

B.C.'s Ellen Shonsta wins national “Local Hero” Award

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Toronto, Ontario – Ellen Shonsta's life-long commitment to helping thousands of Vancouver's street kids started simply enough with oranges and cookies delivered from an electric scooter and has led to June 5 in Toronto when she'll receive the Canadian Urban Institute's 2009 Local Hero Award at the Urban Leadership Awards.

“Ellen has seen things most of us can't imagine – children as young as five years old living on the streets to escape abuse at home. But, she took those images and went a step further and spent seven hours a day, seven days a week for 14 years feeding those kids. Today, she counts as her children and friends thousands of men and women across this country who she once helped on the streets of West End Vancouver, many who now have their own homes, jobs and children thanks to Ellen kindness,” said CUI President and CEO Glen Murray.

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 Ellen Shonsta and 17 other groups and individuals (www.canurb.com/awards/ula/leadershipawards2009.php) across the country that are making Canadian cities exciting and dynamic places to live and work.

Ellen Shonsta had been a foster mother to 75 children when she moved to Vancouver from Cranbrooke, B.C. in 1994, to recuperate from a car accident. When she landed in Vancouver and saw the number of kids living on the street she immediately started visiting them with a simple offering of cookies and oranges. In time, others joined her efforts and today her work lives on, delivered by Agape Street Ministry.

Last year Shonsta travelled from coast to coast in Canada with stops along the way, welcomed by the people she first met and fed of the sidewalks and curbs of West End Vancouver.

“On my trip I was in Edmonton, Lloydminster, Regina, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Ottawa, Hull, Montreal and New Brunswick and a whole bunch of places last year. Everywhere I went I stayed with former street kids who now have their own homes or are going to university. I even met their kids,” said Ellen from her home in Kimberly B.C. She keeps up with some of her former street kids with a Facebook site that includes over 75 friends.

“I'm very happy to be in their lives. I'm sure I got far more out of it than I gave them. You can't give without getting back. If you see someone on the street and you don't want to give him or her money, then give an orange. Even if you're only one person, it will change that person's life and change your life,” Shonsta said, from her retirement home in Kimberly B.C.

One of her most memorable moments was one day when a drug dealer told her that from his street corner he sees billionaires in expensive cars driving by, but that he's never met anyone as rich as Ellen Shonsta.

“He said he was going to change his life and get some of those riches that I had. And he did, he's married and very involved in his church,” said Shonsta.

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.

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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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