

# 'Fine human being' will be missed

Red Bug. Bk.

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The idea that you can sum up a person's life in a few paragraphs in a newspaper obituary is an obviously fallacious one.

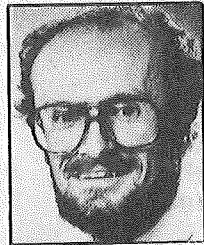
Reporters find it easier to write obituaries of strangers than of those they have known. That is because it is so difficult to do justice to a lifetime of accomplishment in a few column inches of newspaper space.

That truth became more evident than ever to me last week when I was asked to write an obituary for Richard Mortensen, the chairman of the city's committee of adjustment who was buried last week after death of cancer at age 53.

The recitation of years of service, positions held, and contributions to the community don't tell you what you need to know about what a truly fine human being has been lost.

I have covered the committee of adjustment for several years now. I have seen other reporters scoff at the idea that the committee was newsworthy. While it deals with a number of applications each week permitting homes a few inches too close to the next lot, it also deals with a number of major issues from time to time.

But I must confess that it wasn't always the lure of professional newsgathering which drew me into the council chambers every Thursday afternoon: it was often



**John Stewart**

just the thrill of watching Mortensen in action.

The man was more competent at running a meeting than anyone I have ever seen in 14 years of watching politics in Mississauga. Applicants, from the most powerful corporations to the man speaking broken English and obviously intimidated by the forum were dealt with in the same deferential manner. Fairness was the hallmark of Mortensen's approach, but good humor was his special gift.

He had a way of making a point with a small joke which was more effective than all of the lecturing in the world. Many people build porches, or additions to their homes in the city without building permits, then make applications to the committee

for permission after the bylaw enforcement officer comes around.

After such an applicant had received committee approval, Mortensen would invariably suggest as the person turned to walk away that maybe the next time he put up a monstrosity in his back yard, he'd apply for a permit first.

The chairman got away with saying things which no other member could. If an applicant began to stretch the truth a little Mortensen would jump in with both feet. "Now wait just a minute," he'd scoff with a twinkle in his eye. "I've been down to your place and it's an absolute mess."

Anyone who dealt regularly with the committee soon learned that they dared to embellish the facts of their application only at the peril of suffering Mortensen's sarcastic wit.

The committee of adjustment is a common-sense committee. It weighs the intent of the City's planning guidelines and zoning laws with the practicality of what an applicant wants to do, then it makes a judgment call.

Chairing the committee was the perfect job for Mortensen who had a way of cutting through all of the misleading arguments and directing the committee to the heart of an issue. His unerring sense of good judgment has a great deal to do with the com-

mittee's sterling reputation.

But the committee was not the only passion for Mortensen. He was a municipal political junkie who loved to talk about what was happening at City Hall.

He had an infectious enthusiasm for whatever he was doing. As Mayor Hazel McCallion said in her funeral eulogy, "His enthusiasm, vitality, and love of life permeated wherever he went."

It was painful to watch such a vital man slowed by cancer. The last few times I saw him, he would always ask about my father, who also suffered from cancer. When you'd ask about his health, you'd get an entertaining dissertation on how much doctors don't know. As usual, Mortensen was deflecting attention from himself.

Mortensen's death is not only a terrible blow to his family, but to anyone in this community who cares about the quality of life here.

Every year about this time, Mortensen would come into the lobby at *The News* bearing a cheque for the Christmas Bureau Fund. He was one of its earliest and most loyal supporters.

Mayor McCallion said at his funeral that "City Hall will never be the same" without him. She might have expanded that thought to say Mississauga will never be the same.

Richard  
MORTENSEN,  
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