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SAGE IS THE VOICE OF FEDERAL RETIREES

VOLUNTEER MAN!

Cliff Poirier is literally everywhere
in Summerside, P.E.I.

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VOLUNTEER MAN!

Cliff Poirier is an award-winning volunteer dynamo in Summerside, P.E.I.

NANCY MACPHEE



Photo: Nancy MacPhee

In half an hour, dozens of people pass through the lobby of Summerside, P.E.I.'s sports and entertainment complex, most of them stopping by a table where a well-known local man sits. They say hello, crack a joke, offer a smile, or wave as they hurry on their way to the walking track, pool, gym, arena, or for a meeting at the Veterans Convention Centre.

Credit Union Place is a second home to the man at the table, someone who the 15,000 residents of this city know and recognize. Federal Retirees member Cliff Poirier is a constant fixture, and seemingly everywhere, a part of its fabric, although his celebrity in Summerside is unique.

Poirier is a volunteer, one of the most dedicated in a city known for its volunteerism. When there is a show at Harbourfront Theatre, Poirier is there. At the nearby Silver Fox Entertainment Complex, Poirier officiates curling matches, sells draw

tickets, and helps out in the kitchen. At Credit Union Place, Poirier is often at the door of its Eastlink Arena taking tickets or watching over the crowd during a hockey game or a big-ticket concert. During tax season, he prepares dozens of tax returns — at no cost — for seniors, low-income earners, newcomers, and others who cannot afford to do so.

He is a volunteer in demand, someone who is reliable and, in Summerside, highly regarded and respected. "He's industrious, energetic, and dedicated, with a heart for

serving others and his community and a keen sense of the true spirit of volunteerism," says Kieran Keller, executive director of the Harbourfront Theatre. "He's always been someone we could call in a moment's notice, providing we could catch him in between his many other commitments."

Over the last 24 years, Poirier has been an integral cog in Summerside's volunteer machinery. "I think in Cliff's world he is just doing what he loves to do," says Robbie Rankin, event and corporate service manager with the City of Summerside.

Rankin worked with Poirier first while general manager at the Silver Fox and in his current position with the city. “Cliff Poirier is the guy you go to for everything. He never says no,” adds Rankin. “He does everything from cutting carrots to being the head official for a Curling Canada event. He excels in the world of volunteering.”

Summerside, on the south shore of Prince Edward Island overlooking the Northumberland Strait, has a reputation for community spirit and hosting events, a reputation built largely on volunteerism, says Mayor Basil Stewart. In 2019, the Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance ranked the city in the top 10, with a population of less than 50,000, for sport and event hosting. Sport tourism brings more than 15,000 visitors to the city annually. As Credit Union Place’s moniker puts it, “It all happens here.”

With the exception of one four-year term, Stewart has served as Summerside’s mayor since 1985. He has seen volunteers come and go at countless events. Usually, Stewart quips, Poirier is at those events lending a helping hand. “Whenever a function or event is announced that is going to be here, whether it is next month or next year, the volunteers start coming out of the woodwork. You don’t even have to ask Cliff. He just steps forward and is there to help. He’s one of the good ones.”

Poirier grew up in the small, rural community of St. Nicholas, P.E.I., one of three children to a stay-at-home mother and a father who farmed and fished. After high school, he worked at the area’s largest retailer, Holman’s Department Store, then went into management for 10 years with Trans Canada Credit. After that, he joined the federal civil service, first as an employment counsellor but found the work mundane. He later transferred to unemployment insurance, working as an unemployment counsellor, a position he held until he retired at 51. He loved the job, which he says helped fuel his desire to give back to his community. “I helped people, anybody with issues, like those who had quit their jobs,” recalls Poirier.

Poirier assisted people affected by the closing, in the late 1980s, of Summerside’s Canadian

Forces Base, and, years later, those who were part of the massive layoffs following the completion of the construction of the Confederation Bridge. “I interviewed them and helped them with a schedule of when to apply for unemployment insurance and when was the best time to apply so they wouldn’t lose any benefits. A lot of people didn’t have a job lined up to go to,” says Poirier. “It was a very trying time, but when I met with individuals they were very, very appreciative of the fact that I took the time to lay out their financial plan for them.”

He also was a record of employment adviser for area employers, which meant he sometimes worked for an employee and their former employer. That is where Poirier’s trademark diplomacy, level-headedness, and way with people shone. “It was a challenge, but I am a people person and I always have been,” he adds. “I really enjoy talking to people and trying to help people.”

In his final years as a federal civil servant, Poirier began volunteering with Canada Revenue Agency’s Community Volunteer Income Tax Program. “That is probably one of my most worthwhile endeavours. You are helping people who don’t have the money, the means, to go to a professional to have their taxes done. We offer a clinic, and at that clinic we will do it for seniors, for those of low-income, students, immigrants,” he says. “There is a self-satisfaction, really, when they leave and they know they have it done right.” He has been the program’s lead in Summerside for 24 years.

When Poirier retired on March 31, 1996, he decided he would freely give of his time wherever — and whenever — needed. He immediately became a member of the Summerside branch of the National Association of Federal Retirees, of which he is now president. “I haven’t looked back. I have always helped anybody or any organization that called on me,” says the 75-year-old.

At Harbourfront Theatre, he has bartended, taken tickets at the door, been an usher, and spearheaded fundraisers, including yard sales, raffles, and pancake breakfasts. The 520-seat community theatre needs eight to 12 volunteers on any given night. With

only 16 part-time and full-time employees, volunteers are crucial. Keller says Poirier has been integral in recruiting others to volunteer and has helped with scheduling and co-ordination of the theatre’s committees. “Over the years, especially before the prevalence of group emails, he spent countless hours on the phone scheduling fellow volunteers, ensuring that our upcoming events were fully staffed, and never taking no for an answer,” says the theatre’s executive director.

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— *Robbie Rankin*

At nearby Credit Union Place, a hub of activity seven days a week and home to the weekly Maritime Junior Hockey League game featuring the D. Alex MacDonald Ford Summerside Western Capitals, each of the 26 regular-season games attracts several hundred fans and requires at least 15 volunteers. A big-ticket concert, such as Elton John or Sting, in the facility’s Eastlink Arena requires 45 to 50 volunteers. As well, it holds meetings, conventions, fundraising dinners, hockey tournaments, sporting events, and more. “Without volunteers the events that we do would be near impossible,” says Rankin, who adds Poirier is one of his go-to-guys. “Every time I send an email saying we need volunteers, Cliff says ‘yes’ or ‘volunteering somewhere else.’”

Poirier is modest about the accolades and awards he has received for his volunteerism, including Summerside’s Volunteer of the Year Award; the Eddie Laughlin Memorial Person



Cliff Poirier takes on any task to help the non-profit Silver Fox Entertainment Complex.



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Award for his work on the Miscouche parish fundraising committee; and the Lieutenant Governor's Sovereign Medal for Volunteerism. In June 2019, he received national recognition, receiving the Volunteerism Award from the National Association of Federal Retirees. He says that was a huge honour and something of which he is proud. "You would never see or hear him say 'I've done all of this'," says Rankin. "He's not that kind of guy."

Poirier is uncomfortable talking about himself. He is humble and visibly embarrassed discussing his volunteerism, often downplaying his contribution to his community. "I feel there needs to be a leader. The leader, or I, should not gloat about what they do, really. The leader is there for a purpose in that capacity," he says. "I have been a leader many times, and I will assist by giving jobs to certain people and I expect them to do their job to the best of their ability."

Curling is his passion and where Poirier volunteers most of his time, a dedication that earned him a place in the Prince Edward Island Curling Hall of Fame as a builder in the sport. In 2014, Sport PEI named Poirier official of the year for his contributions to curling in the province.

When Summerside hosted a Grand Slam of Curling event in 2014, Poirier was the first person to step up to help. When it played host to Road to the Roar in 2017, he not only volunteered, he worked with Curling Canada in planning the event. "He was basically here from sun up to sun down for 10 days straight. On just that curling event itself, he probably put in, leading up to the event and the event, 400 or 500 hours of volunteer time," recalls Rankin. "He was our volunteer chair who went out and got 150 volunteers to work for that event. He did it all, right from knocking on their door and getting them to volunteer, to making their schedule, where they are supposed to be and what time they are supposed to be there and what job they were doing."

At the Silver Fox, the city's curling venue, Poirier volunteers at bonspiels, as well as at provincial, regional, and national events. "Every provincial event I usually help with. I also have worked a fair number of national events, some Slam events, and also world events," he notes. "Most of the time I do officiating."

Poirier is also an avid curler, a sport he took up after retirement. As soon as the ice was

ready this fall, he was out throwing rocks. "I curl four times a week, or I try to," he says with a soft chuckle.

He finds it rewarding to see young curlers grow in the sport and takes pride that he can play a small part. "I try to meet with coaches and junior athletes to teach them the rules, not only the rules, but the sportsmanship part of the etiquette. That is very, very satisfying when you see an athlete, a young kid, on the ice, and they say 'you taught me that.' It is very rewarding."

Rod MacDonald, who has won many provincial curling titles, has known Poirier for more than 40 years and curls out of the Silver Fox. "Cliff was always fair in the many decisions that he made over the years as a head official," says MacDonald. "I just think Cliff likes to keep busy, meet people, and make his community a better place to live. If you need a volunteer that will give 110 per cent of his time, ask Cliff Poirier."

Amy Duncan, executive director of the P.E.I. Curling Association, first met Poirier when she started working at the association in 2010. "In my experience, Cliff takes on just about anything someone might ask of him. He helps with virtually everything within the club. On a provincial level, he has been an official, conducts officials training workshops, helps review rules of play, has been a club rep on the board of directors, and helps when asked." She adds, "Cliff volunteers because he has a huge heart and truly enjoys giving back to the community around him."

The Silver Fox is also home to the city's yacht club and marina, hosts community events, fundraisers, dinners, weddings, musical acts, and boasts meeting space, a restaurant, and junior sailing and curling programs. "We host hundreds of events a year. We have 50 staff and probably close to 100 volunteers," says general manager Gordon Lapp. "We would never be able to afford to operate without volunteers like Cliff."

Poirier takes on any task to help the non-profit Silver Fox remain viable, including serving food, peeling potatoes, and fundraising. "He probably spends more hours here than any other volunteer,

for sure. He spends more hours here than many staff," adds Lapp. When winter rolls around, he notes, Poirier is at the Silver Fox almost daily, either curling or officiating. "Every bonspiel we host, which is a couple a month for several months, he's here doing something."

Lapp is amazed by Poirier's commitment, enthusiasm, and energy. "I just think it brings him pleasure. He's retired, he's got the time, and he seems to have the energy. He has more energy than most people," he says with a laugh. "He is a great ambassador for this club, for this community, for all the organizations he belongs to and helps out."

For Poirier, volunteering gives him a sense of fulfillment. "You do it because you enjoy doing it. It is that self-satisfaction, not necessarily being thanked or rewarded."

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— *Cliff Poirier*

When asked if he is an ambassador for his city, Poirier pauses before answering. "I hope I am, really. I hope in all my commitments that I am an ambassador. I enjoy people. I enjoy teaching people. I probably should have been a teacher, really, but that didn't happen."

In his "down" time, Poirier likes to do word puzzles on his iPad or tend his garden. "I have quite a large garden on my property. It is very, very relaxing. You just do it at your own pace. You do it because you enjoy it. It is not work. It's relaxation, full relaxation when you are out there." True to nature, he found a way to turn his passion for gardening into a volunteer opportunity. As a member of the local garden club, he helps tend to the Healing Gardens at the province's second

largest health-care facility, Summerside's Prince County Hospital.

Poirier is not one for vacations. He has spent a few winters in Florida but found the time long, and was bored. He even tried to volunteer while on vacation: "They didn't take me," he says with a laugh. "I wasn't going to be there long enough. They didn't want to teach me."

At 75, he has no plans — or desire — to slow down. "I am single and do what I want to do when I want to do it." As he has done for several years, Poirier recently balanced volunteering with a temporary position as automation co-ordinator in the riding of Egmont in the lead up to the fall federal election.

With so many demands for his time as a volunteer, how does Poirier keep it all straight and how does he decide what facility or organization to help? "The first one that comes along, you make the commitment and you stick with it, that's the way it is. I can't leave them stuck for a volunteer."

Each morning, he checks his calendar to see where he is going that day, and, often, he is volunteering from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m. He never seems to tire, getting his energy from helping others, drinking a coffee a day, and averaging no more than six hours sleep a night. Anything more makes him groggy and lazy the next day.

Even cancer did not slow him down. Diagnosed late in 2018 with throat cancer, he had surgery in January 2019. His biggest concern was how long recovery would take because he had committed to a curling event in mid-February. Mere weeks after the invasive surgery, Poirier travelled to Liverpool, N.S., to help with the 2019 World Junior Curling Championships.

So, why hasn't he slowed down to enjoy retirement? "If you are active when you worked, you are active in retirement. The people that went to work because they just went to work and did nothing else are the people that don't do anything now. That is just the way it is," he says.



Federal Retirees president Jean-Guy Soulière, left, presents Cliff Poirier with the association's 2019 national volunteerism award.

He hopes other federal retirees will follow his example and find the fulfillment he has in giving back to their community. Recruiting volunteers with the Summerside branch of the National Association of Federal Retirees, though, can be difficult, admits Poirier. With approximately 600 members of his branch, he encourages retirees to lend a helping hand. Poirier has served as his branch's benevolent officer, health and benefits officer, in membership and, in recent years, as the branch president. "If people don't volunteer in crucial positions we could not have a local organization."

The Summerside branch meets four times annually and hosts socials, dinners, and, during the recent federal election, a candidates' debate.

Volunteering keeps him healthy and lets him to stay young at heart, says Poirier, and that is why he encourages others to volunteer. "It just feels great." ■