

‘The Pier’

The Story Behind the Award

The Honourable Mayann Francis, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia

For the first 18 years of my life, I lived in Whitney Pier. Others called it different things – many of them derogatory – but for me, ‘The Pier’ was always just home.

Whitney Pier was a child of the industrialization boom that swept through Cape Breton in the last years of the 19th century and early part of the 20th. Hard to imagine now, but people came from around the world to Cape Breton in search of employment, in search of a better life for themselves and their children.

They came from many different countries and experiences. Ukrainians, Poles and Lebanese left their homelands and crossed oceans to come to this island. There were Jewish people and West Indians crowded in with the descendants of earlier waves of Scottish and Irish immigration. On the streets of Whitney Pier, conversations could be heard in a dozen different languages and dialects. As well as stocking meat and potatoes, local shopkeepers now had to find the fixings for ox tail soup.

Churches, temples and synagogues were built to feed the spiritual hunger of the newly arrived. Halls were built to meet the cultural needs. Indeed, Whitney Pier was multi-cultural decades before the term was even invented.

It would have been easy for these new Canadians to have lived in silos of separation – divided as they were by language, culture, religion, even colour. Instead, the people began to coalesce around an idea. They developed a common identity.

For despite all their differences, they had powerful commonalities. They were all strangers in a strange land. Their menfolk faced the same dangers in the mills and the mines for shockingly low wages. Their wives and children breathed the same orange air. They were working class people, bound together by the daily struggle for survival.

I hold no illusions about the Pier’s physical and economic conditions back then. It was bordered by dreary industrial sites that spewed pollution over the neighbourhood and into the homes. The housing stock was inadequate.

Whitney Pier was not rich. Most of its people struggled to put bread on the table, to properly cloth their children, and even themselves. My own family was not immune. My father was the head of small church that drew its congregation from the same working class community.

I remember food being sent down the road or passed over the backyard fence. Every Saturday I would wait to see what food was going to be sent to our home. Usually, it was wonderfully odiferous Caribbean food. It was not unusual to see a pie or two being sent to someone’s home.

My mother made most of our clothing. And when soot would descend on her freshly washed sheets, she would drag them back inside to hand scrub them clean. When we outgrew our clothes, they were sent to other families in the neighborhood. Nothing was wasted.

But despite the material shortcomings, despite the multitude of reasons for despair that existed in Whitney Pier at that time, the community did not lack commitment to its members. An almost tribal pride grew up from within. A sense of place was born, a place of connection, a place of reaching out and of looking out. The many “I’s” had become a singular “we.”

Shopkeepers, many of them Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution in their home countries, allowed customers to pay as they could. Fishmongers went from door to door selling seafood at low prices. Those who could afford food would cook and share it with those without. People who had difficulty paying bills were often helped by someone in the community. Credit unions were formed to help people save or borrow money to be reinvested in the community.

The care went beyond the material. My own father would give boys who got into trouble chores to do around the church. With the blessing of their mothers and fathers, the youths were put to work polishing the brass candlesticks on the altar or sweeping the church steps.

There was a sense that everyone was responsible for raising the children in the community.

I myself was a beneficiary of this community caring. Despite my parents' great belief in the power of education, there was no money in our home for university. So instead, I studied to become an x-ray technician. This is a fine and important profession, but still university beckoned me.

While money may have been in short supply in our home, faith was in abundance. My parents had faith that somehow a way would be found for me to go to university.

Their prayers were answered when one of my father's friends – a kind-hearted, community-minded family doctor – offered to pay for my education.

There was one condition: We would never reveal his name. He has long since passed away, but I have kept that covenant with him. I will continue to keep it for he wanted no public acknowledgment of this gift that he extended to me and others in Whitney Pier and beyond. To him, it was an investment in the future of a community, an investment he was certain would pay great dividends in the years to come.

This act of caring and the belief in education was actually widespread in Whitney Pier. It helped shape many successful people from the community who went on to do great things. When they achieved their success, they were expected to reach back to lift another generation.

Soon after I received the call from Prime Minister Stephen Harper asking if I would accept the appointment to be Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, I thought of how I could reach back, and so this Award, through the work of the Design Committee and soon, the Selection Committee, is thought made into reality.

Whitney Pier was my community.

From my story – and soon, yours – I hope that Nova Scotians can rediscover the security and satisfaction that a sense of community can bring.