

United Way has inspired many for the past 70 years

In 1941, two years into the Second World War, a dozen community and business leaders gathered to consider an urgent problem: how to raise money for K-W's war support efforts.

The timing hits home for me personally; my father, who recently passed away in his 92nd year, was a member of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. An optometrist, he served his country with great pride for the duration of WWII, holding the rank of sergeant in charge of vision care.

While Dad and more than a million Canadians served their country in war, the organization now known as United Way of K-W and Area was born in a quiet boardroom at Mutual Life of Canada.

Although the cities of Kitchener and Waterloo were experiencing an economic and manufacturing boom, war-time rationing was a reality for many households. The Twin Cities were deluged with pleas to donate to the war effort and to local charities. School kids rallied to raise funds for a trainer aircraft at Waterloo-Wellington Airport, the KW Sales & Ad Club ran a "buy a tank" campaign, and countless women rolled bandages and knitted socks for soldiers.

Our community was gaining a national reputation for its war fundraising leadership.

JAN
VARNER

UNITED WAY



This new charity — then registered as Kitchener-Waterloo Federated Charities — was created to take things a step further, coordinating the war fundraising appeal. The approach was an immediate success: the first

campaign raised \$99,500 in just three weeks.

John Thompson worked at United Way for 28 years, retiring as CEO in 2005. He has witnessed considerable change in our community but says that the sentiment and sense of urgency that inspired United Way's creation remain the same today. "This charity was the inspiration of business and community leaders and the original concept was that it would be more efficient and cost-effective to campaign together than to campaign separately," John explains.

Business played a crucial role from the beginning. Unions and employee groups became immediate contributors, creating workplace campaigns similar to those still run today. Companies like B.F. Goodrich, Krug Furniture, Mutual Life of Canada and Zehrs Food Markets were among the early supporters. "Our founders applied a business approach to charity," reflects John, "and businesses made giving a key part of their workplace culture."

Their foresight proved invaluable: when the troops returned home in 1946, the demand for social services greatly increased. Service men and women needed support to rehabilitate and re-integrate into a post-war society and community. We were there to

help. For example, there was demand for a post-war "home for the blind", which was established by Canadian National Institute for the Blind, partly supported through Federated Charities funding. (Given my dad's role in the war, the irony is certainly not lost on me.)

As we celebrate our 70th anniversary, there's one thing that strikes me more than anything else: while our strategic priorities and community outcomes are relatively new, United Way was a community problem-solver even back in 1941. We might measure success differently now, and we may face different issues in our community, but we can take a lesson or two from our war-time founders. This organization has always relied on forward-thinking community leaders and generous donors and volunteers. As we conclude National Volunteer Week and United Way begins early preparations for our fall campaign, we thank you KW.

Special thanks to John Thompson, former United Way CEO, and author Cathy Williams, whose book "Fifty Years of Caring and Sharing" greatly informed this column.

I'm taking reservations for this column. If you're interested in a breakfast chat about community change, you can reach me at jvarner@uwaykw.org or @janvarner on Twitter.

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