

Lowell McClenny is not one to watch from the sidelines



By Brock Weir

It's a story anyone with kids in organized sports is all too familiar with ? a parent sits on the sidelines watching their son or daughter hit the field, and then sitting on their hands and trying not to grind their teeth when they disagree with a play by a coach or ref.

Where this story differs, however, is unlike some parents who heckle and embarrass their kids from the bleachers and sidelines taking the coaches to task, Lowell McClenny decided to do something about it.

Mr. McClenny, a retired superintendent of the York Regional Police, was singled out for his efforts for young people in sport by being named Aurora's Citizen of the Year in 1984. It was a surprise to Mr. McClenny as he came to Canada Day celebrations completely unaware of what was to come.

For him, it was nice for his work to be recognized, but it was a labour of love.

Nominated for his involvement with local minor sports, having progressed through the ranks from his initial election to the board of directors of Aurora Minor Hockey to a nearly 10 year term under its presidency, his efforts extended beyond hockey to other sports, including lacrosse.

?I got involved with sports because of both my boys and my oldest one really brought it to light,? he recalls. ?He was being coached in hockey by a fellow I didn't think was really doing the job he could. He didn't seem to be interested in the team in the few weeks and months I was watching. You get a little bit more infuriated as you watch because I thought there could be more put into what was going on.?

Taking his concerns to the president of the Aurora Minor Hockey Association (AMHA), he was encouraged to act on his concerns and run for their executive. After that, there was no turning back. During his terms as a director and then president, he took on coaching duties in house league and select hockey, and eventually coaching and refereeing local lacrosse for about five years.

While it initially started out of concerns for his sons not getting all they should out of Canada's national games, it was soon a labour of love working to better the lives of all Aurora youth who might have wanted to venture onto the field or ice.

?It was about the opportunity to work with youth,? says Mr. McClenny of minor sports. ?Over the years, there were a lot of young people who came through that needed some type of direction in terms of being involved with team sports. Some of their parents didn't have an overabundance of money. You wanted to see these kids have the same opportunities as everyone else, and I can tell you many times in rep hockey of putting my hand in my pocket and covering the expense of some of these kids because they were part of the team and needed to have that same opportunity the other boys did.?

As an Aurora native, Mr. McClenny could certainly empathise with the kids as his upbringing was not without some degree of

struggle. His earliest jobs were packing groceries and then stocking shelves at a local IGA store, but he left school in Grade 10 to help his father with his milk business.

Some of his earliest memories are hopping up onto his dad's horse-drawn milk wagon ? his father owned a franchise milk route through certain sections of Aurora for Cousins Dairy ? and meeting the people along the way. After his father's four heart attacks, however, it was time for Lowell to do the heavy lifting in the family business.

?If he didn't have someone to come and help him and take over the business for a short period of time, he would have lost everything,? he says. ?I left school and went to work with my dad and saw him through a couple of years of recovery. He was there all the time, but I was the guy slugging the milk carts and crates. Two years after that, in 1957, I had the opportunity to buy my own milk franchise at Cousins.

?Volunteerism is giving back; we all went through our younger years doing things that involved community groups and you needed someone to guide them and volunteers who would give up their time for the purposes of helping out the community. You're in it for somebody else and it helps make the community tick.?

Volunteers giving up their time for helping out the community is a lesson Mr. McClenny took to heart. After four years with Cousins, he decided to take a step back and re-evaluate his career. Had he not taken a detour through the dairy cans, he might have twigged earlier where his true calling lay.

He distinctly remembers going through elementary schools being transfixed by stories of police heroism in the class readers so familiar to Ontario students of a certain age. It was an image that stayed with him throughout his life and when an opportunity seemed to be on the horizon at the former Aurora Police Force in 1965, he decided to put ?helping out in the community? to one of the ultimate tasks.

Next week in the second part of our interview with Aurora's 1984 Citizen of the Year, Mr. McClenny joins the Aurora Police Force and eventually finds an unlikely voice.