

Vivienne Bridgeford named OJHL Volunteer of the Year



Vivienne Bridgeford wandered into the arena into her adopted home town one day in the early 1970s. She's never really left.

A hockey game was on in the Aurora Community Centre. "This girl from England" fell in love with the sport. She stayed to watch and phoned home. She would be late for dinner.

A few years later, she convinced her father "Alf, now 91" to become part of the new ownership group of the Aurora Tigers. "The Group of Seven," as she called them.

"Viv" began volunteering for that team. And save for a few years, when the Tigers were renamed the Eagles under another owner, she's been there ever since.

Bridgeford, 65, has been named volunteer of the year by the Ontario Junior Hockey League for her 40-plus years of work with the Tigers.

"It's simple, Vivienne is Aurora Tigers," said team president Jim Thomson, who purchased the team in 2015 along with his wife, Rita, and Domenic Tassone.

"Her passion and commitment are unmatched anywhere."

She began working in the booster club room at the ACC, serving beer and sandwiches to thirsty fans during Sunday games.

But for most of the four decades she's been the box office ticket seller at the rink.

And while she loves her hockey, most nights she only gets to begin watching midway through the third period.

"I don't do it to see a hockey game, I do it to see the smile on people's faces," she said. "The people are now a part of the family."

She arrives for home games three hours before puck drop to prepare the dressing and coaches rooms for the visiting teams. It's a minimum six-hour day.

"Some people think I'm part of the arena staff," she said.

At home, a three-minute drive from the ACC, she's the only member of her real family "with any interest in sports," she said.

?Anything on ice ? hockey, figure skating or curling ? I love it,? she said.

The OJHL award?

?I was overwhelmed, I was crying,? she said of hearing the news ? while preparing to go the rink, of course. ?There are just so many great volunteers in this league.?

?I don't do it to win awards. I do it to help.?

She was in Grande Prairie, Alta, when her Tigers won the RBC Cup in 2004 but couldn't be there when they turned the trick again three years later in Prince George, B.C.

She's turned the championship rings the team presented her into medallions she wears proudly.

?I told Jim that three would be nice,? she said laughing. ?Maybe this is the year??

With a pair of playoff series already behind them, her Tigers have qualified for the North/East Conference final.

Betty Masterson, ticket sales manager for the Wellington Dukes, was named runner-up for OJHL volunteer of the year.