

Frank J. O'Hara began the process of retirement when he reached the age of 70. In the 14 years since, he has shifted his focus and formidable energy, experience, expertise, and enthusiasm to the not-for-profit and charitable sectors.

This is his story....

Frank J. O'Hara:

Senior Volunteer Extraordinaire

Theme Thread 1: Mentoring

Frank O'Hara was born in Silver Centre, Ontario, near Kirkland Lake, on April 4th, 1926. His family was desperately poor, so as soon as he was old enough to manage the weight, he signed on as a paperboy for *The Globe and Mail* and in very short order made a name for himself as the best of the lot. But his efforts to contribute to family finances didn't end there. A born entrepreneur, he also salvaged and sold used, wooden 8-quart baskets and, later, live chickens at the local farmers' market. When his family moved south to Welland, he picked peaches and other soft fruit for local growers and found work in factories and on building sites.

After service with the Canadian Navy near the end of World War II and a degree from the University of Toronto, Frank built a very successful business career, much of it owning and operating his own small- and medium-size businesses.

Experience taught Frank the value of well-timed mentoring. When he decided to retire, it was natural to look for opportunities to share *his* experience, knowledge, and expertise.

His first mentoring gig was with **CESO (Canadian Executive Service Organization)**. CESO is a not-for-profit organization that sends Volunteer Advisors (VAs) to serve as mentors, advisers, and trainers to clients and partners at home (to Aboriginal communities in Canada) and abroad. Frank found himself much in demand, thanks to his business savvy, his expertise in e-commerce, his focus on sales and marketing, and his intuitive understanding and mastery of small- and medium-size business challenges and management.

In six short years, from 1999 to 2005, he did 11 international assignments (in Armenia, Bolivia, China, Guyana, Romania, Russia, Sri Lanka, St. Lucia, and Ukraine) and two national assignments under the auspices of CESO. He also did a further two international assignments in China at the direct invitation of the Government of the People's Republic of China—so impressed was everyone with the quality he brought to his role as advisor and mentor the first time around.

Unfortunately, the clock was ticking on Frank's career as a CESO VA. Although he was still ready to rumble, when he turned 80 in 2006, CESO was forced to take him off the books. Frank took it philosophically. He would have liked to have done more international assignments, but he also recognized he'd had a good run and was grateful.

Also, he had already found another mentoring opportunity with the **Centre Francophone de Toronto**, and he was enjoying this new challenge immensely. The Centre provides counselling and other support to French-speaking immigrants. Frank's entrepreneurial approach, business experience, and ability to communicate effectively in both English and French have made him a particularly valuable volunteer. He has mentored many individuals (ranging in age from early 20s to 50-something). He gives very practical, hands-on help in reshaping résumés, developing job search criteria and techniques, and providing moral support during those difficult early days in a new country.

As well, Frank finds the time for many shorter-term volunteer engagements.

An example is his association with **Perspective Entraide Humanitaire**. Over a period of approximately a year, Frank developed a template for a bilingual website (www.haitiaide.ca), helped the Board develop a marketing plan, participated actively in fund-raisers, and generally lent a hand when his special skills and knowledge were of benefit. He helped mentor and train new volunteers to take over the website and other jobs. He is no longer actively involved with Perspective, but he still, several years' later, responds to calls with questions and requests for advice.

Another example is **The Humanist Society of Toronto**. (Frank developed a website, maintained it until he could find and train another volunteer, served on the executive committee, and gave marketing support to the organization.)

Recently (in late 2009), Frank joined the **Management Advisory Service (MAS)**, a CESO-like group based in Toronto that matches experience and skills to not-for-profits in Ontario in need of mentoring and practical supports. He has already done one assignment (with a group of Tamil youth developing a self-help and support organization). He is looking forward to doing more.

Frank carries the concept of mentoring right down the line to very young children. He is registered as a World War II Veteran with **The Dominion Institute's Memory Project** and responds to requests to speak to students ranging in age from the under-10s to teenagers near high school graduation. Every year, around Remembrance Day, he does what he can. His favourite engagements are with the Grades 2 and 3 classes at Island Public/Natural Science School on Centre Island.

Theme Thread 2: Mental Health

Frank did what many of his generation did. He married and worked hard to provide a living for his family (three sons and two daughters). He found his métier in sales for Moore Business Forms and then as the founder and owner-operator of his own business. Gradually, he moved into multimedia, the coming thing. Along the way, he contributed to his community as a volunteer, as, for example, an active member of Toastmasters, teaching Sunday school, and leading Tai Chi classes.

But his private life was fraught with sadness, loss, and tragedy. His first marriage was unable to withstand the pressures of alcoholism (his wife's) and mental illness (two of his three sons developed schizophrenia in their mid-teens). The family imploded, and Frank found himself trying desperately to provide some semblance of a stable home life for his children. As part of that effort, he remarried, but the enormous strain of coping with his schizophrenic sons resulted in a second divorce. It was years before Frank could find some measure of stability and peace.

One consequence was Frank's determination to help others who face comparable challenges. The cause of promoting mental health and supporting those touched by mental illness and addictions has a deep, meaningful hold on his heart and mind. In 2009, he decided it was time to use the life lessons he'd learned at such cost in a direct, positive, practical way.

Frank's first steps were volunteering to develop websites for **The Secret Handshake Schizophrenia Peer Support** (www.thesecrethandshake.ca) and **The Family Council of CAMH** (www.thefamilycouncil.ca), but, of course, he did much more than that.

The Secret Handshake is a micro organization. Over the period of a year, Frank provided moral support, direction, and counsel on forming a Board of Directors, helped develop and present funding proposals, and acted as a sounding-board and reality check. Although he has stepped back from a day-to-day role, he continues to respond to calls for advice and requests for help with particular tasks.

The Family Council is on much firmer ground when it comes to funding, thanks to its relationship with CAMH, but like all not-for-profits it faces challenges in recruiting appropriate candidates for the Board, implementing strategic, marketing, and membership plans, managing staff, and developing mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. Frank decided to devote a big chunk of his formidable energy to helping The Family Council to the greatest extent possible.

In Fall 2009, he was elected Vice-President of the Board, he serves on several committees, and he has become an integral part of The Family Council's volunteer team. He expects to remain involved for as long as his peers at The Family Council feel he can play a useful role.

Theme Thread 3: Think Globally, Act Locally

Frank believes in the adage, "Think globally, act locally." When he sees something on his own street that needs to be done, he rolls up his sleeves and gets to work.

For the past three years, Frank has been working on the **Toronto Police Service (TPS) 52 Division Plaza** project. He often refers to it as The Jane Jacobs Plaza project.

Anyone familiar with downtown Toronto will know the streetscape of Dundas Street West stretching from University Avenue to the AGO and will inevitably be impressed—and depressed—by the barren, windswept, concrete wasteland fronting the TPS 52 Division station. What Frank sees, however, is an opportunity to create something wonderful, something that will be a credit to the city he loves, something that will tug at the heart and enrich the minds of everyone who covers that stretch of street, whether on foot, by bicycle, by streetcar, or by motor vehicle. He's made it his business to research, find other interested parties, jog memories, dig up records, create linkages, and generally keep the idea of wonderful possibilities on the radar screen of the decision-makers who will, ultimately, be the ones to make the thing happen.

Often discouraged but never willing to give up, Frank is now celebrating virtual success. Why "virtual" rather than "actual"? Because beautifying the 52 Division Plaza is now on the City of Toronto's official list of sites to be included in the improvement of Dundas Street West from Bathurst to University. Work has begun—at the Bathurst Street end. Frank won't stop pushing and prodding and encouraging and networking until the work crew has reached 52 Division and done the job.

Theme Thread 4: For the Joy of It

Frank is a gregarious, big-hearted, friendly kind of guy who takes pleasure in small things. One is singing, which he does very well thanks to a natural gift and a good ear. He can't read music and might not know a treble clef from a C-sharp, but he can carry a show tune—and a show.

About six years ago, Frank decided it was time to sing out. He formed a trio, **The Forget-Me-Nots**, with two long-time friends, Al Boyer and Don Cameron. Don plays the piano, Al plays the bass, and Frank sings old-time favourites dating from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. They book gigs at seniors' residences, such as the Loyola Arrupe Centre for Seniors on Bloor Street West.

He was having so much fun that, when he was presented with an opportunity to form another group, he didn't hesitate. **The MetroTones**, variously a trio to a quintet, has developed an eclectic program that includes folk songs, soft rock hits from the 1960s and 1970s, Christmas carols in English, French, and Latvian, and, yes, some of Frank's old-time favourites, too. The MetroTones also perform at seniors' residences, such as the Beaches Arms on Kingston Road and Kristus Darzs Latvian Home in York Region. (The MetroTones' pianist is an ordained Minister in the Latvian Lutheran Church.)

And So It Goes....

It will be obvious, from the details in this statement and the letters of support accompanying it, that Frank O'Hara is a committed volunteer who lives what he believes—that individuals have an obligation to use every bit of their capacity to help others and to be a positive force in their communities.

It is also obvious the time has come to honour him. An Ontario Seniors Achievement Award in the Community Service/Voluntarism category would be entirely fitting.

Respectfully Submitted by

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