

Mission bids farewell to woman who ‘knew they could do better’

By Kelly Egan, Ottawa Citizen
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Diane Morrison retires on Friday after 20 years as executive director of the Ottawa Mission.

Photograph by: Jean Levac , Ottawa Citizen/Postmedia News

Ten revealing things about Diane Morrison, 68, who leaves this week after 20 years as executive director of the Ottawa Mission. Still bubbly; in some quarters, now beloved.

1. The oldest of four children, she grew up in Farm Point, Que., below Wakefield, on a 100-acre farm where plows were pulled by horses. Her father, John Caves, worked in the nearby Alcan plant until he died at age 46. She was only 14. He was buried on a Wednesday, she says, and mother Velma started working at Alcan on that Friday. Of poverty, they would know its taste.

2. “Nobody would talk to me.” This was her first impression of volunteering at the Mission in 1990, when she began spending two days a week helping out in her off-time as an elementary teacher. She recalls the Waller Street building was filthy and populated, mostly, by old, sullen drunks. She began by washing walls, dirty from nicotine, and, a scribe once wrote, “tired humanity.” When a man asked her for fresh underwear, she could find none, so ran out and bought some, an early act of improv.

3. On Boxing Day 1992, a \$250,000 fire broke out in the Mission, sending Morrison and 70-some men into the bitter cold at 5 a.m., barely clothed. They went to a hotel lobby, where the night clerk nearly fainted, then to a nearby restaurant, where she ordered breakfast for the whole bunch, only to discover she had no money with her. They spent much of the day on an emergency bus.

4. Already a teacher for 17 years, she took a one-year leave to become an administrator at the Mission in 1991. “I came here on a faith journey.” At \$25,000 a year, it was also a severe pay cut. There were basically zero programs, except the old Gospel goal of saving souls. No health or

addiction treatment, no dental care, only 17 employees, no active fundraising. “None. I used to phone churches.”

5. Her proudest achievement, possibly, is the creation of the Mission Hospice. “I was told for three years we couldn’t do this.” After a great deal of prep work, the 14-bed unit opened in 2001 and has since allowed about 200 poor or marginalized people to die with dignity. Its inspiration was a resident named Tim, who had AIDS — so sick he had to be carried around the Mission, but still loathe to die in hospital. She knew they could do better. They did.

6. A McGill graduate, she decided to take a masters of public administration at Queen’s University while she was still working at the Mission, commuting every couple of weeks to Kingston. “I was 50, the oldest person in my class. But I never missed pub night.”

7. Over the course of her tenure, though she hardly did it single-handedly, the Mission grew to become one of the largest social-service providers in the city. It went from 75 beds to 235. It has the hospice, dental and health care, and one of the most intensive addiction treatment programs in Canada. It has also added a learning centre, social and housing workers, off-site transitional residences. It now has its own foundation, raising roughly \$4 million a year.

8. Morrison was the first woman to lead the Mission, founded in 1906, at a time when it was becoming less evangelical and more practical. “What Diane has brought to the Mission is a real heart for the poor.” This is from Jack Murta, the new interim executive-director, former MP, and chair of the board. He’s now discovering the complexity of the job, appreciating the combination of heart and mind it takes to run an organization with 100 employees and myriad goals and stakeholders. “It’s a hard mix to get.”

9. She might look like a church lady, but she’s picked up things. Saying goodbye to Johnny in the dining room on Tuesday: “This woman saved my life so many times.” When she first met him, Johnny was living in his car. A teardrop tattoo at the eye’s edge means you’ve killed somebody, said Morrison, working the lunch-hour crowd. Before us sits a thin man with not one, but two.

10. “There were times when I was absolutely scared, not from you, but from not being able to have enough food, not being able to have enough staff to make everyone safe, not being able to help. God works slowly sometimes.” This is Morrison saying goodbye at Tuesday’s daily chapel. This is her a few moments later: “I’m going to miss the people. There really isn’t a day when you don’t make a difference in someone’s life.”

So concludes her book of days on Friday, bound, she says, to be “a weepy one.”

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