

Hould recognized with Good Citizenship medal for therapy dog work



By Brock Weir

Aurora resident Vivian Hould was one of eight Ontarians recognized at Queen's Park on Wednesday with the Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship.

Presented by Lieutenant-Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Ms. Hould was recognized for her years of dedicated service and compassionate work with the St. John's Ambulance York Region Therapy Dog Program, through which she has assisted thousands of people, including local residents living with Alzheimer's Disease, while spreading joy and happiness to everyone they encounter.

"I am honoured to invest this year's recipients of the Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship, all of whom have demonstrated a common devotion to Ontario," said the Lieutenant-Governor. "Good citizenship is the foundation of a society that aspires to be resilient. It is fundamentally about how we live together and what we can expect from one another. The civic leadership of these awardees is helping to shape our future as well as our present."

The Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship is not the only honour Ms. Hould has received for her decades of service. Nearly five years ago, she was recognized by then-Governor General David Johnston with the Caring Canadian Award, an award for which she was nominated by the 140-strong team of volunteers and their dogs she shepherded through the St. John's program for 19 years before her retirement in August 2014.

Ms. Hould, a retiree from Bell Canada, has always had a giving instinct. As a high school student growing up in Montreal, she volunteered her time as a candy striper in a local hospital. But when her time at Bell came to an end, she was not content to sit idle.

Before St. John's Ambulance developed their program, Ms. Hould had her long-haired dachshund evaluated for the program. Soon after the dog passed with flying colours, she went blind, scuttling temporarily but their hopes she would be able to make a difference as a therapy dog. Later, a veterinarian suggested she try the dog again in the St. John's Program, and the seeds for two decades of service were sewn.

'She could sense the doors would be open,' said Ms. Hould of her blind companion, in 2014. 'Here was an example of a dog that was blind and could still be a therapy dog. We have blind dogs in the program, deaf dogs and there are no limitations.'

From her humble beginnings as a volunteer, Ms. Hould's eventually became coordinator for Aurora and Newmarket. This responsibility eventually expanded to include just about every area from Steeles Avenue in the south to Lake Simcoe in the north, and from Highway 404 in the east to Highway 27 in the west.

Responsibilities as the program's coordinator include monitoring volunteers, evaluating new teams of owner and dog, and teaching them what to do and how to visit.

Through her work with the Therapy Dog Program work expanded beyond nursing homes and hospitals. In addition to her Paws For Stories program in local libraries, she joined forces with the Town of Aurora and the OSPCA to develop the Play It Safe with Dogs program, which visits local schools throughout York Region teaching kids dog bite prevention techniques.

Since its formation in 2000, Ms. Hould estimates the program has been presented to nearly 30,000 kids.

'In Aurora there are so many children who will come up to you and ask, 'may I pet your dog,' and it is obvious they have either had the program or their siblings have taught their younger siblings the right way to meet a dog,' she said. 'When I am with [the therapy program] it is all about the smiles. In nursing homes, people's heads are often down because they are so depressed but when you go in and you see you bring a smile to their face it just makes your heart feel good. Maybe it's selfish, but it really makes you feel good.'