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Veteran Naturalist Keeps Up Zest For Activism

By Andy Marshall

Dorothy Dickson's husband, David, recently had to remind Alberta's irrepressible naturalist she'd reached the three-quarter century mark. "Cripes, I forgot my own birthday," she laughs, lust for life and good humour still twinkling from clear eyes.

At 75, Dorothy has lost little of the zest that has kept her at the forefront of Alberta's environmental and conservation movement since she first arrived in Calgary almost 35 years ago. "Ty Lund (former Alberta Environment Minister) called me a trouble-maker," she says, those eyes still twinkling. But that hasn't stopped her constant cajoling, questioning and challenging on behalf of the natural habitat she has come to love so dearly.

"I've become more pragmatic as I get older ... I've learned to bite my tongue," she concedes. "I don't like that, but otherwise you don't get anything done." However, whether it's fighting to preserve the Rumsey Ecological Reserve in the parkland region in east-central Alberta or the Bighorn Wildland area in the west, Dorothy is still prepared to talk about her "line-in-the-sand" approach: "I'm a bit of a terrier when I get my teeth into something," she says with well-toned understatement.

Her voice reveals her 30 years in England, where she grew up and later became a physical education teacher, a wife and a mother of two children before the family's departure for Canada in 1963.

Although she's quite short and trim – she has lost 15 pounds through a low-fat diet in the past four years – Dorothy is not someone you'd ignore easily. Perhaps it was the sports and athletics she was so keen on as a young girl, or the drama and singing that she performed with gusto for much of her life in England and in Canada, that give her that animated, authoritative demeanour.

Dorothy has long marched – or more likely skipped and danced – to her own drumbeat. With her Irish-born husband, she has an email address with a Celtic word meaning "place on the hill where the sun shines." It aptly describes the converted farmhouse and three-acre parcel they have shared with their horses at Kneehill Valley, about 23 kilometres southeast of Innisfail, since 1985.

For the light Dorothy has directed into dozens of organizations, from the Alberta Wilderness Association to the Calgary Eco Centre, from the Canadian Nature Federation to the Red Deer River Naturalists, she has, in her special way, also been an appreciated patch of sunshine on the hill of conservationist struggles. And even though she and David, who last year celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, are, with some regret, about to move into a Red Deer condominium to be closer to the urban services people are likely to require as they grow older, her passion to remain involved is far from setting.

"It's a very hard decision to move," she says. But using an expression she's heard from other environmentalists in other practical contexts, she and David are "applying the precautionary principle."

With fewer chores to worry about, Dorothy believes she will have even more time to pursue her passions. Check her diary. This month, for example, she's giving a talk on the importance of biodiversity to a group in Stettler. It's one more step on the trail of speaking and teaching she has followed with such enthusiasm since becoming a phys ed teacher in England as a young woman.

Throughout her life in Canada, Dorothy has placed a high value on education and presentations to school classes. Only a couple of years after her arrival in Calgary in 1968, she built on the efforts of young





people and helped found the Eco Centre to launch an important trend in urban environmental activism for recycling. Along with three other founders, she was able through the Eco Centre to propose and have accepted changes in Alberta's science and social studies curricula to promote better awareness of our water, air, earth and wildlife among young people. In 1980, she received an Alberta Achievement Award for her work in environmental education.

For this coming fall, Dorothy has committed to teaching Shakespearian staging techniques and music to high school students in Lacombe, confirming her belief in drama as a highly effective teaching tool and her love of young people. Originating early in her career, this belief found expression through the branch of the Canadian Child and Youth Drama Association that she helped start at Dalhousie University soon after the family's arrival in Halifax in 1963.

Dorothy has taken leadership roles in numerous boards and committees, small and large. She has also sat on several provincial advisory boards, adding her insistent voice to the formulation of government positions, including the Eastern Slopes Policy. She estimates at least 40 per cent of her "environmental time" in the last 30 years has been spent working on parks policies and planning, including being on the Banff-Bow Valley Study Steering Committee. Among many other activities she has kept up since moving from Calgary is her work as a volunteer steward for the Innisfail Natural Area.

A testament to her ability to mix with ease with a wide range of people has been the warm acceptance granted her by the farming community around Kneehill where she lives, despite jaundiced views about environmental activism. In fact, many farming families have sought her advice on water or oil exploration issues. Through a local association, she has been able to pass on information about birds and wildlife.

Born in Sidney, Australia, Dorothy developed an affinity for her natural surroundings at an early age. The middle child of her British-born father, who was working as an accountant for the company building the Sidney Harbour Bridge, she recalls talking to the banana tree in their back garden. The family moved back to England when she was five, and the trip back included a dramatic journey through the dust storms of the Canadian prairies in the early 1930s.

Another influential memory is that of her teenage wanderings during the summer months across the Yorkshire Moors in northern England. While they enjoyed visiting the countryside and her mother took delight in birds and flowers, Dorothy says she was the only one who pursued a scientific interest in natural history. "I knew the birds and flowers by name." She also remembers her parents encouraging volunteerism.

As so many immigrants are when they come to Calgary, she was immediately struck by the magnificence of the mountain and prairie landscape. And, like other newcomers of that era, she soon saw the threats from industrial encroachment and apathy that pushed her into a life of activism.

While stimulating, that life can be wearying and discouraging, too. Dorothy even admits to having lost her natural joie de vivre. She remembers sleepless nights and the cloud of stress hanging over her during a particularly busy time in the 1980s.

She has advice for others in the same boat: "Whenever I think I haven't time to complete tasks, but I've got to do them anyway, otherwise they won't get done, then I know I've gone over the top," she says.

David, her loving companion of 51 years, has also been a source of strength. Since the moment they met, they have shared a joy in the outdoors. In the 1980s, they developed a passion for the Arctic after several visits there.





Today, she still credits him for helping prepare her for the cut and thrust of environmental activism and for her meticulously careful approach to issues. "He is known for his meticulous research. His way of thinking challenged me always to get my facts right," she says of David, a specialist in embryology research throughout his career in Canada.

Dorothy has written many articles and contributed text for five books by photographer George Brybicin and the upcoming book on the Bighorn Wildland by AWA. Although she's reluctant to talk about them, she has received several prestigious awards, including the Douglas H. Pimlott Award and Honorary Life Membership in the Canadian Nature Federation. In 1999 Alberta Environment gave her an Alberta Volunteer Stewards Award, and last year she accepted an Honorary Life Membership in the Federation of Alberta Naturalists.

Her experiences and view of the world have helped inform a particular approach to environmental issues. Her battles against environmental degradation are based on concern not so much for the impact on humans, but on all creatures and plants.

"I am a naturalist and come at issues from the point of view of the species," she explains. "This is not sentimentalism, but a moral standpoint. The main reason for protecting other species is that they have as much right on earth as we do."

While the view is still strong, particularly in this part of the world, that God put humankind on earth for stewardship of creation, Dorothy would rather avoid these concepts. God or creation are not part of her lexicon. Instead, she puts it this way: "I cannot share the belief that other species are on earth for humans to use as we wish." That's not to say humans should not fully savour the richness of the diversity of life around them. "I still get a vast amount of pleasure from nature," she says. "I feel sorry for environmentalists who are not naturalists."

She is still able to hike for quite long distances and will sit for hours in a natural area. This is undoubtedly a reason for her longevity and still active engagement with the world around her. "You will lose your drive if you don't get out there and just enjoy it," she adds simply.

