

## Prescott's her pride and joy

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Tenacity. That one word best describes Sandra Lawn, a driven community leader who has spent more than four decades of her life fighting to make Prescott and the region a better place.

When Lawn drives around the community that became her home more than four decades ago, she sees the effects of her drive and determination.

The most obvious is the Sandra Lawn Harbour, which includes a marina, walking path and amphitheatre that hosts another endeavour in which she has been deeply involved, the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival.

But it doesn't end there. Lawn has also been instrumental and a leader in making other projects a reality, before, during and after her term as town mayor from 1977 to '91: building the Prescott medical centre, adding the second floor of the fire hall, planting trees at various parks in the community, creating a museum and fundraising for the expansion of the Prescott Public Library.

Outside of the town, Lawn has also been a project manager for the Eastern Ontario Model Forest and chairman of the Southeastern Ontario Mental Health Implementation Task Force, a mission with special meaning for her after her mother developed Alzheimer's disease.

Lawn was also chairperson of the Brockville and Area YMCA when the facility expanded, and more recently, she has been project manager at the Ontario East Wood Centre and Eco-Industrial Park at Johnstown, where the first company, Greenfield Ethanol, started production in December 2008.

Does she enjoy seeing all that she has done?

"It's a very, very good feeling," she commented during an interview this week in her historic Prescott home. "I try very hard not to be possessive."

Lawn is quick to point out she hasn't done it alone. Each project has come to reality as the result of the work of a committed group of people, and Lawn's own drive and determination have played a large role.

She credits her parents for setting the example.

Sandra's father was a mining engineer in the frontier-like North, and her mother was a community leader, involved in her church, girl guides and other activities in the various mining communities where they lived.



Lawn's spirit of determination evolved over time. While studying at Queen's University in Kingston, Sandra -then named Graham -told the registrar that she wanted to be an engineer like her father.

"The registrar said, 'We don't encourage girls to be engineers, so why not study chemistry,'" Lawn recalls. "We women of the Fifties, we always did what we were told.

"I would not accept that advice now."

Lawn went on to complete an honours science degree in biology and chemistry in 1959. She wanted to continue studying, but lacked the funding, so she went to the Ontario College of Education in Toronto to become a high-school teacher, intending to return to university to earn a doctorate in entomology.

Instead, she met her husband, Robert Lawn, a fellow education student, on the beach of Lake Simcoe on Canada Day. They married exactly one year later on July 1.

"When I was mayor, we used to have fireworks on Canada Day," Sandra Lawn recalls. "We can never forget our anniversary."

Following graduation, both Lawns became high-school teachers, moving from Smiths Falls to Ottawa to Carleton Place and finally settling in Prescott, where Robert became head of the history department at South Grenville District High School.

By then, the Lawns had two daughters -Andrea, now a school principal in Kingston and a married mother of two children; and Kerrie, now a federal civil servant and also a married mother of two.

Julia, the youngest, was born soon after. Julia Lawn is now a lawyer in Vancouver and is also married, with three children.

Lawn quickly became involved in her community, first as a volunteer at Central Public School and later with an environmental group, Organization HOPE, or Helping Out Prescott's Environment.

She volunteered to teach an environmental course to grades 7 and 8 students, who she took on a tour of Prescott's waterfront, then an environmental wasteland of discarded industrial debris.

"I think that's what really inspired me," she recalls of that walk.

The members of Organization HOPE, however, realized their impact on the environment would be minor if they only painted garbage cans and did other small cleanup projects at the waterfront.

"We began to realize, as a committee, that we would be doing that as very old ladies, painting garbage cans, so I ran for council," says Lawn.

Encouraged by then-mayor Pat Kingston, Sandra successfully ran for Prescott council in 1973 and her term began in January 1974.

"I was the first woman elected to the council since a Mrs. Burke was elected to council in the 1940s," she notes.

Lawn quickly became a true community leader and even managed to earn a master's in public administration from Queen's University during her term of office, while she and Robert raised their children.

But Lawn learned politics was not always easy. She gave her parents a subscription to the Prescott Journal, which her mother clipped anytime there was a mention of Lawn.

"Then I stopped the subscription when a reporter started saying mean things, very unfair things."

In politics, she notes, "You have to have a very thick skin. But my mother said, 'Who likes someone with a skin so thick that nothing affects you?'"

She tries not to let the naysayers detract from her missions.

Even in the early days, when she rode her bicycle around Prescott because the Lawns had only one vehicle, some people criticized her for that and said she would not make a good choice as councillor.

"I just think there are some miserable people in the world," she says.

"I am tenacious. I don't give up easily," Lawn adds.

"I have strong people who work with me, and I know what I am talking about. I don't say anything unless I am 100 per cent sure."

She is driven to achieve goals.

She tells a story to illustrate: "Someone called (the late lawyer) Barry Laushway and said, 'Tell that woman to stop bothering us.' Barry said, 'Do what she wants because she won't stop until she gets it.' It was someone from the Treasury Board because the federal government was supposed to buy that land we had rezoned from industrial."

The federal government did buy that land -and it is now home to a riverside walking path in Prescott.

What is her greatest accomplishment?

"The most obvious is the waterfront, the visible one. But I think the invisible is more important. That was giving Prescott back a sense of pride in the community. That was epitomized in 1984, when the Queen came to Prescott. That was a pivotal time in the community's self-awareness."

Her only regret is not preparing herself adequately before running for Parliament in 1993 and 1997, when she lost to Liberals Jim Jordan and Joe Jordan respectively.

"When I ran for Parliament, I would have benefitted from more experience and more knowledge. That's my greatest disappointment, not being elected as a member of Parliament ... but I did well, I didn't fail miserably. It was a wonderful experience."

She says there is a silver lining to not winning, in that, "I am not beholden to anybody or any party -now I do my own thing."

She also has time for some hobbies, including reading, gardening, tennis and swimming. The couple dotes on their seven grandchildren during visits.

At age 71, Lawn hopes to continue to be involved in community projects well into her 80s - and perhaps even until she is 100, she says.

"I will stay involved as long as I can, if the things I am doing are worthwhile and necessary."