

Burlington's grassroots link to modern day recycling

In 1970, housewife Roberta McGregor experienced a 'kitchen epiphany' about items usually destined for the trash

by Kathy Yanchus
Burlington Post Staff

Roberta McGregor refers to it as her "kitchen epiphany."

In the spring of 1970, the 29-year-old Burlington mother of two had just finished the dishes when she spotted a pickle jar and a can on her counter.

In that moment, what she saw in those inanimate objects would rally a small women's group of mostly young stay-at-home moms to lead a citizen army of 1,000 to make Canadian recycling history.

"It just struck me — where are these going to go? I knew there wasn't a single tin mine in North America to replace that can, and the glass would never break down and it would just sit there perpetually in the landfill site," said McGregor (formerly Roberta Golightly).

Certainly, there were environmental concerns in the media at the time about overflowing landfills eating up precious agricultural land, chatter about the toxic effects of DDT and dire warnings about the chemicals polluting the air and water.

"Anybody who was interested in the environment was terrified," she said.

"I phoned Stelco and I said, 'if I brought a truck full of cans to you, would you accept them?' They said, 'yes and if the cans are crushed, we'll give you some money.' I called Dominion Glass and asked if they would accept a truckful of glass; they said yes and they would pay us if it was colour-sorted. Mill Paper Fibre said they would accept newspaper in any condition."

So, McGregor approached her "chat" group at the now defunct Aldershot Presbyterian Church and suggested they "do a little recycling experiment" with tins, glass and paper on two consecutive Saturdays. The group was onboard, but first organized a survey of 300 Aldershot households; everyone who agreed to participate in the experiment, was given several brown paper grocery bags for their items, donated by the local Dominion store.

"We would pick them up on two succeeding



Mary Jane Boelhouwer and Roberta McGregor hold a can and a jar — the two items that launched the recycling program Burlingtonians know today. The two women were among the founding members of an Aldershot-based citizens environmental organization back in the '70s before it was really trendy to recycle. The media attention their group's early efforts to recycle helped spawn Canada's modern-day, municipal recycling programs. | photo by Riziero Vertolli - Burlington Post

weekends. We got our husbands involved, we borrowed a truck and three men went out and did the pick up on the two weekends."

McGregor, now 76, recalls standing at the corner of Townsend Avenue and LaSalle Park Road on one of those weekends, when she was approached by a Hamilton TV crew wanting an interview about what "we were doing as a group of women."

"It hit the media big time. We had five minutes on CBC radio, all of the newspapers were reporting it." Even *Chatelaine* and *Reader's Digest* published stories about the "primitive" community experiment, because there was not a city in the country with a municipal recycling program, said McGregor.

"Right from the beginning, from the first interview, I was saying that the city really needed to do

a large organized pilot project with maybe 1,000 families. So, we started pushing for that right away when the media descended."

But it would be more than a decade before the city took responsibility for recycling services.

In the meantime, once word spread about what was going on in Burlington, things "exploded."

Public interest soared.

Thinking the women behind the program were part of an established environmental organization, they were inundated with calls; people wanting to know what laundry detergent to use at the cottage, people wanting to volunteer. McGregor remembers balancing one child on her knee and cradling the phone with the other.

They hoped publishing one newsletter to answer all questions would be suffice, but people wanted

more and that led to several publications every year for 1,600 subscribers.

"A group of us got together down in my basement. We would get the newsletter together and staple it," said Mary Jane Boelhouwer, now 86.

McGregor recalled someone running the newsletters off on a Gestetner (a kind of duplication machine) at a local school and members hand delivering them.

In the midst of the media frenzy, the Glass Container Council of Canada signed them to a three-month contract as the organization was looking for large quantities of glass to experiment with glass-phalt for road surfacing.

Randomly, people began dropping bags of recyclables on McGregor's driveway, so much so that

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'We knew we were making history'

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one day, she couldn't open the side door of her house. This led to the development of a network of neighbourhood depots, which eventually grew to 21 spread across the city.

"We did feel very overwhelmed. We realized we were going to have to form an organization," said McGregor.

And that's how the group of 18 women became the core of Citizens' Committee for Pollution Control (CCPC), which would initiate the first citywide, multi-material recycling program in the country.

"At that time, we were mostly women for the simple fact that not very many women were working at that time," said McGregor.

Committees were developed and McGregor became the face of the organization.

Before they landed a volunteer with a truck, it was a convoy of personal vehicles filled with tins, glass and paper materials, driving over the Skyway Bridge en route to the Hamilton industries.

In 1971, the city provided an old house on Brant Street for sorting purposes, dubbed Canada's First Recycling Centre, but because of the tonnage of materials, the shifting building had to be abruptly closed within a month or two, said McGregor.

CCPC was then given the use of an empty public

works garage on Guelph Line, which enabled it to operate a proper industrial process.

"Trucks could drive right into the building. A truck could come from Stelco, drop the empty bin and take a full bin away. It just was a perfect setting. We knew we were making history."

That same year, CCPC approached the Ontario government with its idea of a Burlington Waste Separation Pilot Study involving 1,000 families.

"If the Ontario government would cover the cost, the city would do all of the physical picking up and we would do all the public communications, so it was a three-way pilot project," said McGregor. "The pilot project was a curbside method so that was a first examination of curbside methodology for recycling. They were doing curbside for regular garbage already."

Residents weren't provided

with containers, said McGregor.

"I think I remember it was deliberate because they wanted to test peoples' willingness and interest."

Despite the 72 per cent participation rate and positive interpretation of the results by the minister of natural resources, it would be almost another decade before local government took the leap, said McGregor.

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"A truck could come from Stelco, drop the empty bin and take a full bin away. It was just a perfect setting"

Roberta McGregor Founding member of Citizens' Committee for Pollution Control

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Aldershot housewives launched modern recycling movement

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But it was a turning point.

In 1977, although the city still wasn't prepared to take on such a program, the mayor established a task force to study the practicalities of curbside recycling of multiple materials, and included two CCPC members.

In 1981, CCPC again approached the provincial government to suggest the hiring of a contractor for curbside pickup of recyclables. When Halton's Recycled Resources was selected, Burlington became the first city in the province to use government funding to establish a municipal recycling system. CCPC carried on their efforts for another two years, parallel to those of the city, to ensure the ball wasn't dropped, said McGregor.

For its groundbreaking efforts, CCPC was recognized by the Recycling Council of Ontario and through letters of appreciation from the government. In 1975, McGregor was recognized as one of Burlington's Outstanding Women.

"It's hard to believe really what happened. To me, it was an unrepeatable citizen action. Could we, today, get 1,000 people signed up for anything?" she wonders. "Our aim was to get the responsibility of recycling shifted to government at the Ontario and local level."

"It just happened at the right time," added Boelhouwer.

"It was a time when people were concerned and they were ready to put energy and time into doing this because it was a practical thing that connected with their lifestyles and their personal sense of contributing to a safer world," said McGregor.

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Roberta McGregor (holding child) and Mary-Jane Boelhouwer were in on the ground floor of an Aldershot-based citizens grassroots effort to divert glass, tin and paper products from '70s landfill sites. | **Special to Burlington Post**

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Recycler hopes story inspires others to act

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Nobody can remember a final meeting to close the recycling centre, but CCPC treasurer Billie Houlgrave remembers turning the key in the lock for the last time.

"It had been more than a decade that we had run that program, but it was time to lay it down," said McGregor, adding CCPC was taking in very little by that time as the city's recycling program took off.

It has been 47 years since this amazing citizen action movement took place, and it's a local story that is getting lost, worries McGregor.

"We want to promote the story of what happened, not to blow our own horns but to inspire people to do something now."

In the spring of 2012, three of the original members resurfaced under the banner of a new group, Recycling Revisited. One of the reasons behind the organization is to remind people about the historic grassroots movement and to recount the story for those who never knew it.

McGregor is also determined to have CCPC's

work never be forgotten by getting all records digitized and placed with the Burlington Historical Society. She is also writing two books, one a student version of CCPC's history geared to Grades 7-12, and the other, a history of recycling in Canadian provinces.

Boelhouwer, a mother of three who eventually became a teacher and journalist, found herself even more committed to environmental issues after her CCPC experience, she said.

Back in the movement's early days, McGregor said she found herself taking on roles she didn't think she was capable of executing.

"I think I got a taste for community development, for bringing people together in a cause that matters to them, and facilitating," said McGregor, who had two more children and earned two degrees in anthropology in the ensuing years.

"You don't walk into a situation as an expert; you walk into a situation as a learner. I don't believe in top down organization; I believe in grassroots organization and this was grassroots, believe me."

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