

Calgary's 1600 Public Library volunteers win national "Local Hero" Award

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Toronto, Ontario – The 1600 volunteers at Calgary's 17 public library locations help children read, new Canadians practice English, seniors use computers and deliver books to shut-ins – extra services the libraries could never offer without the volunteers. It's the volunteers' dedication to literacy and learning that has earned the volunteers national recognition and the Canadian Urban Institute's (CUI) 2009 Local Hero Award to be presented June 5th in Toronto at the Urban Leadership Awards (ULA).

"The number of volunteers at the Calgary Public Library allows the library to improve the quality of life for Calgarians, especially those in most need. It's a powerful statement when one of the services a city provides is so valued that citizens enrich it with their own talent and time," said CUI President and CEO Glen Murray, noting that in one year the volunteers contributed 30,000 hours of services.

"These dedicated volunteers help the Library enrich lives and build a sense of community and for that they are truly heroes to those whose lives they touch," Murray said.

About 500 elite members of Canada's who's who of city building will gather in Toronto on June 5 at the Royal York Hotel to honour the Calgary Public Library Volunteers (<http://calgarypubliclibrary.com>) and 17 other groups and individuals (www.canurb.com/awards/ula/leadershipawards2009.php) across the country who are making Canadian cities exciting and dynamic places to live and work.

For Ellen Humphrey, Assistant Director of Customer Services, the award is evidence that the Calgary Public Library is very unique.

"I can't think of another public library with such a well-developed volunteer program," said Humphrey, who is most proud of the cultural diversity of the volunteers who can speak 30 different languages and of the fact that 45 per cent of the volunteers are teenagers. Some of the Library's volunteers are in their 80s and others have volunteered for over 30 years.

"We even have four-legged volunteers in our Story Pals Program, offered in partnership with the Pet Access League Society, where kids read to highly-socialized dogs who don't judge," Humphrey said, recalling how one struggling young reader with autism finally read out loud because she felt comfortable practicing in front of a dog, much to her mother's amazement.

The Urban Leadership Awards (ULA) Program honours Canadian individuals, groups and organizations that have made significant contributions to improving the quality of life in Canada's cities and urban regions. The 2009 ULA's have been made possible by the generous support of a variety of corporate sponsors including Gold Sponsors Loblaw Properties Ltd., Scotiabank, TD Bank Financial Group, the Ontario Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, Environics, the City of Toronto, GE Canada and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Community Builder Sponsors include Toronto Hydro, Local 27 of the Union of Carpenters and Allied Workers, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Great West Life, London Life and Canada Life Assurance Companies.

The judges for this year's awards included Canadians who have dedicated their lives to public service and who have detailed knowledge of the local stories and triumphs of Canadians in their home communities. Under the chairmanship of the Hon. David Crombie, the committee included; Al Duerr, former Mayor of Calgary; Newfoundland's Dr. Linda Inkpen; Dr. Antonia Maioni, Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada; John Kim Bell, founder of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation; Ms. Mitzie Hunter, a Vice President at Goodwill Industries; and, Dr. Nola Kate Seymoar, President and CEO, International Centre for Sustainable Cities, based in British Columbia.

The Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life in urban areas across Canada and throughout the world.

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Some facts about Calgary Public Library volunteers

- In 10 years from 1998 to 2008, the Calgary Public Library volunteer pool has risen from 306 to 1595.
- 750 or 45 per cent of the volunteers are teenagers.
- 31 volunteers are over the age of 80.
- 5 volunteers have been active library volunteers for 30+ years.
- At least 30 different languages are spoken by the volunteers.
- In 2008 1595 volunteers contributed 29,697 hours of time worth a conservative estimate of \$550,000.
- 19 volunteer based programs supporting literacy and reading, technology skills development, and language learning for new Canadians are being offered. Some examples are:
 - Homebound Readers delivers materials to those who otherwise would not have access to them.
 - Reading Buddies matches teen volunteers with “little buddies” in Grades 1 to 3 to develop strong literacy skills and make reading fun.
 - Computer Buddies pairs children with teen volunteers who help them learn to use computers and develop safe Internet searching and Microsoft Office skills.
 - Read with Me matches Grades 1 to 6 students struggling with reading with adult volunteers.
 - Reading Advantage assists adults with low literacy to improve reading and writing skills.
 - Calgary is the fourth most ethnically diverse city in Canada with an immigration population of 25 per cent; ESL Conversation Club allows immigrants to practice their conversational English with volunteers.
 - Story Pals program involves Pet Access League Society dogs who provide calm, accepting presence for children learning to read aloud to the dogs.