

?Radical Roots? drive Black?s desire to make a difference



By Brock Weir

Annabelle Black has never been one to shy away from speaking her mind.

Admittedly, she is a big talker, and that's exactly the way she likes it.

Sometimes, however, it can get her into a spot of welcome trouble ? such as the time she voiced an idea on how Aurora should celebrate its 100th Anniversary 50 years ago.

In 1963, she was a relative newcomer to Aurora. The Saskatchewan native was one of the first waves of women to make their way through Canadian schools in the mid-1950s studying the fledging word of dental hygiene.

It was there at the University of Toronto she met dental student Wilf Black and wrapping up their respective courses, she and Dr. Black set up practice in Aurora in 1961.

?He wanted to practice and the dental climate here in Aurora was really good because the population had doubled in a very short period ? from 3,000 to 6,000 ? but the population of dentists had stayed the same,? she recalls.

Settling into Aurora, first in a series of rented homes before they bought one of their own, Annabelle decided that if this was going to be her community, she was going to get the most of it. Becoming involved in a myriad of projects which came her way, she decided to help build the kind of community she wanted to live in.

One of the first steps was becoming involved in Aurora's 100th anniversary. For the young woman who grew up in a province which was not yet 60 years old at the time, the occasion was something of a novelty.

?I went to the meeting and made a suggestion, which was a big mistake because they say to you, ?Well, why don't you do that?!? she says with a laugh. ?I wanted to get involved because this was going to be my community.?

It was the start of a love-affair with Aurora, which grew through the 1960s and early 1970s, where she and her husband became very active members of Trinity Anglican Church, the Beta Sigma Phi sorority, the Senior Citizens Friendship Circle, the Canadian Cancer Society, March of Dimes, Canadian Mental Health Association, the Community Junior Auxiliary, and spearheading the local ? and first ? Conference on the Troubled Child.

For her efforts, Ms. Black was named Aurora's Citizen of the Year in 1971 – only the second recipient of the prized honour and the first woman. The late Bob Blick was awarded the inaugural honour in 1970 for his work with minor hockey and Ms. Black jokes that if they ever named a street after her, she would love an intersection of Blick and Black.

"I talk a lot and they told me not to tell anybody and that was hard," she says, noting in those days when Aurora's Canada Day parade flowed from south to north ending at the Aurora Community Centre, the Citizen of the Year was awarded as one of the final parts of Canada's birthday bash.

"We always had a big party on July 1 and I told my guests I had a nomination for Citizen of the Year, so come and it will either be a celebration or we can cry into our beer. I was thrilled, of course. It was a great honour to receive it."

For several years, Ms. Black said she almost relished being the lone woman in the Citizen of the Year award until Nora McRoberts received the nod a decade later.

"I always said I feel like throwing a party for all the Citizens of the Year because there would be 10 men and me at it! Doesn't that sound like fun?"

Receiving the award 10 years after her arrival in Aurora was a signal of how far she had come. When she first arrived, she says she felt she had moved into a somewhat insular community; a very small town where everyone knew everyone's business and were slightly wary of newcomers such as herself.

"They knew everything about me," she says of her neighbours. Did any of them ever call or knock on the door and say I was welcome in the community? Never. That's the kind of Town that I moved into. Being the radical westerner that I am, I thought, "I'll fix 'em! I'll change this place."

Evidently she made true of her word.

One of the key areas she thought needed improvement was building an inclusive society for kids with intellectual disabilities. An active local volunteer eventually knocked on her door, hearing through the grapevine that she might be a good person to knock on some doors on behalf of the precursor for Community Living, and sit on their board. She was elected on her first crack.

"I raised an awful lot of money for the association and I was pretty good at it because I was ruthless!" she says with a laugh. "If anyone owed me anything, I would get back to them right away!"

Her interest in the treatment of children stemmed from her early years in Saskatchewan watching her nurse sister worked with intellectually challenged children when institutions were commonplace.

Inspired by the first Conference on the Troubled Child in Toronto spearheaded by journalist June Callwood, she believed having one locally was just what York Region needed.

"The schools were involved and all these agencies, but they didn't talk to each other [to pool their resources and knowledge]," she says. "We had a good response from all over the place and it really made some changes in how social services develop in York Region."

While her work on the Conference on the Troubled Child left a lasting impact at a high level on generations of kids in York Region, through her work and her faith, Ms. Black closed the 1970s making a very direct impact on a single family in desperate need of help. For the continuation of Ms. Black's story, please see next week's edition of The Auroran.