

Former police superintendent finds his voice in choir



By Brock Weir

(For the first part of The Auroran's two-part interview with Mr. McClenny, please click [HERE](#).)

Reading about a vacancy in the Aurora Police Department, Lowell McClenny didn't make the leap from his milk truck simply on a whim.

For the Cousins Dairy franchise-owner, the Force always held a certain amount of romance from his time in school. His class readers often had riveting detective tales that left a lasting impression.

"The picture of the policeman with the little children spurred me into thinking about policing and I don't even remember what the story was about!" he recalls. "The more I learned, the more I realised you were out there to help the community."

He joined the team on July 1, 1965 as a Fourth Class Constable. From there, he began his ascent first within the Aurora ranks and then, after the Regional Municipality of York was established in 1971, through the newly formed York Regional Police. From there, he rose to detective, Detective Sergeant, and inspector before retiring as Superintendent in 1999.

Out in the field, the romance he may have felt towards his vocation quickly made way for reality.

"There were times I wondered why I was there, mostly in cases with children involved," he explains. "The death of a child really hits home because you have children at home. Those cases were probably the only times I had apprehensions about what I had done, but you get through that."

"Over the years you become a little bit hardened and you become a little bit more aware of what you're going to face down the road."

His 35 years with the police force also afforded him the chance to experience and adapt to changing roles of police officers within the York Region community. He worked under seven police chiefs and each transition of power brought about new ideas of what police officers should mean to their communities and the rules they should adhere to.

"When I first joined, you could take little Johnny off Yonge Street if he knocked over a flower pot and drag him home to Dad and Dad would look after that," he says. "Now, if you tried to do that, you would be charged with assault and taken into court yourself!"

"I don't think that is ever going to change. The pendulum might swing back the other way, but I can't see that happening for a long time."

Although his active duty wrapped up on October 4, 1999, his is not a retirement which kept him away from the men in uniform ? and that is indirectly by design. In 1988, the Provincial Government of the day mandated a policy shift towards ?community-based policing.? The idea was that police departments across Ontario had grown away from serving the community directly and it was time to get back to basics.

?It was a guy in a police car getting around, never stopping, never talking to people unless they were writing a ticket,? recalls Mr. McClenny. ?The government wanted to change that so people looked at police in a different way. [Then York Regional Police Chief] Don Hillock called me because I was in charge of community services at the time for the whole of York Region and he wanted me to find a way to bring them closer to the community.?

By that time, they had already formed the York Regional Police Pipes and Drums band that was already growing in popularity within the community, but Mr. McClenny did not miss a musical cue. The result was the founding of the York Region Police Chorus.

Now 42 members strong, the Chorus has endured for 22 years.

?We started off with nothing, and it is still going, having performed 646 concerts not only in York Region, but the GTA, Quebec, Newfoundland, tours in Ireland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales. The chorus is working for the community. They have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars through fundraising. We also do a lot of performances in seniors' residences. They don't see a lot of enjoyment here, and this gives you the satisfaction not only of seeing them, but seeing the enjoyment on their faces.?

Organizing each concert during his time on the force, he became a volunteer with the chorus upon his retirement and it still brings him about three hours a day, five days a week of work.

Also occupying his time is PROBUS, helping to oversee his local neighbourhood watch program (?I'm no Zimmerman!?) and 26 active years within the Royal Canadian Legion.

?I had a wife at home, a good pension coming, and I thought since I had worked from the age of 15, it was time to sit back and relax,? he says of his retirement. ?That didn't mean I had to stop being involved in things and that is what made my adjustment a little bit easier than some people find.

?You cannot just retire, flip the light switch and sit around and do nothing. If you do, you're probably not going to last very long!?