

Michele Polinuk named 35th Citizen of the Year



Michele Polinuk, the 35th Citizen of the Year, was surprised when she learned she'd been selected, and again when her nominators and friends showed up with balloons and flowers for her.

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The balloons were a dead giveaway, and Michele Polinuk couldn't believe it – she'd been caught off guard, surprised even, twice in less than a week.

First, it was a call from Aaron Martyniw, whom she'd worked alongside on the Selkirk and District Community Foundation (SDCF) board of directors during her six-year term, which recently ended.

It was a Saturday, and with her long association with Martyniw, she easily recognized his voice on the other end of the phone. But when he identified himself as the “Chairman of Selkirk

and District Community Foundation”, Polinuk knew something was up. In fact, it quickly dawned on her exactly what was up – Martyniw was calling to tell her she'd been named the 35th Citizen of the Year.

“When he started saying ‘chair of the foundation’, I’m thinking, ‘yeah, I know that you’re the chair’,” Polinuk laughed while having tea and chatting with a reporter about the award.

“Right then I could tell he’s doing something formal and not just phoning to maybe ask me a question. And I know the timing of everything, I know the routine, I know (the selection committee) just had their meeting on Thursday, so I thought, ‘I think I know what’s coming’.”

So when she sat down for tea the following Wednesday to do the obligatory announcement interview, she likely figured the surprises were in the rear view, and she could rest easy.

But then the balloons and the flowers and about a half dozen or so of her friends, former colleagues and nominators showed up to surprise her one more time.

Obviously touched by the gesture, Polinuk thanked everyone and admitted to being somewhat speechless.

“Thank you for the nomination,” she said.

“To get nominated is such an honour and then to get chosen was just, I don’t know, breathless.”

Martyniw said Polinuk was gracious in accepting the honour, but made it clear she has no plans to ride off into the sunset.

“She told me during the call that she’s not done, and I know she’s sincere,” Martyniw said.

“I got to know Michele through the Foundation, and her dedication and drive were on full display every meeting, every event and literally every day. She puts that same energy into all she does, and I, and everyone at the Foundation, absolutely believe Michele will be a force in Selkirk, St. Andrews and St. Clements for years to come.”

Her nominators – Lena Kublick, chair of the Lord Selkirk School Division Board, Kathy Good, LSSD Executive Administrative Assistant, Jerret Long, LSSD Superintendent, Jack Bogaski, LSSD board member and Jean Oliver, former LSSD board member and Rotarian – are all also friends.

Each has worked closely with Polinuk, who this past July retired from the LSSD where for the past three years she was Superintendent. They witnessed first hand her dedication to education and more importantly, her dedication to people.

In his nominating letter, Bogaski noted Polinuk’s support of the performing arts in both elementary and high school, her promotion of literacy and dedication to the I Love to Read program and called it all just “the tip of the iceberg”.

“I have to say that I am somewhat surprised that Michele has not been considered for the Citizen of the Year honour in the past,” Bogaski wrote, sighting her leadership throughout the COVID-19 pandemic not just in the LSSD but throughout the province.

“Michele met all the challenges that COVID-19 presented head on and in a very innovative way, changing challenges into opportunities so that the education of students would not be severely interrupted.”

A Selkirk girl born and raised, Polinuk’s teaching career began in Winnipeg and eventually led her home to the LSSD.

Her list of volunteer involvement is too long to list in its entirety, but includes the Selkirk Rotary Club, where she’s held the position of president twice, the SDCF, Education Research Development & Innovation Corporation, Interlake Eastern Regional Health Authority, Interlake Eastern Regional Health Foundation and the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents.

She said her commitment to community comes from her parents and grandparents who supplied a lifetime worth of good examples for her to follow.

“I learned growing up that you needed to be a part of the community, it’s just what you do,” she said.

“That’s what I always saw. My dad and mom were involved in so many different clubs and organizations and my dad actually ran the parade for a while. I saw them not only going to things but bringing things home and working on them at home.”

Her dad Ernie Malis passed away in 2009. Her mom, Sylvia, is an active volunteer to this day.

“My mom is still volunteering with the (Our Daily Bread) Soup Kitchen and House of Economy and doing funeral lunches and she’s 78-years-old.”

Polinuk’s volunteering really ramped up in the early 2000s and with the encouragement of her dad and her husband, Gary, she moved from smaller events like hockey tournaments and bonspiels to the 2003 Western Canada Summer Games where she co-chaired the waterfront festival.

She’s a recruiter’s dream, admitting she has two character traits that predispose her to volunteering.

“I don’t say no very often,” she laughed.

“And the problem with me is that I don’t know what a little bit is. I go all in. I can’t just do a little bit, I have to be all in, be all involved.”

Jean Oliver, who has worked alongside Polinuk on the school board and in the Rotary Club, can attest to that. It was Oliver who approached Polinuk about co-chairing the events at the 2003 Games and, with her friend Charlene Henrikson, Polinuk worked for three years and established a new base line for entertainment at the Games.

“We were told at the conclusion of the games that these were the best events of the games and the best entertainment ever in the history of the games,” Oliver said.

“It was their commitment to share local talent with the athletes and their families that displayed their love for the culture of our community.

“The Rotary motto of ‘Service above Self’ is demonstrated in all that Michele does.”

Polinuk is honoured and humbled by her friends’ and colleagues’ words, and with the award, which has a special meaning to her.

“I think the word ‘citizen’ is the critical piece of it, and sometimes that’s lost in our day and age of social media,” she said.

“We need to keep the word citizen alive, it’s something that we teach in the schools, the whole citizenship piece, doing what you can, rounding out your life as much as you can, helping yourself, helping your family, helping others, that’s what keeps our world ticking.”

Polinuk has the distinction of being named the Citizen of the Year in a year when the annual gala celebration in her honour can’t take place because of a global pandemic, but for her, an admitted ‘glass-half-full’ kinda gal, that makes it all the more special.

And though she admitted the big evening in her honour, with family and friends, would have been wonderful, she relished the kind gesture of her nominators surprising her with balloons and flowers.

“I like being unique. I like doing things in a different way,” she said.

“It’s just so intimate and personal.”

To watch a video of Polinuk’s nominators and friends surprising her go to:
Twitter: SelkirkDCF@DcfSelkirk Instagram: selkirkdcf or click [HERE](#).

The Selkirk and District Community Foundation is a charitable organization that provides financial support to charitable causes and agencies in the region, which includes Selkirk, St. Andrews and St. Clements. Gifts from donors enable the Foundation to support countless groups and individuals in our community. The Foundation has given in excess of \$2.7 million to more than 125 local charities and community organizations during its 25 years. For more details contact SDCF Executive Director Bev Clegg at 204.785.9755.