

Remembering Don Wedge (1930-2010)

Indie columnist driven by love for Westmount

BY LAUREEN SWEENEY

Don Wedge loved Westmount. That's what it all came down to.

Tireless volunteer, citizen watchdog, environmental activist and columnist, he was driven by a passion for the community that was almost paternalistic. He could be blunt and chiding, but always caring and wanting Westmount to achieve only the best.

Sadly, his death July 20 has left the community without one of its strongest advocates for public consultation and transparency in municipal affairs. He was widely known through his participation at public meetings and his weekly Civic Alert column in the *Independent*.

"We were planning to celebrate his 80th birthday on September 21," said his wife Sylvia. "Now we'll be celebrating his life."

A minute of silence was held at the start of the city council meeting August 2 "for the passing of a good, loyal friend to Westmount," as Mayor Peter Trent described him.

Don died at the Royal Victoria Hospital after some four months of back-and-forth hospitalization between the Vic and the Catherine Booth in an ongoing battle with heart-related problems. According to his wishes, his body was donated to science.

'Good trooper'

"It's been a long haul and he was a good trooper," Sylvia said.

Don had triple by-pass surgery more than 10 years ago. This was followed by a bout with cancer and ongoing cardiac complications, which eventually took their toll.

Despite it all, he carried on relentlessly. He refused to slow his pace or withdraw from the steady round of council meetings and public hearings in Westmount and at the island-wide level to ensure nothing

"slipped through," as he used to say.

He then reported back, with his own take on the events, not only in his column, but also through his volunteer positions with the Westmount Municipal Association (WMA) and the Westmount Healthy City Project, which he continually served since its inception two decades ago.

Long career in music

Don considered his community work as a switch in careers, although it consumed his years of retirement from the music industry, most of them in England (see separate story, p. 4). He was an avid fan of the big bands (Ted Heath) and jazz (Ella Fitzgerald and Blossom Dearie).

Mentor and dogged researcher, he was strong willed and refused to let go of an idea once it got under his skin.

One of his regrets, he confided recently, was not having had his tape recorder with him in April when he unexpectedly found himself sharing a hospital room and candid conversations with Westmount MNA Jacques Chagnon, whom he had come to know and respect over the years (see story May 4, p. 10).

Another disappointment was being prevented by the same hospitalization from receiving in person May 1 the Quebec Lieutenant-Governor's Medal for outstanding community work carried out by persons over age 65.

He had been nominated by the city at the behest of Mayor Peter Trent just as he had been in 1997 when he won Quebec's Mérite Municipal award for exemplary citizen volunteerism to the local community and beyond.

His contributions have also been recognized by the Rotary Club of Westmount, which made him a Paul Harris Fellow, a distinction not usually accorded to a non-member of the worldwide service organization.

Don's father stimu- continued on p. 4



Don remembered

Mayor Peter Trent:

“I knew Don over such a long time, from the late 1980s. He was an unofficial member of city council as far as I was concerned. He overcame his shyness and unilingualism and understood that as a citizen advocate he had to understand French.

“I remember the days he used to travel all the way out to Montreal East by public transit to attend BAPE (Bureau d’audiences publiques sur l’environnement) hearings and then go up to TMR for waste management meetings.

“He did so, so that his views would be taken seriously. He always did his homework and was infallibly polite.

“Where he’s gone, there will be no smog, no undulating sidewalks, everybody composts, rides public transport, and no celestial cities will be merged. I’ll miss his gruff voice and solid advice.”

Tom Thompson

WMA president (1989-92)

Former city councillor

Former chair of the Healthy City Project

“Don had a knack for inspiring others to become involved in what was going on in the region and to understand its impact on Westmount. He knew that by encouraging others it would have a ripple effect.

“On the Westmount Municipal Association (WMA), I got to know some of the key players through him.

“I remember one day he took me way out east to see the new sewage collection and water filtration plant of the MUC (Montreal Urban Community). He got me interested in the environment. Don saw his role behind the scenes

as encouraging people to attend meetings of the MUC and to take the best ideas from other places and customize them to Westmount’s needs.

“He made a very effective contribution and continued to have an impact on the WMA.”

Former mayor Karin Marks:

“He saw himself as a non-elected representative of the public but he took his role very seriously. It was as if he were an elected member of council, paid to do the job and be well informed. He tried to push us on council to move what was important up the scale of urgency. He felt the only way to do this was to keep battering at council. He helped me to see the urgency of sustainable development and to move it up the scale.

“He was really unique. There are not many who take that amount of time, energy and concern and are so well informed on such a wide breadth of subjects. He had always done his homework.

“He will be missed not only in Westmount but in other places. There are many people who knew Don Wedge – and respected him – in Baie d’Urfé and in Quebec. It was pretty amazing.”

Sally Aitken

Founder, Healthy City Project

“Don was a very special friend, not only to us but to the whole community. Although he had strong opinions, he never sought power for himself. He preferred to work apolitically on items that affected the environment and Westmount.”

At a glance

The following list reflects some of Don Wedge’s positions and activities over the last quarter century:

- Active participant in city council meetings;
- Founding member (1990) and chairman (in 1995) of the environmental committee of the city’s Healthy City Project;
- Member of the Healthy City steering committee, which advises city council on issues of environment and safety;
- A vice-president of the Westmount Municipal Association (WMA);
- Spokesman for the environment group STOP on all waste management issues in the 1990s;
- Delegate to the National Packaging Protocol Task Force (1994);
- Member of Environment Canada’s Issue Table on control of

perchloroethylene, a solvent used in dry cleaning;

- Secretary of the Seniors of Westmount Action Group (SWAG);
- Member, CLSC Seniors’ Advisory Committee;
- Active in the demerger fight, helping set up community groups in communities needing extra strength such as Verdun and Dorval.

His work on behalf of seniors’ safety, in particular their ability to remain mobile as pedestrians, led to an adjustment in the city’s specifications for sidewalk construction, decreasing the height of the curb at driveway cuts to maintain a more even sidewalk, as well as earlier snow clearing at bus stops.

His efforts on behalf of the WMA included an annual survey of members on municipal issues to provide important data to the city on assessing the needs and opinions of citizens.

Wedge was Westmount

BY DAVID PRICE, PUBLISHER

Don Wedge was an unflagging supporter of the *Independent* and he will be missed.

These two thoughts might sound like boilerplate: he was a “supporter” and “he will be missed.” But that perception couldn’t be further from the truth.

From Day One, Don went out of his way to support what we were doing, including floating the idea that he should be on the paper’s list of original supporters – even though he was writing for a competing paper at the time!

He took a risk in joining our team. In sharp contrast to his previous venue, we were a twice-a-month, not-even-one-year-old paper when he joined us – and housed inside an entrepreneurial firm (as we still are). But he thought what we were doing was important to Westmount and he wanted to be here with us, itself a compliment to the paper’s team and a boost to our early prospects.

He will be missed because he was a part of the paper’s editorial process as well as a columnist. He pored over every issue that he could, aided by his wife Sylvia, whose comments he would integrate into one commentary for us. It was not all compliments, of course. He had certain things

– both perennial and fleeting – that he didn’t like and he would tell us so in his characteristic grumble, “I’ve given up reading ____!”

But that ended up being a compliment, too. He cared enough to do this work and thought enough of us to share his thoughts.

And those thoughts were much broader ranging than many would think. It was his idea, for instance, that we do the fashion-oriented Trendsetter column.

He had all sorts of unexpected perspectives. We once chatted about the project to rejuvenate the vacant Empress/Cinema V on Sherbrooke at Girouard. He was skeptical about its prospects, “There’s no parking.”

“But Don the environmentalist,” I said, “should be happy with that.”

“Maybe. But I am thinking as Don the real estate developer.”

I also admired his persistence in the face of his final health challenges. When he could, he would read the draft paper from his hospital bed and, when we last spoke a week or two before his death, he was mulling over the idea of a mini-column to be written during dialysis.

His gallows humour about the whole unpleasant business epitomized the best of British *sang froid*.

Over the course of his final illness, the treatment for one system’s problems put an added strain on others. “It is a race to see which fails first,” he coolly summarized.

He once told me how many heart attacks he had suffered. I expressed amazement. “Yes,” he deadpanned, “but there is an upper limit.”

The last word on Don has to be two: Westmount and newspapers. He looked

out for this city in a way that very few do, even if they’ve lived here longer or have greater potential to effect rapid change. He was always worried about perpetuating negative stereotypes about Westmount, but came to embody a positive one: the engaged, environmentally conscious resident.

And he loved newspapers. If heaven has one, I am sure that Don is already writing for it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

‘SIR WEDGE’ WILL BE MISSED

It was spring 2002 when Don Wedge asked me to join the board of the Westmount Municipal Association (WMA).

At the monthly board meetings, I remarked that the WMA president, Kathleen Duncan, who would later become a city councillor, usually addressed Don as “Sir Wedge.” Over the years that I came to know Don, it was clear that the appellation fit him well. Don epitomized the ideal of the knight and his code of chivalry: always ready to fight battles for the welfare of all; despising pecuniary reward; eschewing unfairness, meanness, and deceit; at all

times speaking the truth; and persevering to the end in any enterprise begun.

The consummate volunteer, he was always ready to offer his help and be available to serve where needed. And he did so without fuss or fanfare, in his softspoken, graceful manner.

During my years as president of the WMA, I often benefited from Don’s wise counsel. I will miss him greatly, as will many other Westmounters.

To Sylvia and family: Helen and I extend our heartfelt sympathies. You will be in our thoughts and prayers.

HENRY OLDERS, LANSDOWNE AVE.

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EDITOR: Kristin McNeill
CHIEF REPORTER: Laureen Sweeney
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HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

Stories and letters

Kristin McNeill: 514.223.3578
indie@westmountindependent.com

Advertising & Sales

Arleen Candiotti: 514.223.3567
advertising@westmountindependent.com

Accounting

Beth Hudson: 514.223.6138
office@westmountindependent.com

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Sherbrooke-Valois Inc., 310 Victoria Ave., #105, Westmount, QC H3Z 2M9
Fax: 514.935.9241



Don Wedge offers the WMA’s thanks to retiring president Henry Olders at the annual general meeting during its centennial year, May 5, 2008.

Father inspired civic interest

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lated his son's early interest in village council meetings, he wrote. This "created a wish in me to empower others to improve their circumstances, which became visible only in my 'retirement'."

Once he began involving himself in social issues in the mid-1980s, he became immersed. They evolved from the environmental into the more political side, including the challenges of the now defunct Montreal Urban Community and eventually into writing.

He was instrumental in encouraging Westmount to become a pioneer among Quebec municipalities in recycling and anti-pesticide use and instigated Westmount's successful stand against the elimination of the 63 bus line in 1996.

He was also considered to be a credible spokesperson on issues of citizen consultation, preservation of green space, the treatment and disposal of waste material, hazardous materials, landfill and incineration.

Initially, he worked with WeACT (the Westmount Environmental Action group), STOP and the Westmount Healthy City Project.

He was also elected to the boards of

Seniors of Westmount Action Group – a forerunner of Contactivity Centre – as well as the WMA and Transport 2000.

Fought for demerger

It was during the demerger fight that he launched his column. Called Democra-Cité Alert, it went out as an email letter to subscribers on behalf of the inter-city lobby group.

The column evolved into a personal report card on city hall's performance, his main fields of interests and the struggle of the reconstituted cities within the new island-wide agglomeration. It ran in the *Westmount Examiner*, before Don joined the *Indie* team in January 2008, eight months after the launch of the new paper.

"He is invaluable to the community and the municipality as a resource person on these issues," stated the city's submission for his Mérite Municipal award. That was 13 years ago.

And the citation continued to be just as valid in 2010.

Tomorrow was always just another day in Don's ongoing causes – the same chapter to be continued next time we spoke. As he often said in signing off on the continuing saga: "Bye for a bit."

Life before Westmount

BY LAUREEN SWEENEY

Yes, Don Wedge did have a life before coming to Westmount. But he was always somewhat coy about the details. It was almost as if it only began 32 years ago with his move into the community.

He was born and raised in the Walsall area of the south Staffordshire coalfield in the Midlands. He was the eldest of three boys. Brothers Michael and Peter continue to live in England.

After training at the Birmingham College of Technology, Don carried out his military service, working in administration services of the Royal Air Force.

He apprenticed in heat and ventilation engineering but soon moved to London and switched into the music world. He wrote and edited with *New Musical Express*, a popular weekly paper, where he met future wife Sylvia. He later worked with *Billboard*, a trade publication.

'Huge adjustment'

He eventually branched out into the production of records. It was with PolyGram records that he moved to California

in 1974 to work temporarily.

"We lived in Los Angeles and Hollywood for about six months before being moved to Greenwich, Connecticut," Sylvia recalled. "It was a huge adjustment and we fully expected to return to the UK."

Instead, they moved to Montreal in 1975, lived in Beaconsfield North and moved to Westmount in 1978 at the same time as traveling across Canada with their two daughters.

Roberta now lives in London, England. Joanna resides in Toronto with her husband Mike and their two children Sebastian and Sophie.

They became Canadian citizens in 1980 "so we could vote," Sylvia points out. After leaving PolyGram a few years later, Don attempted to introduce a computerized financial information service but he was, Sylvia said, "too far ahead of the game."

He was always on the cutting edge of social movements or new technologies, she noted. This included spearheading the conversion of a large rundown house in London into what today would be known as condos.



Don Wedge, 1985.



Don Wedge in his Royal Air Force days, c. 1953.