

## John Creelman JP, set to retire

By Todd Taylor

Have you ever been to court to defend yourself against charges? If you have, odds are you have pleaded your case to a local Justice of the Peace. I had the opportunity recently to spend time with Dufferin County resident and Justice of the Peace John Creelman, who has announced that he will be retiring in June.

John Creelman began his public life as a Mono councillor in 1991. The councillor role progressed to Deputy Mayor, then to Mayor, and two back-to-back terms as Warden in the early 2000's. Mr. Creelman's time in politics witnessed defining moments for the county, such as fighting against amalgamation with Orangeville, and Mono being re-incorporated as a town. Like any strong advocate, at a certain point an individual inevitably decides to move on to another challenge. In the case of Mr. Creelman, he had decided to start a family and wanted to do something different professionally.

It is not easy to become a justice of the peace. One must have a keen interest in humanity, demonstrate good judgment, be organized, possess high intellect/analytical skills, and work co-operatively with others. Since he has all these skills, I fully understand why John Creelman became a successful JP; he had qualifications transferable from his time as a county of Dufferin political leader.

In his typically understated manner, Justice Creelman shared how he got the job. "You apply and wait. Hopefully you get an interview".

In the end, the Attorney General of the day did call John with a job offer. He was posted to Brampton, which is a high-pressure court due to the sheer volume of hearings in a day and the complex matters that occur. You see, a justice of the peace does quite a bit more than marry people. They attend to Provincial Offence matters, oversee trials, apply the Highway Traffic Act, enforce health/safety issues, and protect the environment. John was eventually promoted to Senior Justice of the Peace responsible for other JPs in Ontario. His role was to make certain other JPs were doing their job and help to ensure administrative changes were implemented province wide.

Justice Creelman found himself exposed to a vast array of people in the courts. There were brilliant, compassionate lawyers who cared deeply about the people they represented, and dedicated fellow judges whom he called "extraordinary and courageous".

John also has high regard for the police. "The Shelburne, Orangeville, and Dufferin OPP are all hard-working and dedicated. They are all in line with the best virtues of the justice system". Yet, the most important people were the accused who stood before him to determine if they should receive bail or be made to stay in custody. Once the decision was made, John found it challenging to explain decisions to people in non-legal ways.

Justice Creelman feels it is imperative that all involved understand the implications and rationale of any decision he makes. As time progressed, he concluded that the legal system is a "very civil process. The level of politeness is remarkable and there are very few outbursts of temper. Candidly, I thought the environment would be more highly charged".

I asked for an instance of when he had given someone a break in court and was surprised at the seriousness of the situation. He shared with me, "There was a day-long bail hearing for an individual charged with attempted murder. The Crown would need to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt, but they did not present a strong case in terms of identifying the individual. The young man had not been in trouble previously, yet the Crown vigorously argued he should be locked up with no bail".

Guess what? John did the difficult thing and released the young man. Months later, the man came back to court seeking a variation on his bail so he could attend university. The Crown ended up dropping some of the charges because they did indeed have an identification issue. A strong judge must be consistent in applying the law regardless of the situation. John recognizes that "sometimes law is in conflict with common sense. Everything you do must be justified. Consistency is of the utmost importance". He did share that, at times, his profession causes him to have sleepless nights. A justice of the peace needs to read all the details of a warrant; these include cases such as murder and crimes against children. The facts of these cases are often difficult to hear and the details cannot be discussed with friends or family. He copes by utilizing his supportive colleagues and learning to compartmentalize his life. To John, "the justice system works remarkably well, at times in spite of itself".

His last day of work as a JP is in June. In the short term he will vacation and return to writing about law, politics, and finish a book about his ancestor, James Creelman. In the future, he plans to become a licensed paralegal and continue to serve his community in some sort of capacity.

I asked John specifically what his plans are for his community involvement. He was coy in his response, only offering, "I promise not to disappear".