

Toni Ellis Named Citizen of the Year (Apr. 01/08)

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Joanne Ross-Zuj, Mayor of Centre Wellington**

She opened the door of her Elora home Friday afternoon to find mayor Joanne Ross-Zuj, a delegation of chamber of commerce reps, and a handful of media cameras outside.

They were all there to tell her she'd been selected Centre Wellington Citizen of the Year.

"I'm speechless," she said at the door. "This is a great honour ... There are so many people who are more deserving ..."

Ellis, who was co-founder of the Elora Centre for Environmental Excellence and is still connected with the group through NeighbourWoods, was nominated by a group of friends and people who've worked with her through 18 years in the community.

They cited her involvement in saving the old Elora public school building and creating the Elora Centre for the Arts, as one of the founders of the Elora junior school council, in supporting Canada World Youth home and working placements, and in founding the Elora-Fergus Unitarian Church, among other community activities.

Reference letters supporting her nomination as Citizen of the Year state she's "an inspiration and a generous, giving person," "clear-thinking and tireless," and "embraces the community with passion, devoting endless time, commitment and effort to a cause."

"She has a wonderful ability to make things happen, and this is one of the reasons people gravitate to her," another letter states. "She acts with passion, energy, and to the benefit of all, yet she is modest about her contributions," one supporter writes. "She is quick to spread the credit around, although she's often done most of the work."

Ellis in turn praised the people she's worked with on projects and in organizations – many of them volunteering as she has.

"Without people volunteering in this community who do the things I do, they wouldn't be possible," Ellis said, surrounded by people in her kitchen. "I feel honoured to be here and be part of the community."

Mayor Ross-Zuj made the actual announcement – in the doorway – and Ellis was presented with a bouquet of flowers from Centre Wellington Chamber of Commerce interim manager Roberta Scarrow and president Garth Green.

She also gets tickets to the chamber's 2008 Awards of Excellence, April 24, where the award will be officially presented.

She had no idea what was going to happen Friday afternoon when friends arranged to take her to lunch and there was some juggling of schedules to get her back to the house at the right time for the "ambush" – how the chamber surprises citizen of the year recipients. Seeing the mayor at the door, "I thought Joanne was campaigning again," Ellis said.

"I love a surprise, and this is the best one ever," she said. "This is really neat ... I can't believe this."

In turn, Ellis presented the mayor with a new environmentally friendly canvas shopping bag – made locally in Elmira – that can carry up to 50 pounds, that she's going to be promoting in the near future.

"It just seems she's always doing something like that," Ross-Zuj said later, mentioning the "hours and hours" of time Ellis puts in on especially environmental projects that have had gone a long way to making the community better.

She mentioned Ellis's work with NeighbourWoods, which spearheads tree planting and caring for municipally planted trees in the township's urban areas.

"We don't have a good percentage of green coverage," Ross-Zuj said. "Tree planting is really important to this community and Toni takes the lead on that."

Calling her a "do-er", who works so hard to make things better in the community, she said Ellis also brings cheerfulness, passion, and a real enjoyment to the projects she takes on.

"I'm very, very thrilled that Toni is receiving this award," she said.

- Fergus/Elora News Express, April 1st 2008.