

Trustee still hitting the mark after 30 years

By JOHN STEWART
Staff

She's tiny. She can be pugnacious. She's a senior citizen. And she's the champ — the public education champion for 2003.

More than 30 years after she first won public office as a school trustee in Mississauga, Ruth Thompson has been awarded the ultimate accolade the Peel District School Board can award.

At its recent Showcase in Excellence Awards, Thompson was named this year's education champion — joining last year's inaugural winner Harold Brathwaite.

The award is presented to someone who has defended public education, contributed significantly at the provincial and national levels and had a lasting impact on public education.

Friends and associates say it's an honour long overdue the Ward 3 and 4 trustee, who's been a stalwart on the front lines for the Peel board, battling provincial policies and settling contentious labour issues for more years than she cares to contemplate.

In introducing Thompson to a standing ovation of parents and educators, Brathwaite noted that, "She's no shrinking violet. She's always made it clear where she stood."

In her own speech, Thompson was characteristically brief. She's always been bigger on action than words.

Thompson is also famous for seemingly being everywhere, attending numerous school events, endless board meetings and informal get-togethers. Not bad for someone who's never had a driver's licence. The trustee sloughs off suggestions that it's a big deal. She just bums rides or takes a taxi.

Former Peel Board Chair Margaret McKee, who served 14 years with Thompson and is a close friend, said, "she's a combination of honesty, common sense and caring. She's not out to get the

accolades. She always made decisions based on what she thought was right for the kids.

"There was no notion of going on to other levels of politics like her brother (former Toronto Mayor and federal Cabinet Minister David Crombie.) Education was in her blood."

Current Board Chair Janet McDougald says Thompson is an invaluable resource to her colleagues.

"Ruth has a long history with our board and she's pretty well seen it all and done it all. You'd be surprised how often history repeats itself. When something comes up, she can say, we tried that 20 years ago and it didn't work. Here is what did work."

Thompson says it's getting tougher to recover from long sessions that invariably end at 4-5 a.m. While she will be running this fall, the trustee, who just turned 65, says the next term will likely be her last.

Thompson credits her parents with giving her much of her interest in community life and politics. Her mother Vera, a long-time Port Credit resident, who died two years ago, worked on many election campaigns, not just those of her children.

Her father was a labour man, starting the milkman's union at Borden's and helping launch the printer's union at The Toronto Telegram.

McDougald says Thompson has "a background type of leadership style."

"She's never shrunk from any issue. The board depends, sometimes, on that



Ruth Thompson of the Peel District School Board has been named a champion of education.

courage. No matter what's going on, if there's a right thing to do, she'll be right there."

Although the board couldn't keep it a secret that Thompson was being named education champion, they did manage to hold a meeting while she was out of the country to give her a surprise at the

presentation. A new middle school in Churchill Meadows will be named in her honour.

What was it like hearing that news? "Kind of scary," said Thompson. "Kind of awesome too, because I know how careful the board is about naming schools. I was just so taken aback."

In the next sentence, Thompson was already putting the honour in her own kind of perspective. "In 30 years, I know there'll be lots of people asking: who do you suppose Ruth Thompson was?"

The answer is actually quite obvious — an acknowledged champion of public education.

*Peel B'ing.
Thompson, Ruth
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