

If anyone ever deserved the description “gentleman”, it was Jim Profit

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

Since arriving in Guelph some 20-odd years ago, I have been uplifted and inspired by three individuals in particular. Each dedicated his life to improving our world and sharing whatever knowledge he had about how to do that. And each has died.

In 2005 we lost horticulturalist Henry Koch; in 2009 we lost outdoor education teacher Mike Elrick; now we have lost Jim Profit, the public face of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph. All were taken long before their respective primes and I struggle to make sense of it all.

By the time this column is published Jim Profit’s funeral will be a recent memory, and many column inches in this newspaper have already been dedicated to this wonderful man. Here are a few more.

Last Monday’s event was very powerful. I’m not normally big on funerals, or the whole church thing, come to that, but that is a comment about me, not the guy for whom the funeral was held. The power came from the love that this man inspired.

It was one of those strange quirks of fate that brought Jim Profit and a host of local community activists together. If a greedy developer from Markham hadn’t tried to skirt the city’s planning process 20 years ago, we would likely never have met.

A lapsed agnostic, whatever church background I did know was decidedly Anglican, and decidedly distant. In the 1990s, ironically, I found myself spending an increasing amount of time in churches – albeit in the meeting rooms, not the sanctuaries. Jim was at many of those meetings.

Given Jim’s affinity for the land, his support for all things green and his sense of social justice, it was natural that he would find common cause with activists, whatever their philosophy on matters spiritual may have been. The only real difference was that Jim attributed the wonders of the world to God, while many of us who ended up working with him over the years were perhaps more comfortable attributing them to Mother Nature.

Like so many practices that we have forgotten about in the name of short-term so-called efficiency, respect for the soil was the key to Jim’s sense of ecology, and a growing number of others see the long-term logic in that approach, whatever religious path they may or may not choose to follow.

When that very way of life was threatened by the big W, it wasn't hard to understand how so many folks like me – non-church goers - soon found themselves sitting next to people they had never met before and would likely never come across in our daily lives.

Early on in the protracted planning process that led to the big box power centre at Woodlawn and Woolwich, my wife and I were invited to have a get-to-know-you dinner with the Jesuits. I was soon to learn that my limited view of clergy was way out of date.

After a wonderful meal, and some great conversation, Jim was filling up my wine glass for the second time and I solemnly announced that I was almost ready to convert. We still laugh about that.

We spent many happy evenings as Jim's dinner guests, and found the Jesuits to be marvelous companions, with stories from far and wide, and insights worthy of any Oxford University forum (or so I Imagined).

The many post-public meeting pints at the Woolly brought many local heathens closer to the good folks at St. Ignatius and introduced us to a piece of land that is truly special, and very much worth preserving.

Even when it was clear the legal system had, as usual, favoured the guy with the most money, a final challenge led by a local citizen resulted in a settlement that has allowed the Jesuit Centre to continue to operate.

It seems Jim, as in all things, found solace and even religious inspiration in his final journey. And he in turn inspired so many with his dignity, his passion and, above all, his gentleness. There was never any blame.

I wish I could do that. From my jaundiced eye, all I can see is that the three greatest inspirations that Mother Nature (or whomever) placed on this earth in my neck of the woods have all been taken long before their time.

And that sucks.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)