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Martha Rogers reflects on 26 years as head of the UGDSB

The province's longest-serving director of education retired on Sept. 1
September 22, 2021 By: [Anam Khan](#), Guelph Today



‘Fish rots from the head down,’ many heard Martha Rogers say throughout the years. So much so, that a farewell present from the directors department at the Upper Grand District School Board illustrated a caricature of her and a fish flat on her desk among other symbols of her leadership.

“They’ve got me down to a T,” she says about her colleagues while standing in her Elora home.

After 26 years as director of the UGDSB, Rogers retired Sept. 1.

The window sill in her living room is filled with cards and presents and a book with a life's worth of memories titled 'Memories From a Legendary Career,' gifted by her colleagues looking back at her life.

Those who know Rogers know how often she shares a story to express her thoughts, and her story leading the UGDSB for nearly three decades is nothing short of remarkable.

She spent nearly 50 years in education and began her role as the director of education in 1995. Her 26 years as head of the UGDSB made her the longest serving director of education in Ontario and one of the longest serving Canada.

At 73, Rogers remembers in detail the names of people and dates of events that paved the way for her unforgettable career.

She was the first superintendent of programs for the Wellington County Board Of Education (which eventually merged to become the UGDSB) in 1989 where she served for four years.

Rogers recalls the director of education at that time told her that even though she would want to be a director of education eventually, she should pursue a career in plant operations or human resources.

"It was a long time ago. He said 'Martha, directors are usually men, and they're usually older than you. You can fight against it and you can say it's not fair, but it is what it is,'" said Rogers.

But fate had other plans. When a job for human resources became available in Hamilton, she took it and when an opportunity rose three years later, she became the director of education at the Upper Grand District School Board in 1995.

And the UGDSB would hold on tight to her for as long as it could.

Rogers was originally scheduled to retire in the summer of 2020, but when COVID hit, she accepted the board's request to postpone her retirement to guide it through the pandemic.

Longtime trustee Linda Busuttil, who worked with Rogers since 2006, said the greatest value from her perspective is the leadership currency Rogers brought to public education.

“Dr. Rogers' leadership strength has been built on relationships, with many stakeholders, from all perspectives, and sides of the table in the education sector,” said Busuttil.

She remembers Rogers visiting staff in schools, recognizing their efforts and listening to their community needs. But the highlight of these visits was always the classroom visits where she would connect with teachers and children, said Busuttil.

“Dr Rogers would take the time to admire artwork and would read a story or two if invited to sit in the circle,” said Busuttil.

“There was no need to ask about the vulnerable children in our school when it came to budget time as Dr. Rogers would take these children's needs to heart and if there was extra, and even if there was not, would make efforts to ensure that our children were well cared for and educated.”

This June, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association presented her with the Fred L. Bartlett Memorial Award which is awarded each year to retired or active teaching professionals for their outstanding contribution to education in Ontario.

The president of OPSBA, Cathy Abraham, described Rogers as one-of-a-kind, a person with a deep understanding of the public education system and a sustained commitment to honesty and integrity. She even added that she couldn't think of anyone more fitting for the award.

Born in Hamilton, Rogers began her career as a teacher in the Peel District School Board in 1972 and taught there for 10 years. In that time she also completed her PhD in special education (which has always been near and dear to her heart) at the University of Toronto and then left the board to go to the Dufferin County Board of Education as a program consultant and Grade 1 teacher.

The superintendent at the time sat her down on her first week asking her what her long-term career goal was.

“I had no clue. So, for lack of anything else to say I said, ‘I want your job’, and he laughed, he said 'Oh are you going to have me fired? And I said ‘No. When I grow up, I'd like to be a superintendent of program,’” said Rogers.

So the man, Ken Trumpour, made her a three-year plan. Rogers recalls him saying, in the first year, you'll learn how to do your job, in the second year, you'll get your qualifications and in your third year, I will get you some interviews, and after that, I'm retiring.

And that’s exactly what she did and she still credits Trumpour for the plan written on a paper.

“It guided the rest of my career because that set me on the path to be a superintendent and set me on a path to be the director of special education, superintendent of program, superintendent of human resources, and then director so it was a very logical path that I was on once superintendent Trumpour got my head thinking about my career," said Rogers.

She got married after becoming the director of education to her late husband Paul Rogers, who retired as a school principal to work in the private sector when Rogers got the job as the director of education at the UGDSB so they could avoid any allegations of favouritism.

Her blended family includes her two stepdaughters and three grandchildren.

Rogers' parents were both medical professionals and her mother particularly had a passion to give back to the community, something that is dear to Rogers.

In her 26 years, she has seen a lot of change in the education sector.

She said over time, there has been an increased focus on students with special needs, inclusively, gender and race and there has been a greater realization that the education sector has not been as inclusive as it might be for students and staff who have been there for a while,

“The whole of society and the education sector is reflective of society. It has become far more sensitive to and inclusive of students and staff or parents who have diversity in either their learning needs or in their being. That is the greatest change I've seen over time,” said Rogers.

What she misses the most in her retirement she says are the people of the board. The trustees, the teachers, the staff, the students and the parents.

“Nobody ever tried to make themselves look good at anyone else's expense. There was no office politics. There was nothing. It was like you'd read about in a book,” said Rogers who passed on the torch to the new director of education, Peter Sovran .

“How can I possibly sum up an almost 50-year career with 26 of those years as our director, it is an impossible task,” said Martha McNeil, chair of the UGDSB, with tears in her eyes, at the board meeting last month where Rogers banged the gavel to conclude the meeting for one last time.

“She cares deeply for everyone in our educational community and deeply values the input of everyone at the table and beyond. Martha views the UGDSB as a very large extension of her family, and treats everyone accordingly.”

Roger has been a part of the Rotary Club of Guelph for 30 years and already over two weeks into her retirement, she is already making plans to give back to the education community and her town in Elora.

“I am starting to explore what places there are, where my experience and my knowledge, skills and abilities, such as it is, would be useful,” said Rogers.

“I don't need money, I'm not looking for a job. I'm looking to volunteer and give back to my community.”