

QCGN Fêtes 10th Anniversary of Community Awards

By Bea Vongdouangchanh

The Quebec Community Groups Network celebrated the 10th anniversary of its community award program on Nov. 1, recognizing three community leaders and a young Quebecer who've made contributions to the English-speaking community in the province.

Olga Melikoff, Murielle Parkes and John Rae received the Sheila and Victor Goldbloom Distinguished Community Service Award. The annual award celebrates individuals who, like the award's namesakes, have dedicated their lives to ensuring English-speaking Quebec remains a vibrant community within Quebec and Canada. For many years Sheila and Victor Goldbloom invested their talents and skills for the betterment of the community and inspired others through their outstanding contributions.

The Young Quebecer Leading the Way Award, which is sponsored by Quebec Community Groups Network, the Fondation Notre Home Foundation and CBC Quebec, recognizes and celebrates the outstanding achievements of young English-speaking Quebecers who are engaged in innovative initiatives that create change in our communities. This year's youth leadership award was presented to were pleased to 23-year-old Hayley Campbell from Shawville, Que.

In 1963, Melikoff and Parkes along with their friend the late Valerie Neale, set out to create a French immersion program at Margaret Pendlebury Elementary School in St. Lambert. The province was changing, and they knew that if they wanted their children to have a good future in Quebec, they needed to be able to speak French.

In a tribute video produced by CBC, Melikoff said that the school boards were not behind the idea at first because "it was threatening to them." She said they told her that if she wanted her children to be educated in French, they should go to the French board.

Parkes added: "Originally they said, 'We can only give you a piece of the pie,' and we said, 'Well we want a different pie.'"

The three did not give up, and their effort changed the face of English-language public education across Canada and helped forge linguistic duality into a defining characteristic of our nation.

In her speech to the more than 180 people at the ceremony at St. James Club in downtown Montreal, Parkes said when she heard she won she did research on Victor and Sheila Goldbloom. "I've been busy reading about building bridges. We need more people who build bridges," she said. "If there were a lot more people who built bridges, French, English, sovereigntists, federalists, Christians and Jews, my gosh, the world would be a lot better. I'm touched this award is connected to Sheila and Victor Goldbloom."

Melikoff said that the advocacy for French immersion programs in English school boards was a "real community effort," but singled out a doctor who supported them the entire time: Wilder Penfield.

“He wrote us a four-page letter and that meant a lot because a lot of people thought there was a lot of problems with the program, for example, students will lose a year, they’ll have psychological problems,” she said before reading parts of his letter.

“Having read the proposal over, I can only say that if I had young children of my own I should like to enter them there. If this scheme is established, I’m perfectly certain you will have the parents of young children come to St. Lambert because of it,” Melikoff quoted Penfield. “We need an example of this sort in the province of Quebec and Canada.”

Melikoff noted that Penfield was only wrong about one thing: “Parents didn’t come flocking to St. Lambert, they went to their own school boards and demanded immersion programs across the country.”

In presenting the award to Melikoff and Parks, QCGN presiden Geoffrey Chambers said their contribution was “truly historic.”

Rae, a long-time Liberal Party adviser, community advocate and philanthropist, was recognized for his commitment to public service. He’s been involved with many philanthropic causes from education, music and the arts, athletics, social services and youth. In health care he helped to develop and implement a strategy to raise \$300 million to build the new McGill University Health Centre (MUHC) hospital at the Glen site.

“Community involvement is how you become something bigger than yourself. You’ll be better for it, and your community will be better for it,” Rae said in a video tribute. “The English community in Quebec is a very strong community. The most important quality they have to embrace is openness. It is confident in itself and its future.”

Rae’s younger brother Bob, former Ontario premier and former interim Liberal leader, sent a message which Chambers read to the audience. He said he was sorry not to be there in person and praised his brother despite his “modesty and reluctance to take credit for what he does.”

In his speech, Rae said he was humbled because he was in the same category as Parkes and Melikoff. “Canada is a wonderful country. It’s an impossible but beautiful country and somehow we have a miracle of a country,” he said. “The reason is because when we go from coast to coast to coast, we have common values – if we look back over 50, 60 years, what tremendous progress we’ve made between Canadians of the two language groups, indigenous people and everyone who’s come here. ... I’ve always believed that our system works best when the public sector and the private sector and the community sector work together to accomplish great things. This happens over and over and over. I’ve learned in the different elections I’ve conducted that victory lasts a short time, but responsibility lasts a long time. Thank you to everyone who work to better our country.”

In nominating her for the award, Regional Association of West Quebecers executive director Linton Garner said “Hayley has proven skills for leadership and innovative thinking in our community. Community involvement has been very important to her since a young age and she has participated actively in many activities inside and outside her community.”

Campbell has been involved in her community since she started in Girl Guides at age 7. Since then, she's been involved with MADD Canada, the Shawville Fair, Pontiac Agricultural Society, Project Communautaire de Pierrefond, Alpha Phi Leadership Fellows Program and Youth for Youth Quebec.

Her message to fellow youth: "It's important to get involved, find something that really means something to you and seek out the opportunities. Don't be afraid to give it a shot."

In her speech, Campbell said that the future of Quebec is opening and welcoming and that her generation is willing to make change. "It encourages me to continue doing what I'm doing to help make change in our society," she said, about winning the Young Quebecer Leading the Way Award. "Shawville may be a small town but it has a big heart. I believe the large heart that Shawville has encourages people to seek ways to contribute to their community. With this award, I hope to inspire other youth to get involved."

Comedians and musicians Bowser and Blue performed at the awards ceremony, poking fun at Quebec and federal politics with a song about the Bonjour/Hi controversy, an accurate impression of former prime minister Jean Chrétien and poking fun at the differences between current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and former PM Stephen Harper. Bowser and Blue also had a lot of fodder on U.S. politics with a song about the differences between Americans and Canadians and pointed remarks about President Trump's tweets, all of which received laughs.

Rae, who worked with Chrétien for years, said he will be reporting back to him about Bowser and Blue's presentation. "But knowing him the way I do, he would enjoy that presentation more than anybody," he said.

Laval MNA Christopher Skeete, parliamentary secretary to Premier Francois Legault, who is responsible for overseeing the province's Secretariat for relations with English-speaking Quebecers, attended the ceremony and made introductory remarks. "This is beautiful, this is awesome," he said. "This evening is about celebrating the individuals who do a lot for the community. ... English-speaking Quebecers are a vibrant community. These communities are diverse and beautiful as they are different and unique."

Other VIPs in attendance included Liberal Opposition leader Pierre Arcand along with MNAs Kathleen Weil, Gregory Kelley and Jennifer Maccarone. Dozens of community leaders and stakeholders were also on hand.

Chambers noted that the QCGN has been advocating for years for the rights of English-speaking Quebecers and is happy that the Secretariat will remain under the CAQ government. "We'll continue to be there to voice our community's voice to the government of Quebec. »

Over the last 10 years, 32 individuals have won the Goldbloom Award and four youth have won the Young Quebecer Leading the Way Award.