

John O’Leary – Honorary Manitoban

By Bob Jones

John’s death on Tuesday, April 14, 2020 was deeply felt by his many friends in Manitoba. John Daniel O’Leary spent a considerable amount of time over the years working and visiting Manitoba. We like to think that two of his early work experiences here in the 1970’s played an important role in his formation as an advocate for literacy and social justice.

John first came to Winnipeg as a Jesuit novice in 1975 for a four month internship with L’Arche Winnipeg. L’Arche is a non-profit organization that creates homes marked by friendship and belonging for persons with developmental disabilities. Jim Lapp, current Community Leader of L’Arche Winnipeg, was there at the same time as John and shared the following recollection:

“John lived at Rosseau Court with three assistants and five people with developmental disabilities. John very quickly became a valued member of the Rosseau Court family. His sense of humour and natural ability to listen, learn, laugh, and practice hospitality were evident immediately. I was fortunate to become friends with John during his time at L’Arche and spend time with him over the years when his work or vacations brought him back to Winnipeg.”

John returned to Manitoba in 1977 as a Frontier College literacy tutor. Frontier College is a national literacy organization founded in 1899 that offers programs for children, youth, and adults in Canada. John was a literacy tutor at the Milner Ridge Correctional Centre located southeast of Beausejour, Manitoba in the Agassiz Provincial Forest. During the day he was part of the men’s work related to forestry and at night he did individual and group tutoring. Bob Jones a friend shared some memories of John’s time at Milner Ridge.

“John would spend his weekends off from his work at Milner Ridge in our home. The work he did was challenging and stressful. He was suspect in the eyes of some prisoners as being part of the corrections system and suspect in the eyes of some of the correctional officers as being an advocate for the prisoners. I remember him typically coming to our place for his weekends off, dropping his bag, saying hello, then falling asleep on the couch. Later when he was rested, he would talk about his life at Milner Ridge. John had tremendous empathy for the men serving their sentence at Milner Ridge. John was able to absorb their anger when directed at him and to remain a stable source of encouragement in difficult situations to many of the men he lived beside and tutored.

John was a very accomplished tutor, leader, and advocate for literacy and social justice. His contributions have been widely recognized in Canada. Another side of John was his ability to make friends and be part of the community. Over the years he made life-long friends in Winnipeg. These people knew the John O’Leary who went to bed reading a book, awoke and headed out to a favourite café, had breakfast and coffee, read one or two newspapers, and if it was the weekend settled in reading a book for hours. They knew that if you joined him, he put all the reading aside and participated in wide ranging conversation. He was great company. Bill Kops who got to know John in 1970’s and remained a friend over the years recalls an event that captures the Winnipeg John O’Leary.

A family Christmas tradition was to spend an evening wandering through the shops in Winnipeg's trendy Osborne Village. Many years ago on a crisp winter Friday evening a few days before Christmas, my wife and I were doing just that. Besides the many shops along Osborne, there are many restaurants, coffee shops, and cafes. A favourite of John's when he was in Winnipeg was Basil's Café. As we were winding up our shopping, I suggested we stop in at Basil's for dinner. I remember wondering if John would be there at his favourite table in his corner window seat. From the direction we were walking, I could not see his table until we were actually in front of the café. I turned my head and there he was. He was wearing his signature navy blue turtle neck and longshoreman's toque, head down reading intently, a cup of coffee within easy reach. It was a shame to invade privacy but we did. John greeted us with his wonderful smile and welcomed us with hugs and heartfelt greetings. That is how I will remember John - a warm and generous friend.

Gordon Crook, former Principal of Tec-Voc High School also remembers his friend...

When John became President of Frontier College in 1990, his role changed but his presence in Manitoba continued. During the next seventeen years, his contributions to literacy in Manitoba were evidenced through his focus on program initiatives, fund raising efforts and most significantly his never diminished commitment to literacy and education. He always had a soft spot in his heart for his adopted home, the location of his first experiences with Frontier at Bannock Point and for his connection to people in the Keystone province. Gordon Crook, a friend and colleague reminisced about his personal and professional connections with John, in Winnipeg and Toronto.

"John and I had built our friendship over the years on the personal level but as I was a teacher and eventually a school principal, it was inevitable that our professional connection would develop. I appreciated John's regular visits to Winnipeg and ensured that I always touched base when in Toronto. One visit resulted in John and I getting together in my office at the school to discuss a potential program connecting Frontier with schools in Winnipeg. We discussed a variety of possibilities, met with a few teachers and one Frontier staff person to brainstorm ideas. The program never took place at our school but the work was not in vain as it became a successful program in Winnipeg demonstrating the commitment of John and his staff. Literacy and education became an addition to our regular conversations, both in Winnipeg and at his favourite Toronto restaurant, the Fran's at College and Yonge, along with his beloved Carleton Ravens football team, the latest books we were reading, our mutual friends and our solutions to the ills of the world. I will miss those confabs and will regret not receiving the next email or post card with the comforting signature O."