

BRUCE DOWNEY

Readers of a certain age will remember the Andy Griffith Show and its evocation of a gentler, rose-coloured time in the fictional town of Mayberry, where neighbours helped neighbours and young boys were polite to their elders. Now a youthful 66, Bruce Downey clearly feels a close connection to his childhood. When he talks about it fondly it takes on an almost Mayberryish hue.

But there were hard times as well. Bruce is the third oldest of seven children of Doug and Vivian Downey. The family lived in a duplex on Earl St. and when Doug contracted TB and had to spend over a year in the sanitorium, Vivian rented the family bedrooms to Queen's students and Bruce and three siblings slept with her in the dining room "head to foot in one bed." "But she made it a warm and wonderful time," remembers Bruce, "given the circumstances." After his father recovered, the family moved to a larger house nearby "where I got to share a bedroom with one brother instead of four."

Bruce has particularly fond memories of his boyhood summers. "The day school let out I'd be sent to Darling's barber shop to get the shortest possible brush cut and then my brothers and I would be taken to various family farms in the Ivanhoe area. I loved it. In Kingston I was just a kid, but on the farm I was given grown-up chores, serious responsibilities. I learned to handle a team of horses, to drive a tractor long before I could drive a car. We harvested the grain with all the neighbours which went on for days with lavish feasts. It was an immense amount of work but also an immense amount of fun. I cried all the way home at the end of each summer."

Bruce believes those summers on the farms strongly shaped the man he would become. "I learned the importance of community,

of contributing to a larger effort. This is a thread that has run through my career, my volunteerism, my community involvement to this day."

Judging from this, Bruce might well have become a farmer, but he also had an artistic side. "I always loved to draw," he says. And he was good at it. "While at Victoria Public School a drawing of mine of the battle of Queenston Heights was selected for an exhibition that toured the country." Later on, Bruce saw an ad for the Famous Artists School "in a comic book of all places." Cajoling his parents to sign him up, Bruce faithfully did the mail order assignments for three years. "It was a transformative experience that taught me so much about drawing."

Entering KCVI, Bruce enrolled in an experimental five-year technical program, taking carpentry, metalwork, electrical shop and, his favourite, drafting. "I had a wonderful teacher, Ron Ede. And I was happy to sit at the drafting table fine tuning details for hours."

In Grade 13, unsure what life path to pursue, Bruce took an aptitude test. It recommended two possible occupations for him – architect. Or, surprisingly, military officer. Actually, the second wasn't all that far-fetched. In high school Bruce had joined the Cadets, and excelled at neatness and marksmanship, winning competitions at the firing range in the basement of KCVI (how times have changed!) At military Camp Ipperwash he was named Regimental Sergeant Major and had the honour of leading hundreds of cadets in the final parade.

Bruce probably would have made a good officer, and, he says, he still irons a shirt every day, a habit learned in Cadets. But in the end he applied to the School of Architecture at Carleton and was accepted. "I didn't really even know what an architect did so it was quite a shot in the dark."

Surprisingly, as a person who tends to find the positive side in everything, Bruce didn't enjoy architectural school. "The pressure and amount of work were brutal," he says. "I liked my classmates, but I found the instructors to be excessively negative and critical to the point of being downright nasty. Maybe they thought they were toughening us up for the harsh realities of the real world, but I found the real world far more welcoming and congenial than that school."

During this time Bruce spent several enjoyable summers playing the fife with the Fort Henry Guard. "But every fall when school started I questioned my decision to go back." But go back he did, graduating in the regulation five years, something only about 20 of his starting class of 60 accomplished.

Back in the congenial real world, Bruce and Deborah Hudson had dated since high school. They married in 1975 and after Bruce graduated the next year they took an epic eight-month bike trip from England to Greece, Cairo, the Pyramids and more. "We saw Europe on back roads and it gave me an appreciation for small town architecture, the alleyways, the public spaces. There were a few hairy times," Bruce recalls, including a nerve-jangling descent on a precipitous mountain road with no guard rails in Yugoslavia. But they made it and went on to have two children, Sydney and Spencer, who both live in Kingston.

Bruce assumed he'd go to work in a "centre of architecture" and explored opportunities in Vancouver. "They were appealing," he recalls. "But cycling around Kingston one day I was struck anew by the beauty of this place – the countryside, the old buildings, the waterfront, the human scale – and the die was cast. I decided to stay here."

And he's never regretted it. "Occasionally when I see what a colleague is doing somewhere I think it would be nice to work

on a big, showy project. But I've found a wealth of experiences and a variety of opportunities right here."

Bruce first applied for a job with Wilf Sorensen but "he wouldn't hire me until I'd actually worked in construction. 'You have to learn what a two-by-four feels like in your hands,' Wilf said. And he was right." Bruce went to work for Bob Martin Construction building homes and apartment buildings. "I enjoyed it," he says. "I learned how to bend reinforcing rods in concrete, how to attach a porch to a house. I learned to appreciate building materials and the contractors and carpenters and masons who work with them."

Bruce then worked for Sorensen for seven years, combining it with work for Lily Inglis. He learned from each. Sorensen, whom he considers one of the most inventive architects in Kingston, "taught me to go all out at the beginning. Don't let financial constraints limit your imagination. Aim for something great and only back off when you absolutely have to."

In 1983 Lily and Bruce formed Inglis & Downey Architects, which continued successfully for 20 years. From Lily Bruce learned the importance of involving and listening to the stakeholders in any project – the people who will use the space, live in it, have to look at it long after the architect is gone. This was particularly important in their redevelopment of Market Square. "The process was rife with contention," says Bruce. "But we brought people together in the end, and I'm proud of it now when I see the crowds happily skating,"

So is there a Downey style? "Architecture isn't just designing cool buildings," says Bruce. "We have to understand how our work will contribute to the environment well beyond our lifetime." Although he's worked on major projects like the Wolfe Island Ferry Terminal, and the Napanee Hospital, Bruce's legacy is not a succession of big, showcase buildings. Rather,

he's had a hand in renovations to such Kingston landmarks as Chien Noir, Atomica, Casa, the courtyard laneway to Chez Piggy, the Belvedere Hotel, Hochelaga Inn, the Spire and many more. And all over town there are porches and additions with subtle yet striking touches, which prompt the response "That looks like something Bruce did." And more often than not – it is. Full disclosure: Our house has a Downey-designed front porch, and in the 35 years since it was built countless passersby have paused to admire it. The gist of their comments is much the same – it's stylish, it's distinctive, and yet it ties in so well with our older brick home. Of course it does. It's the Downey style.

Bruce and Deb are now proud grandparents, but the marriage wasn't destined to last, and some time later Bruce was hired by a mutual friend, Elinor Rush, to design an addition to her log cabin on Dog Lake for her and her young daughter, Alice. At some point, while helping Elinor to chink logs, Bruce realized something more was in the air. "Maybe Elinor was just looking to get a better deal," he jokes. "But it put a whole new spin on things. When I realized I might be going to live there, I started to take special care with that addition." And indeed, 30-plus years later, Bruce and Elinor still live in that much-expanded house. "We love it," he says. And Alice is now a brand new mother.

"A slap in the face with a raw fish!" That's Bruce's colourful way of describing how gobsmacked he was when, in 2005, he learned that he was to receive the prestigious Outstanding Achievement Award for Voluntarism in Ontario. It shouldn't really have been a surprise, because Bruce's list of volunteer activities is almost laughably long. It includes: Chair of an Ontario Association of Architects Committee which travelled across the province to assist communities with urban planning; mentor for Architectural Interns; advisor in the Limestone

School Board Construction Internship Program; organizer for the Blue Skies Music Festival; stage manager for the Live Wire Music Series; original member of Open Voices Choir, where he also plays banjo; set designer for Domino Theatre; spectacular carver of giant pumpkins at the Battersea Pumpkin Festival -- and more.

To expand on just one of Bruce's contributions, for 30 years he was a member of the Kingston Heritage Committee, an undertaking close to his heart. "We can't take our heritage for granted," he says. "We used to cover over old stuff or throw it out. Now we're starting to value it. We designated over 700 properties in Kingston. And it's a myth that once a building is designated you can't touch it. For a building to live and thrive it has to evolve, but evolve in a way that maintains its historical integrity. Brock Street and Sydenham Ward wouldn't look the way they do now if not for the Heritage Committee. Hundreds of properties came before us requesting changes, but small changes can ruin buildings. Our heritage could have suffered 'death by 1000 cuts'. But we never just said no. We always worked with the applicant, showing them what they could do with a window here, a railing there." In effect, Bruce provided 30 years of free architectural advice and was happy to do it. "And I think most people were happy with us in the end."

Bruce often appears as an expert witness at planning hearings, most recently for the Capital and North Block developments. And he doesn't mince words. "No one comes to Kingston to see apartment towers. I'm in favour of intensification, but you can have intensification without big towers. The North Block in particular is a great opportunity for innovative design, a chance to do something world class. But good design can be painful. It's much easier to just say -- let's do what Guelph did, let's do what Mississauga did. But more creative alternatives should be considered. If the developer

says Red and the heritage folks say Blue, somehow we should be able to get to Purple."

The historic character of Kingston is unique, but Bruce worries that it's constantly under threat. "We're balancing on a knife edge, a tipping point. Once you allow a couple of towers you'll create a precedent and end up throwing the baby out with the bath water. This has been my struggle since I started working here. It's exhausting."

Bruce has just given up his licence, but his partner Mikaela Hughes will carry on and Bruce will continue to consult. And to care. "I'm still invested in my community," he says. "I'm ready and willing to be part of the process. The city has my number. I'm not going away."

And his work which graces our city isn't going away.

Doug Bowie

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