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AMPA Alberta Magazine Publishers Association
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THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

JACKIE FLANAGAN

AlbertaViews staff Amber Bowerman, Evan Osenton, Joe Wilderson and Scott Dutton with Red Deer Mayor Leonard Gaetz in Nov 2003.

Editorial

Necessary Activists

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

—Albert Einstein

Alberta's different. When Montreal hosted the Olympics, the city incurred a huge debt, as do most host cities. The Calgary Olympics, however, left a significant sports infrastructure such as the speedskating oval—but no debt. Volunteers made the difference. Alberta has the highest rate of volunteerism in the country—40 per cent, or two in five Albertans volunteer, compared to a national average of 25 per cent, or one in four. The hours contributed are the equivalent of 66,000 full-time jobs every year.

People volunteer because they want to get involved, to become part of something bigger than themselves. They want to make a contribution to something they believe in, whether canvassing for donations to the Heart and Stroke Fund or working on the board of Lunchbox Theatre. Most become volunteers because someone asks: the organization invites them or a friend or relative says come help. Albertans cherish freedom, and volunteering is done, well, voluntarily. To volunteer is to freely donate your discretionary time to a worthy cause.

In the same way that Alberta is known for volunteerism, it is not known as a hotbed of activism. In fact, here, activists are suspect, dismissed or feared. The protests against Bill 11 were met with government scorn. Friends of Medicare are not mentioned in official circles without a sneer. Anticorporate activists demonstrating during the World Petroleum Conference and the G8 Summit were considered wackos.

What is the difference between an activist and a volunteer? Both are willingly involved in causes they believe in, willing to give of their time and talents to make a better world.

An activist is the opposite of passive. S/he is awake, alert, attentive. An activist examines and questions power and the status quo and is not afraid of the "powers that be." Activists develop the capacity for autonomous choice beyond society's conditioning. Activists are prepared to take direct and sometimes militant action to achieve a political or social goal, to force the system to change, as the civil rights activists forced a change in systemic racism in the southern U.S. Activists see democracy as the right and the ability of individuals to participate in the decisions that affect their destinies.

That activists question authority is what the establishment most fears. To question power arouses fear of the breakdown of order. Yet ironically Premier Ralph Klein himself defied the authority of the federal government to set foreign policy, by sending a letter to the U.S. ambassador on behalf of the government of Alberta declaring our so-called support for the war in Iraq. Alberta is different.

It's been a year this March since the protest rallies against the war in Iraq. In Edmonton alone 18,000 marched against the war, the largest rally in the history of our province. We can't take peace, justice and good government for granted. To conduct our affairs in the best way possible in this country, we must have broad-based citizen involvement. People ready to question and do something. Necessary activists.