucks, or strolled through the Aurora Farmers' Market at any point over the last eight years, chances are that you probably have an image of your mind of John Abel with his guitar in hand, often donning a Stetson, belting out a tune with his distinctive country twang.

It was a love of music that he passed down to the next generation, relishing any opportunity he had to share his son Eric's successes on the musical stage at Stratford and beyond, or, in the last couple of months of the most recent mayoral race, making sure he had the time to practice his steps for his father-of-the-bride dance at his daughter Devon's autumn wedding to Ian.

Personally, I remember with a smile the time he took to come over to our offices here at The Auroran to loan me a special edition magazine dedicated to Lucille Ball he and his wife Tracy had purchased, as he took special note my own personal interest ? or, some would say, healthy passion ? for the redhead and I Love Lucy. His enthusiasm for it was such that when I returned it to him at a Council meeting, fully read, a few weeks later, I was subjected to an impromptu pop quiz! (I think I passed with flying colours!) Rest in peace, John.

A FITTING TRIBUTE

Over the next few weeks, I am sure many people will be brainstorming a fitting tribute to the late John Abel. There is no shortage of opportunities in this Town ? from a municipal facility to a trail link ? that might be a lasting legacy for a man that contributed eight years of his life for what he envisioned was the betterment of Aurora.

In my mind, however, there would be no fitter tribute than rededicating the band shell at Town Park in his honour.

The band shell at the northwest corner of the popular green space was often a centre of John Abel's activities.

Whether he was helping three young siblings make their dream fundraising concert a reality, taking the stage himself, or organizing a weekend music festival there a reality through his work with Music Aurora, he was there.

The bandshell provided a backdrop for the international Making Peace exhibition he tirelessly worked to bring to Aurora, and it was also the focal point for many thousands of people who gathered in Town Park to watch the Tragically Hip's farewell concert, an event he was determined to make a reality here in Town, come hell or high water ? and an achievement he looked back on with no small degree of pride.

If there is anything in this Town that can or should be dedicated to the late John Abel, the Town Park Band Shell certainly has my vote.