

The Journal REMEMBERING ROBERT LAWN

Robert Lawn was a River Keeper in his own singular but quiet way

FROM SANDRA LAWN

Robert grew up near the St. Lawrence River in Cornwall, Ontario. In Robert's early days the roar of the rapids was a continual reminder of the power of the River and, along with his beloved music, provided the acoustic background for Robert's childhood.

The running of Cornwall's Long Sault rapids by vessels such as the *Rapids Prince*, which plied the route between Brockville and Montreal from 1913 to 1949, created a living legend of daring and adventure on the St. Lawrence River. This, too, was part of the fabric of Robert's boyhood.

Then came the Seaway.

As a student of history and geography, Robert's stories of the Seaway included his work assisting with the surveying of the lands on the banks of the river. Robert's involvement with the project gave him an increased appreciation for the power of the St. Lawrence and the role it played in nurturing the communities along its banks, some of which were forever destroyed when the Seaway was completed. The draining of the rapids eventually led to the moment, a vivid memory for Robert, that the dam was opened and the roar of the rapids stopped forever.

Over half a century ago, Robert led his family back to the St. Lawrence, just over a decade after the completion of the Seaway and the end of Robert's formal education at Carleton and Ottawa Universities, where he earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees.

The late 60s, 70s and 80s were years of hard work for Robert as an educator – a role which he fulfilled with skill and

sensitivity, impacting so many students and colleagues during this time. But Robert had not forgotten about the River. The environmental efforts of community volunteers like Robert, and local and other officials in the 1970s and 80s led to the eventual development of the Harbour, which opened in 1989. This was a gargantuan task for a small town and the effort received great support from the federal and provincial governments, the Canadian Coast Guard and service clubs, as well as private supporters and volunteers like Robert. His quiet and resolute determination, for example, helped to rid the area of the weed known as lamb's quarters: a monumental and back-breaking task.

Fast forward a couple of decades, and this part of the St. Lawrence shoreline is now a world-class setting for the arts in the large open-air amphitheatre overlooking the River.

The development of the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Company in 2001 brought a new form of life to the shores of the St. Lawrence, and Robert was part of the festival in its earliest days. Hosting the London Globe Theatre production of *Hamlet* in 2014, as their only Canadian stop on a world tour in honour of Shakespeare's 400th birthday, was another great indicator of the world-wide significance of this great waterway setting.

Before the original DLD building was replaced in 1985, the wonderful demonstration lens – a work of art – was preserved and retained. Eventually it would become the inspiration for the construction of the Harbour's picturesque "Rotary Lighthouse". Robert was one of the faithful Rotarians who worked on this iconic structure

and on the gardens around it, creating a lasting structure that provides a focal point for the Harbour while preserving a unique piece of Canadian Coast Guard history. Many residents will remember Robert's careful painting of this and other local buildings, as a volunteer, well into his 70s.

Volunteer effort from citizens like Robert has also led to the establishment of the remarkable "Shakespeare Gardens" – yet another example of how the River now influences the economy and history of this region. These gardens are part of the *1000 Islands and Rideau Canal Garden Trail*. Thousands of local residents, visitors from Eastern Ontario and well beyond, come to this waterfront area every season – for the arts, the scenery and just to contemplate the St. Lawrence, the perfect setting for cultural and recreational activities.

Former Prescott mayor Lee McKnight, at his passing, donated funds to establish a beautiful fountain at the waterfront in honour of the "mothers of Prescott." It was Robert's idea that the plaque read as follows: "one of the most beautiful rivers in the world," a quote from Lee McKnight's poem, *The St. Lawrence River – A Reflective Soliloquy*; 1989. Robert's appreciation for poetry and history continued to serve him, and the community, well.

It was a privilege for Sandra to serve as empowerment director for the St. Lawrence River Institute of Environmental Sciences, headquartered in Cornwall, in the mid-90s. In 1995 the Institute held a conference entitled "Sharing Knowledge, Linking Sciences: An International Conference on the St. Lawrence Ecosystem" and Rob-



Sandra and Robert at library

ert's background role in helping to organize and sensitively carry out this event was well known to those at the Institute at the time – some of whom are still there, continuing the vital work of preserving our River resource.

The words of Dr. Ernie Benedict, former Mohawk grand chief and university professor, provide a fitting description of Robert's efforts as a River Keeper and his commitment to his community generally: "Let us be satisfied that we have gone

as far as it was possible to fulfill our responsibility" (*Akwesasne Notes, Summer 1995*).

Robert never failed to go as far as he could go to fulfill his responsibility: to his students, to his family, to his community, and to the River he loved so much.

There is still more to be done to protect and honour this most magnificent River but Robert is resting in peace knowing he did his part in a wide variety of quiet ways.



All of Robert's offspring

The Journal REMEMBERING ROBERT LAWN

Robert Lawn's lasting legacy in Prescott

FROM THE LAWN
FAMILY AND FRIENDS

"For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."

-Viktor E. Frankl

Robert Lawn's life took shape from his many wide-ranging contributions to his community as educator, municipal politician, administrator, patron, contributor, encourager and volunteer. His impact came not through bombast; he was not motivated by the thought of praise, or prospect of recognition. Instead, he was content to apply his considerable talents and razor-sharp intellect quietly, and relentlessly, in ways he felt could best benefit his students, his fellow citizens and his community. In the words of one of the many friends remembering Robert: "He brought more to the table than he took. He led by example."

A colleague on the Brockville General Hospital board with Robert, in the early 90s, recalled that Robert was never the most vocal one at a meeting. Instead, he listened with his whole brain, and, when he was ready to speak, everyone paid attention, because they knew that what they were about to hear, would be worth careful consideration.

"Robert was a clever and intellectually intense person driven by his deep care of our community and the people of all ages who live and work here," noted David Dargie, longtime colleague and friend of Robert's.

When he saw a need, Robert stepped in. He was instrumental, for example, in bringing the semester system to the schools of Leeds Grenville. He was on the forefront of a concern for the impact of drug use on young people. His daughter Julia remembers his coming to Central Public School in the 1970s, to speak to the students about the impact that recreational drug use had on a young brain. Julia also remembers that the students listened intently. Robert commanded respect wherever he went.

Under Robert's watch, as mayor of Prescott from 2000-2006, along with dedicated staff, council

and volunteers, the *Official Plan for Prescott*, still currently in place, was developed.

As part of the public process that developed the *Official Plan*, a series of workshops were conducted with stakeholders and the public to discuss the specific vision for downtown and the waterfront. The result was the *Prescott Downtown Design & Urban Design Guidelines* adopted by Council in December 2005.

Other accomplishments of the Council under Robert as mayor, included the renovation of the Town Hall and Library, as well as the development of five and ten year strategic plans, land use planning, heritage and environmental protection.

After serving as mayor, and ever watchful over the well being of the community, Robert felt the need to continue his municipal role, this time as a member of Council from 2010-2014.

Robert was a leader who was also a learner and an agent of change.

His spiritual side is lesser known but the strength of his faith sustained him both in his early days, and later in life when he found comfort and a community of faith, at St. Marks in Prescott. He was a fan of music, and the arts – his natural appreciation for drama and poetry finding a wonderful outlet in the St. Lawrence Shakespeare festival, which as mayor of Prescott he supported in its fledgling days. His wife recalls him coming home from a meeting during which the possibility of Shakespeare plays on the waterfront was first raised, a-glow with the possibilities for his community. In one of the many tributes offered after Robert's passing, a friend wrote that the Festival would not be what it is today, without Robert's "passionate championing" from day one.

Mental and physical health were also high on Robert's list of "worries" throughout his time between retiring from education, and his final illness. He served, for example, as Chair of the Brockville General Hospital Board, a member of the Lanark, Leeds and Grenville Board of Health, the Police Services Board, as a member of Community Advisory Group of DuPont Canada Maitland Works from 1995 to 2003, in addition to his involvement in ad-

diction research, youth outreach and other areas.

Sadly, the fine mind that served Robert so very well for so many years, failed him in the end. In December 2015 he received the diagnosis of Lewy Body Dementia. Research soon taught his family that the months ahead were not going to be easy. LBD is surprisingly common – it accounts for roughly 20% of all dementia diagnoses – and is marked by the onset of increasingly challenging physical manifestations along with memory loss and other degenerative neurological symptoms.

Robert carried on bravely at home until April 19, 2017, when after stints at the Brockville General and Royal Ottawa Hospitals, he went to live at Wellington House Nursing Home, where, with skilled care, he blessedly found a great deal of peace and tranquility in his final months.

Even in the later stages of his illness, when hallucinations overcame much of his mind, Robert retained his concern about the students he had served so faithfully, especially at South Grenville and Brockville Collegiate. He continued to feel a responsibility to take care of young people: his students, and his family in Cornwall. This deep concern for family was recently reflected back to family and friends when reviewing photographs of Robert in younger days. Holding his children and grandchildren as babies or toddlers, he clearly had such a special bond and way of looking deep into their souls, with his whole heart and his powerful mind.

Also in his final years, Robert retained his concern for community projects and development. He was devastated when family friend and business partner Brad Hubbard passed away and sometimes, long afterwards, would still talk with Sandra intently about organizing meetings with Brad about the downtown heritage restoration project.

And, in just the week before he passed, Robert earnestly informed his family that they had to help prepare for a gathering of up to 300 people. Perhaps in the far reaches of his mind, he knew and was trying to communicate, what would transpire.

Among the many excellent staff members at Wellington House is a

nurse who is extremely knowledgeable about Lewy Body Disorder – so often undiagnosed, but becoming more widely known with, for example, the diagnosis of high-profile persons such as American actor Robin Williams. Robert's family was grateful for the sensitive care which Robert received at Wellington House.

The family would also like to offer thanks to St. Mark's Roman Catholic Church, Father Justin, Father Brennan, Deacon Mark, Pat Warren and the members of the Catholic Women's League, and all those who attended at the visitation and funeral.

Finally, the family gratefully thanks all those who, in recent days, have shared with them the special part that Robert had played in their lives, by leading quietly and by example. As one friend wrote, "Here was a man who impacted a whole lot of people of all ages and stages."

In the words of a tribute spoken in the Ontario Legislature by MPP Steve Clark: Robert was known for his "quiet dignity and passion for his community...and his relentless optimism for Prescott's future. ... He made all those whose lives he touched, better for the time with him."

In 2010 when he ran for Prescott Council, Robert wrote the following words, which still resonate:

"I care deeply about our community and people of all ages who live and work here. ... I hereby pledge, not a long list of promises, but a short heartfelt 'I will do my very best.'"

He did so: right until the very end.



Opening of renovated Town Hall



Weeding at harbour



Opening of trail near Kelly's Bay