

Brian Desbiens

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OMEMEE — Brian Desbiens was fighting for his life from the day he was born. With his dad away serving in the Second World War, his mother was forced to give birth to him in 1945 at their St. Catharines home because she couldn't get to the hospital due to a wild snowstorm.

Desbiens was born “a very tiny, very sickly baby” of three pounds. He remained smaller than his peers throughout his childhood and was always prone to illness.

In his teens, another health calamity struck.

At age 14, Desbiens was rushed to hospital and isolated for six weeks after contracting hepatitis — a little-known disease in 1959.

Doctors told him he almost died; it took nearly a year to recover.

But from this tough start to life, Desbiens rose to great heights.

He went on to star in hockey, getting drafted by the Chicago Blackhawks to the NHL team's farm system. He graduated at the top of his high school class and was offered scholarships to prestigious American universities such as Harvard, Brown and Cornell.

With the world at his feet, Desbiens had plenty of aspirations: astronaut, Catholic priest, physicist, lawyer.

But, of course, many Peterborough residents know he eventually chose to become an educator and became the well-loved president of Fleming College from 1988 to 2004.

During his tenure, he oversaw construction of a student residence, two new wings, a new campus in Haliburton, the Peterborough Sport and Wellness Centre and St. Joseph's at Fleming.

Among many awards, is a provincial lifetime achievement award for excellence in his profession.

The 63-year-old thinks he may have been compelled to achieve great things because of his childhood illnesses.

“When you're sick, you either get strong or you get weak,” Desbiens says in his home, just north of Fowlers Corners in the former Emily Township. “And sometimes, if you get strong, you get a new appreciation for life and a certain tenacity and you learn how to cope better with life...You just don't take anything for granted.”

Trent University has honoured Desbiens with a 2007 community leadership award in education and literature.

The award is deserving for someone who has always been an excellent leader, says former mayor Sylvia Sutherland, whose late husband, David Sutherland, was the first president at Fleming.

“I think my husband would have been very pleased with the direction Brian took the college,” Sutherland says. Desbiens is someone who inspired people to get things done, she says, because he’s an eternal optimist.

“Because he believed you could do it, you did,” Sutherland says.

Desbiens was born to his father, Leo, a tool and die worker at General Motors, and his mother, Marjorie, a homemaker.

He has two sisters — his older sister Mary Lee and younger sister Judy.

Despite his illnesses, he remembers a happy childhood with his family, who lived just outside of St. Catharines.

He recalls picking plums, strawberries and cherries in the myriad fruit orchards surrounding their home.

Desbiens’ father was always an active community member, joining sporting leagues, organizing ratepayers’ associations and creating a backyard rink in the winters to invite neighbours over for skating parties.

His mother was more of a bookworm, who was interested in world affairs and ensured all her children did their homework every night.

As a teenager, Desbiens got a job as a camp counsellor in the Lake of Bays area, where there was a hepatitis outbreak.

He believes he caught it from swimming in a lake. He feels lucky to be alive, as he says there were five hepatitis-related deaths across Ontario that summer.

Although his dreams were to be a professional hockey player, this illness changed him.

“The experience told me: you better not do something where you’re totally dependent on your body,” he says. “You better have a back-up plan. So that’s when I thought about going to university.”

That didn’t stop him from playing hockey, though, and he was drafted into the Chicago Blackhawks farm team system as a teenager.

Desbiens played Junior B and A hockey — as a forward and defenceman — in the St. Catharines area.

Despite scholarship opportunities at prestigious American universities, Desbiens wasn't sure where to go or what to study, as he had so many interests. Would he become a lawyer, astronaut or priest?

He says he followed his high school priest's advice and attended St. Mary's College in Minnesota because it offered a quality undergraduate education in a Catholic school system.

Good choice, he adds with a laugh, as that's where he met his future wife Ellen, on a blind date. (The couple celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary this year.)

Becoming a priest wasn't in the cards and Desbiens was instead drawn towards studies in education and counselling.

This was during the turbulent political period of the 1960s when campuses were rife with protest.

Desbiens recalls that he resembled a typical student at the time — long hair, mustache and beard, sporting tie-died t-shirts and sandals.

He says he was a conservative social activist who sought solutions to problems and was willing to work with all sides.

“I wasn't the guy waving the flag,” Desbiens says. “But I was the one who'd go to debates and ask questions.”

As soldiers came back from Vietnam, some came to complete studies at St. Mary's. As a floor adviser, Desbiens met with these veterans to help them work through enduring emotional problems. Many struggled with thoughts of suicide, Desbiens says.

By helping them deal with their demons, Desbiens realized he wanted to get into counselling full-time.

He went on to get a master's degree in guidance counselling at Michigan State University.

He got his first job, at age 24, as a counsellor and teacher at St. Clair College in Windsor in September 1969.

A decade later, Desbiens got his PhD in counselling psychology from Michigan State University and then returned to St. Clair College as director of counselling and health services.

He eventually moved to the Chatham campus as a campus principal.

With a happy marriage, and raising three children, John, Jeff and Joanne, Desbiens figured he'd never leave St. Clair.

"My dad worked at GM for 46 years, so I thought I'd be at St. Clair until I retired," Desbiens says.

Desbiens had no burning desire to climb higher up the college hierarchy.

"My dad always told me to do the best I can and I could be anything I wanted to be," Desbiens says. "But I had no driving need to be president of the college."

However, when Sir Sandford Fleming College came headhunting for a new president to replace Charles Pascal, Desbiens couldn't refuse.

"Fleming had a reputation of being very community-based, with good relationships and having small, unique campuses," Desbiens says.

He took the job in 1988 and dove in head-first by teaching courses as well as serving as president.

"I wanted to learn what it was like for teachers in the classrooms," he says. "And I wanted to know the nature of the students at Fleming."

Just as Desbiens had a greater appreciation of life after going through his childhood health problems, he found college students also had a better appreciation for education because many had had difficult life experiences.

There were single parents, those who were first in their family history to graduate college, many from low-income families and many mature students who had been in the workforce before coming to college.

"The most touching thing about being president is making a difference in students' lives," Desbiens says. "It's humbling to congratulate them at graduation."

Under Desbiens' leadership, the college added new wings, a Haliburton campus, a new large-scale computer lab and helped bring about the Sport and Wellness Centre and St. Joseph's at Fleming.

Government cutbacks in 1995-96 proved to be his biggest challenge, he says.

Desbiens crosses his legs and scratches his grey beard while staring into the distance as he recalls the pain of laying off faculty and cutting programs.

"Being president is good in good times but in tough times, you've got to make those tough decisions," he says. "Laying people off was the hardest thing I ever had to do."

While determining how to balance the books, he met constantly with unions, asking their advice and setting up task forces.

“I’ll never forget, at the end of it all, a union president saying, “We did the best we could do as a team,”” Desbiens says. “I think we came out of that experience trusting one another more.”

Outside the college, Desbiens calls himself a community servant.

He has served on the Prime Minister’s National Advisory Board on Science and Technology and also on the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

The list of local community groups he has helped includes the Peterborough and District United Way, Greater Peterborough Area Economic Development Corp., Trent Valley Literacy Association and the Peterborough Regional Health Centre foundation.

Since retiring, he has chaired the disaster relief committee after the 2004 flood, worked with Mayor Paul Ayotte to organize the poverty strategy committee and is now involved with the Peterborough federal Liberal riding association.

But it’s not all work and no play.

Desbiens says he loves retirement because it gives him more time to read leisurely, create stained glass, sculpt, travel and spend more time with his family.

He appears confused when asked if he has any future goals.

Retirement is about letting loose and not worrying about things like “goals” anymore, he says with a good-natured laugh.

“Work was the centre of my life for so long and now I’ve rejigged my life,” he says. “My goal now is to be the best husband, father and grandfather I can be.”