

Granddaughters pay tribute to Pearson's legacy



By Brock Weir

Every child thinks their grandparents are special, including Barb and Robin Hannah.

There came a time, however, where they realised that their grandfather just a little bit different from the other grandfathers who came to their baseball games and school recitals.

It was brought home relatively quickly to Robin as she hurried off to school as a girl of four or five. Barely out of their front gate, she heard her mother call her back.

‘Granddaddy is here,’ Robin recalls her mother as saying, quickly skipping back home to give him a hug. But, when he got out of his limousine he was quickly followed by photographers and flashbulbs.

A hazard of the job, Robin realised, when your granddad is Prime Minister of Canada.

The Hannahs, two of Lester B. Pearson's 10 grandchildren stepped through the doors of his first school for the very first time on Wednesday afternoon to help open Making Peace, the new photo exhibition at Town Park.

2017 marks the 60th anniversary of their celebrated grandfather receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and they were all too happy to share not only their pride at his accomplishments but also the very human side of the man.

Barb had a similar experience to her sister just a few years after those flashbulbs erupted.

Stepping onto the baseball diamond, she was thrilled to see a familiar face sit down in the bleachers.

Pearson, she says, was a ‘baseball fanatic’ and was eager to see his granddaughter at bat.

‘I was about 12 and just so thrilled he was there to see me play baseball,’ she recalls. ‘But the whole game was ruined because everyone just descended on him – teachers and students – because he was Prime Minister at that time. I was actually very upset because he just wanted to watch me play baseball and that was the end of that. The game just fell apart.’

‘He was probably just as disappointed as you,’ interjects Robin.

Wednesday offered another thrill for the sisters as they walked through the doors of the historic Church Street School.

Pearson lived in Aurora between the ages of three and six, where his father served as minister of the local Methodist church (now Aurora United Church). Church Street School was his alma mater.

The Hannahs came to Aurora thinking Barb was simply there to share her reflections on the Nobel Laureate, but learning he too had walked those creaking wood floors added an extra layer of excitement.

‘It makes it even more special,’ she said, bringing with her a signed poster of peace signed to her grandfather by John Lennon and Yoko Ono during a flight from Montreal to Toronto after their famous ‘bed in.’

Following introductory remarks, Barb took to the stage as the keynote speaker, opening her speech with the same words her grandfather uttered upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

‘How can there be peace without people understanding each other, and how can this be if people don't know about each other,’ she quoted, before continuing with words of her own. ‘It's a very simple, yet powerful statement. My grandfather was traumatized by the First World War. He was only 18 when he enlisted. Many young men enlisted at a very young age in that war. Its atrocities changed

him forever. He was also profoundly influenced by the Second World War. He had a front row seat as First Secretary of the High Commission in London during the war and endured many nights of aerial bombing during the blitz. I think the horrors of war shaped Lester Pearson.

It is safe to say he devoted much of the rest of his life to help remove the causes of war. As a diplomat, an early supporter of NATO, as an architect of the UN Peace Keeping force to help prevent war in the Suez Canal, as president of the UN General Assembly and as Canada's foreign minister in the Liberal government of the late 1940s.

Although she was too young to fully grasp the importance of the Nobel Peace Prize and ask her granddad all the questions she now has before his death in 1972 at the age of 79 when she was just a teen, she told the audience Pearson was always as he seemed, a man who cared deeply about our world and the people in it.

He wanted to make a difference and play his part, she said. He had seen the worst of humanity and he knew our greatest priority was to make humanity do better. He was open-minded, willing to hear all sides, was principled, kind, amiable and modest, completely unpretentious. He listened but he also led."