

2008 Citizen of the Year Walmer reflects on 'encore' as 2014 nominations approach

By Brock Weir

Aurora environmentalist Susan Walmer is comfortable in what she describes as the 'encore phase' of her life.

For her, it was a matter of wanting to do something to make a difference in her own lifetime and for generations to come. A certified management accountant by training, Ms. Walmer found the tools to make her 'encore' matter in the world around her while raising her son and daughter.

'[Raising my children] I started to notice the environment around me more and I wanted to make sure there was good future space for my children and future generations,' she says.

Concerned that land, such as the Ann Bartley Smith lands were not as protected as they should have been, she says she decided to do something about it.

Starting off as a volunteer, she became a board member of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust. Now, several years later, she has moved off the board and into the chair of the organization's Executive Director.

In recognition of her environmental work, Ms. Walmer was named Aurora's Citizen of the Year in 2008.

The honour, however, may have been an affirmation that she took the right path in her encore.

'It is a totally different realm, but what is so wonderful about it, and the reason I think, in part, why the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust has grown so rapidly is I looked at it from a management perspective rather than just a charitable perspective.

'How could we move from a wonderful volunteer board and bring in lots of new energy, new people and new ideas to move us up to a different level? To me, that was the exciting part.'

In the role of Executive Director, Ms. Walmer says she found building relationships with people as one of the most rewarding aspects of the day-to-day work. They are protecting land forever, she says, building relationships with the land, and also relationships with landowners and land donors. She likes to be able to sit down for coffee with someone to hear their 'dreams' in protecting their properties which can remain in families for generations to come.

'It is really rewarding to be able to help those people make their dreams come true.'

In the job, however, she has learned people often have misconceptions about the Oak Ridges Moraine, specifically in the myth that the Moraine, in its entirety, is protected. Next year, there will be a review of the existing Oak Ridges Moraine legislation and, she says, there will be an opportunity to make 'positive change' on the plan and move the many pieces of Ontario's environmental legislative puzzle into 'better synchronicity.'

Between now and then, she adds, they are focusing on their Million Dollar Stewardship program, which received a significant boost last year from former Lieutenant-Governor Hal Jackman, to make inroads into Toronto based organizations, corporations, and foundations which are the key, she says, for many charities. She expects a significant announcement will be made on the Stewardship Program later this year.

'Passion is wonderful, purpose is fantastic, but you have to be able to have the funds to support it,' she says of the land trust. 'We all need to find our passion and purpose in life. I am blessed I have been able to do that with relative ease and I am keen to see what's next. I think everyone can do that in their life.'

To make your own nominations for Aurora's 2014 Citizen of the Year, or to make nominations for a variety of Community Recognition Awards, visit www.aurora.ca/aurora/2014awards, or call 905-727-3123 x.4232. Nominations close Thursday, March 13.