



Six Alberta residents honoured for excellence in volunteering

BY KEVIN MAIMANN, EDMONTON SUN

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Dennis Anderson poses with a certificate after being honoured with 5 other Albertans with a Caring Canadian ceremony at the Alberta Government House in Edmonton, Alberta on Tuesday, August 28, 2012. Anderson has mental health advocate for 40 years. His accomplishments include founding the Alberta Alliance on Mental Health and the creation of the Chimo project, that uses pets in the treatment of people with mental illness.
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Dennis Anderson was just 11 years old when he tried to end his life.

Feeling neglected at home, he walked to the edge of a bridge and prepared to jump.

That's when he felt his pet dog tug at his leg.

“When you're young, you see somebody on television jumping off a bridge and you maybe don't give it as the would when you're older,” said Anderson, who is a longtime volunteer and former Tory cabinet minister.

“If my dog hadn’t grabbed my leg ... I would not have been here. That showed something cared.”

That experience stuck with him for decades and in 1999, it inspired Anderson to create the Edmonton-based Project, which uses volunteers and their dogs to treat people with mental illness.

That’s one of several projects that earned him a Governor General’s Caring Canadian Award during a ceremony at Government House Tuesday.

“I’ve always been amazed that this great help to mankind, this unquestioning love that we get from animals, is so often recognized the way it should,” he said.

Edmonton-born Anderson ran a crisis treatment centre in Toronto at age 17 and moved to Calgary at 20, where he became involved with the Canadian Mental Health Association, later becoming president of its Alberta chapter.

After leaving the legislature, he founded the Alberta Alliance on Mental Health and Mental Illness, which unites nonprofit organizations and mental health professionals in an effort to help them speak to government with one voice. The alliance pushes for community-based mental health services.

“Because of my not-great childhood, I had a particular empathy for people who came from the bad side of the street,” Anderson said.

Today, he feels things have progressed, but says the province still has a long way to go in terms of helping those with mental illnesses.

Six longtime Alberta volunteers received awards Thursday, including two other Edmontonians.

Gloria Aaron was honoured for her 57 years as a volunteer with the Edmonton Symphony Society, the National Jewish Women and the Canadian Cancer Society.

Also recognized was Margaret Day, who co-founded the Londonderry Community League in 1968.

Anderson feels the awards should be seen as a recognition of the positive work all Canadians do.

“The problem with these awards, of course, is that everybody who deserves it can’t get it,” he said. “I’m very lucky. I was one of those few who have been able to be recognized in that regard.”

More than 1,300 volunteers from across Canada have received Caring Canadian Awards since 1995, including many Albertans.

kevin.maimann@sunmedia.ca

@SunKevinM

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