

Humble millionaire true to his roots

Rekindled school memories spark donation to health centre

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Walking through the newly constructed Runnymede Healthcare Centre, a flood of memories hits Gordon Gooder as he looks out on the old schoolyard where he once played ball.

The 89-year-old retired roofing mogul used to attend Strathcona Public School, which was built in 1908. The school was converted into Runnymede Hospital in 1945. Construction of the new Runnymede Healthcare Centre's state-of-the-art facility was completed in October 2009 on the former public school site.

"I couldn't go to (my Grade 8 graduation commencement) because I didn't have a suit or tie or shoes to wear out — all I had were my old scampers," Gooder said, reflecting on his humble beginnings.

"So, I climbed out up on the big sills on the windows and watched the ceremonies from there. They had a party and songs and things like that going on."

Gooder has many fond recollections of the school.

"I remember those windows and where I used to play ball," Gooder said of the now half-demolished old school building which sits on the corner of St. John's and Runnymede Rds.

He has beloved memories of his favourite teacher, Mr. O'Brian; being awarded the MVP who helped bring home the baseball city championship; and playing hockey on the ice rinks in the school yard, which prompted Gooder to give \$1.2 million this week to Runnymede Healthcare Centre.

Born March 21, 1920, Gooder grew up at 150 St. John's Rd., half a block from the school.

During his years at Western Technical and Commerce High School, Gooder learned shorthand and how to type. In 1937 at the age of 17, Gooder landed a job as the

stenographer and private secretary for the president of a roofing company. He was a fast learner and picked up the ins and outs of the business within six months.

When the Second World War broke out, Gooder was promoted to the job of roofing estimator and then he became a roofer after his colleagues were drafted.

Gooder married his high school sweetheart, Ruth Roelofson, on Sept. 2, 1944. They had met as 15-year-olds at Ravina Gardens skating rink. They didn't attend the same school, but that didn't deter Gooder. The tenacious teen was turned down four times before Ruth relented and allowed him to walk her home and carry her skates.

"Ruth had class written all over her and she gave me her telephone number even though I was known as the toughest guy in the neighbourhood," Gooder said.

Gooder's big break to branch out as an entrepreneur came after a dispute with his boss over wages.

"After the war I had a bit of a difference about bonuses with my boss. He said he didn't promise me, and I picked up my things and up and out of the office I went," Gooder said.

"I am a man who keeps my promises, so when my boss didn't keep his, I couldn't work for him any longer.

"I came home and told my wife. Ruth looked at me and said she had \$600, which back then would last us about six months to live on."

Undeterred by being freshly unemployed, Gooder networked and found a lucrative \$36,000 roofing contract where he made "a pile of money" and bought equipment to start up a roofing company with his friend, Lex Semple, in 1947.

The contracts kept coming in for Semple-Gooder Roofing Corp. While Semple died at an early age, Gooder built up the business to become one of the largest and most successful roofing companies in Canada.

Gooder, who retired at age 70, attributes his success in life to "a lot of luck and hard work."

Luck was on their side on Nov. 6, 1963: Gooder and his wife were two of 97 survivors of a Trans Canada Airline crash at Heathrow Airport in London. The DC-8 landed in a muddy cabbage patch. Gooder said it was a miracle the plane didn't blow up.

"I got lucky and I worked hard and the harder I worked, the luckier I got," Gooder said.

Upon retiring he bought a yacht in Toronto, another yacht in Florida and a cottage in Muskoka, since sold.

Gooder's life has a little slower pace nowadays. He's still a die-hard Maple Leafs fan. He religiously watches his favourite TV shows, Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy, surfs the net and downloads music. He has become so computer savvy that he has learned to pay his bills online. In the summer, he likes to garden carrots, lettuce and tomatoes.

Gooder is still using the first trade he learned, which eventually led to his success.

“Once you learn to type and do shorthand, it's something that never leaves you. I still use it when I write things down or type on the computer,” Gooder said with a chuckle.

The Gooders have no children but they have two nieces — Nancy McGrath and Mary-Anne Stephens — whom they treat as their “surrogate” kids.

This week, Gooder and his wife were honoured for his donation to Runnymede Healthcare Centre at the hospital's inaugural gala. But the humble Gooders, declining the recognition, didn't attend. The Gooders' donation will be used for operating costs, specialty education and nursing enhancement programs. Last October, Gooder donated \$1 million to Trillium Health Centre where he had undergone quadruple bypass heart surgery.

“My uncle Gordon always says bull---- baffles the brain,” McGrath, a retired nurse, said.

“He just likes to get to the bottom line and get things done. That's how he was with the donations.”

Gooder's affinity for Runnymede Healthcare Centre stems from his father-in-law — the late Toronto alderman Edward C. Roelofson — who served for many years as a city councillor and was appointed chair of the inaugural board of directors for the Runnymede Hospital when it opened in 1945. Gooder's sister-in-law, Betty, served as the first female chair of the hospital board.

The new centre is a complex-care hospital which serves 200 chronically ill in-patients.

‘No-nonsense type’

“(Gooder) is a no-nonsense type of man,” Connie Dejak, CEO and president of Runnymede Healthcare, said.

“Once Mr. Gooder decided to donate, he asked his accountant to transfer the money and he called me up himself to make sure it was done properly.

“Mr. Gooder insisted that we not spend a lot of time thanking him for the gift at the gala. I'm really humbled in his presence. He's someone who has truly accomplished a great deal in his life, but has done so with a social conscience and strong civic duty.”

Gooder said it was wonderful that he could help the hospital.

“I have good memories from that school, my father-in-law and niece fought for it to stay open when they wanted it closed. I just wanted to help keep it going. I achieved everything I ever wanted to do, so I thought I’d help the hospital achieve their goal,” Gooder said, adding that he hopes it inspires others to give.