

37th Citizen of the Year – Milt Pedwell

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Pedwell with some of the many young people he's impacted over the years.

On a soggy, Saturday morning, when almost no one would think of putting a canoe in the water, there was a crowd gathering at the Selkirk Canoe Kayak Centre (SCKC), an unassuming building tucked off the Selkirk slough.

None of them were there to paddle though, but instead to honour the man who taught so many how to paddle, how to stay safe on the water, how to respect nature and perhaps by default, how to live a good life.

Pedwell, who started the paddling club more than 30 years ago, has been named the 37th Citizen of the Year, and when he walked through the door, he's walked through a thousand times and was greeted by friends cheering and chanting his name, it was obvious just how touched he was.

"Well, I never expected anything like this," Pedwell said in response to the welcome.

And when Selkirk & District Community Foundation Chairperson Shauna Curtin further explained to Pedwell that he was the Citizen of the Year, his chin dropped, he looked down and fell silent for a moment. Then he spoke.

"Thank you all very much," Pedwell said.

"Anything I've ever done for this club, I've always had a whole pile of people helping me."

"I've had a heck of a pile of fun and I'm gonna keep on doing it as long as you'll have me."

It may be true that he had help, but it was Pedwell, who upon arriving in his retirement community of Selkirk in 1991, set up a table at the Selkirk mall to recruit people to form a paddling club. He was the leader then, and there's no denying, he's the leader now.

For Curtin, Pedwell is a most deserving recipient.

"Milt's nomination is like a short story, his life is so interesting and his commitment to paddling and people is inspiring," she said.

“And here in this room today, the love and respect for this wonderful man is overwhelming. The Foundation is more than thrilled to be a part of this moment. Congratulations to Milt.”

Corrine Johnson, current President of SCKC, the group that nominated Pedwell, spoke on behalf of the club members who were there to celebrate with Pedwell Oct. 15. She started by calling him ‘one of a kind’.

“I want for you to take a moment and drink this all in. Look around at some of the people whose lives you have so deeply impacted. Take a moment to realize the impact you have made,” she said.

“This was your dream and you have made it an amazing reality. Over the years you created this beautiful place and taught so many people so many things. You created a safe place for all without judgment or prejudice. Your legacy will forever be known and associated with this club and every person and child that has had the privilege of meeting you.”

The overwhelming consensus was that Pedwell has the ability to teach paddling, but to somehow also help you navigate more than the waterways – he helps you navigate through life.

Kids are drawn to him, says SCKC board member Katrine Buisse, who told a story of how Pedwell teaches kids in summer camp about nature and makes them part of the wolf pack. The members do a special wolf call and they enthusiastically will let the call out anywhere and anytime they see Milt.

“Milt always tells this story about one time he was shopping...and all the sudden he hears, ‘ouuhhh, ouuhh’ so he’s wondering what the heck is going on,” Buisse said.

“He looks around and there’s this little girl that was in the summer camp and she’s howling to him, showing him that she’s a part of the wolf pack. It just shows that kids never forget and they always know they’re forever in the wolf pack with Milt.”

Bonny Wynnobel shared a similar story about this past summer’s camp. Brother and sister, Jacoby and Addison were camp veterans and Jacoby in particular was looking forward to seeing Milt. Unfortunately, Milt wasn’t going to attend that day. Wynnobel said his disappointment was obvious, so she went and picked Milt up and brought him to the club.

“I brought (Milt) down to the camp and Jacoby was by the dock and all of the sudden what do we hear? An animal call from Jacoby,” she said.

“It just made Milt’s day.”

Brett Mitchell, last year's Citizen of the Year, came to know Pedwell when he too was a newcomer to the city. Mitchell and his wife Janet were raising three young boys and their neighbour, a guy named Milt, took a liking to the young fellas.

"Milt would always be interested in what my boys had to say. And they of course, because there was this gentleman across the street that seemed to be interested in their lives as much as he was, they were always over at Milt's house," Mitchell said.

"They still talk about Milt today...it's not just my kids, it's every kid in this club and many others who he has impacted in this community, and he so deserves this."

Leanne Doubleday, past president of SCKC, agreed.

"Milt has put so much time into this club. When I first came on the board, and then became president, I nicknamed Milt the Godfather of the centre, because he truly, truly, is," Doubleday said.

"I can't say enough about Milt and his positivity and what he has brought to this club."

The Godfather was also Pedwell's nickname after he competed with a club member in the 2017 marathon race in The Pas, winning the Mixed Masters event. He was the oldest paddler and so well respected by his colleagues that they too gave him that moniker.

Pedwell helped mold some pretty successful paddlers too, with several who began under his tutelage achieving spots on national teams. Others went on to coaching success and of the many that didn't achieve that high status, they simply became exceptional paddlers in several disciplines, include canoe, kayak, marathon canoeing and dragon boat racing.

Congratulations to a most deserving recipient of the 37th Citizen of the Year.

Milt Pedwell will be celebrated over the coming weeks on SDCF social media, so please tune in. His bio is available for reading on sdcf.ca.

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 \$3.4 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.