

Watershed champion

Guelph-based fundraiser receives Grand River Conservation Authority's highest award

BY HELEN LAMMERS-HELPS

Marilyn Murray has helped raise millions of dollars for outdoor education programs, nature centres and multi-use trails throughout the Grand River watershed.

Her hard work and dedication in more than 30 years volunteering with the Grand River Conservation Foundation were recognized last October when she was presented with the Grand River Conservation Authority's highest level of recognition, the Honour Roll Award.

Marilyn Murray poses for a photo in her Guelph home. Her fundraising efforts have benefited the Grand River Conservation Foundation for three decades.

PHOTO BY DEAN PALMER

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*“It’s easy to be a fundraiser
for things you think
are important for people to support.”*

MARILYN MURRAY

The award is reserved for people who have made a huge impact and a lifelong commitment to improving the watershed, explains Sara Wilbur, executive director of the Grand River Conservation Foundation. Murray, who lives in Guelph, was the obvious choice.

Since joining the foundation’s board in 1986, she has been involved in all of its initiatives. The foundation is the charitable fundraising partner of the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA), which is responsible for water management, recreation and environmental stewardship in the 6,800-square-kilometre area drained by the Grand River and its tributaries. More than a million people, including the residents of Guelph, Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and Brantford, call the watershed home.

Murray is particularly passionate about helping children experience nature firsthand. That passion has paid off in initiatives such as the Living Classroom fundraising drive, launched in 2002.

At that time, the GRCA’s education programs, run through the school boards, were in danger of being cancelled because of changes in the provincial education curriculum. Murray co-chaired the Living Classroom campaign, which raised \$2.5 million, covering the cost of outdoor education for five years. Each year about 50,000 students participate in these programs.

As well, the campaign spurred other conservation authorities to lobby the provincial government to reinstate the focus

on outdoor education in the curriculum. “That was really gratifying,” says Murray. “I think it’s important for kids to learn something about the environment and their connection to the outside world.”

Tomorrow’s leaders will be stronger if they have an environmental conscience, she says, noting that some city kids may not have any other exposure to nature.

She says she can’t help but get excited about outdoor education when she watches the nature interpreters interacting with the children. “They have them eating out of their hands.”

Murray, who grew up in Toronto and spent the first 13 years of married life there, says the connection between humans and nature really hit home when, at the age of 35, she moved to a farm near Guelph with her husband and children. When you live in the country, it doesn’t take long to see the effect of man’s role in the environment, she says.

At the time, she and her first husband, Doug Robinson, who died in 1994, had a film company that did a lot of work in the agricultural and natural resources sectors. It was while working on a film for the Grand River Conservation Authority that Murray had an “aha moment.” While walking on a trail in Luther Marsh, the nature interpreter described what you could see and hear, things you wouldn’t have observed on your own, she says. “After that I always noticed more when walking.”

When someone asked her to join the board of the Grand River Conservation

Foundation, it was an easy sell, Murray says. “I was already hooked.”

The foundation funds projects for which there is no budget money, she says. “We can help with things they wouldn’t be able to do otherwise.”

Murray first developed fundraising skills as a volunteer with the University of Guelph – the school from which she graduated in 1955 – when she was living in Toronto after graduation. She later honed those skills while working at U of G for about 10 years before retiring in 1996 as director of donor relations.

“It’s easy to be a fundraiser for things you think are important for people to support,” says Murray, although she jokes that people run in the other direction when they see her coming.

Being a successful fundraiser isn’t rocket science, she says. First you tell your story, develop awareness and create the interest in the project. “Then you ask for the money: ‘Will you help us accomplish this goal?’”

Having the right connections helps, she adds. “It’s who you know and how you ask.”

In addition to her work with the Grand River Conservation Foundation, Murray has been an active volunteer in many other sectors, which she attributes to the example set by her parents who were also active volunteers.

Murray, a mother of five, grandmother of 10, and great grandmother of six, met her second husband, Ken Murray, the former president of J.M. Schneider Inc. in Kitchener, while working on a capital fundraising campaign for the University of Guelph. The two married in 1996.

Ken has a long history of philanthropy and community support. After his first wife, Helen, died from complications due to Alzheimer’s disease in 1995, Ken created the Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program at the University of Waterloo. He continues to be a strong

advocate and supporter of this program.

In addition to his own community interests, Marilyn says Ken became a staunch supporter of her volunteer involvements, including the Grand River Conservation Foundation and the Guelph Lake Nature Centre. In 2014, they were named Outstanding Philanthropists of the Year by the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Golden Horseshoe Chapter. The following year they were also presented with Alumni Volunteer Awards by the University of Guelph.

While the community certainly benefits from Marilyn Murray’s service work, she believes she also benefits from volunteering.

“It keeps you connected to the wider community and not just your own small world,” she says. “It keeps you thinking much younger and keeps the focus off your ailments.”

Wilbur, the Grand River Conservation Foundation’s first full-time paid executive director, credits Marilyn Murray with guiding her as she learned her new role 14 years ago. “She provided the history but with a forward lens.”

It was Murray who recognized the need to stay connected to all the communities within the GRCA’s watershed, which is the size of Prince Edward Island. The solution was to create a body of supporters known as the Grand Champions to give feedback and to act as unofficial ambassadors on the foundation’s behalf. Murray was the founding chair of this group.

“They are our eyes and ears in the community,” she says. The group receives regular updates about fundraising activities and meets for lunch and tours annually.

Murray was also part of the team that raised \$1.5 million for the Rails to Trails Campaign, which allowed the GRCA to purchase 77 kilometres of abandoned rail lines along the Grand River and convert

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In 2003, Marilyn Murray poses with Brian Tuffin, left, president of S.C. Johnson, Brantford, and honorary chair John Pollock at the official launch of The Living Classroom campaign for outdoor education.
PHOTO BY DAVID BEBEE

them to trails, including the popular Cambridge to Paris stretch.

In 2007, a lookout on the Alf Hales Trail was named the Marilyn Murray Riverview. It is on the Speed River, just behind the River Run Centre in Guelph.

Now 85, Murray says she has pared down her volunteer commitments to just a few favourites.

“The will is still there but the energy runs out sooner,” says the cancer survivor, who had quadruple bypass surgery 10 years ago.

Although no longer officially on the foundation’s board, she continues to be involved in an ad hoc committee raising funds to build a new Guelph Lake Nature Centre.

The existing facility is a single-family home that was converted into a temporary

nature centre in 1980. That building has many accessibility barriers and is not located within the bounds of Guelph Lake park.

Wilbur says it was Murray’s idea that the new nature centre not simply replace the old converted house with a purpose-built structure, but instead serve as a hub for all visitors to the park, not just students.

“Her vision of drawing in the community was really important as we made our fundraising case,” Wilbur says.

Murray also recognized the fundraising challenges.

For one thing, many people in Guelph aren’t aware of how close Guelph Lake Conservation Area is to the city. As well, many residents do not identify with the Grand River Conservation Authority since it is the Speed River, a Grand tributary,

that runs through the city.


The fundraising campaign was dubbed “Nature at Your Doorstep,” underlining the fact Guelph Lake park is only a few minutes from the city.

Wilbur says Murray also recognized that although the existing Guelph Lake Nature Centre is well-loved, with 20,000 children using its programs every year, the campaign needed a deeper way to resonate with people caught up in a hectic world: could fundraising evoke the parents’ fond memories of childhood scavenger hunts and cookouts in the park?

It was Murray’s leadership that helped to capture stories that emphasized the value of Guelph Lake, says Wilbur. So far, local businesses, service organizations, individuals and schools have raised about \$1.75 million of the \$2.5-million goal.

The Rotary Club of Guelph has played a significant role. The organization has committed \$600,000 to the project in recognition of the organization’s 100th anniversary in 2020. “It’s given shape to what we’re doing at Guelph Lake and it’s an important part of 2020 for Rotary,” says Wilbur.

The GRCA board has given its approval for the implementation phase. Meanwhile, Murray and other organizers continue to work diligently to raise the remaining funds before the centre opens in mid-2020.

“The foundation wouldn’t be where it is today without her,” Wilbur says of Murray, while also recognizing that Murray has worked hard to bring the next generation of leadership onboard for its continued success. 



In 2009, Marilyn Murray presents a paddle to Trevor Matthews, Manulife Financial executive vice-president of Canadian operations, at the launch of the Grand Champions Program.
PHOTO BY PETER LEE

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