

Incandescent Leadership: Judith Rodger

By Alexandra Jesus

Engaged, mentor, mother, wife, and friend—these are the words Judith Rodger came up with when asked to describe herself in five words. While these terms are without a doubt appropriate, it was made glaringly clear to me that this is a woman who could not be epitomized in a novel, let alone with a handful of adjectives. Judith Rodger, a major cultural leader in London, Ontario and beyond, is a woman who radiates strength, sophistication, and warmth, all laced with a perceptible self-assurance one can only acquire through decades of experience. From the moment you meet Judith Rodger you get a sense of who she is: an absolute and incandescent leader.

Judith Rodger, raised in Hudson, Quebec, has long had an affinity for education. Influenced by her mother's example, Rodger attended McGill University in her youth and has since journeyed all over the map educating herself—from Montreal, to England, to London (Ontario), and Toronto. Settling down, however, does not seem to be an option for Rodger at this point in her life, even with six grandchildren and an Adjunct Professor position at the University of Western Ontario. Constantly taking up new positions and challenges in London and Toronto's arts and culture communities, Rodger's life has been anything but linear and monotonous. Educating and supporting her community is where Rodger finds satisfaction in her roles, which include enlightening and helping others.

For thirteen years Rodger worked at Museum London. For first eight she acted as the interface between the public coming in the door and the works of art that hung on the walls. It was her job to make it easier for visitors to understand what they were looking at

which was not a simple task, especially when it came to contemporary art. To Rodger, these challenges presented themselves as opportunities, an auspicious attitude that has fostered a great leader in her. Action in the presence of opportunity seems to be the fundamental principle of leadership for Rodger; without taking risks and putting yourself out there you're forever sentencing yourself to be an acolyte riding on the coattails of other enterprising individuals. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," remarks Rodger, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Living life on the offense and with ambition is essential to the constitution of a leader. While making decisions and taking action are undoubtedly conscious choices, Rodger believes this hunger and resolve to be inherently hard-wired within. "Leadership," says Rodger, "is an innate capability you have from a young age." Though natural aptitude is the main component of a leader, Rodger believes that while you cannot forcibly construct a leader, you can encourage and enhance this capacity in individuals. She herself was a Brownie and a Girl Guide while growing up, an experience she believes facilitated her assimilation of the leader within. Recounting an event that occurred when she was volunteering on the board of the London Community Foundation, Rodger and her peers found a gap in leadership education for the 10-14 year olds and attempted to fill it. It was then, she explains, that she saw the natural quality of a leader; when a group of children walked into a board meeting to present their progress in the program, one boy stood out among the rest, fearlessly talking to an intimidating room full of adults, full of enthusiasm. "I've never forgotten him," Rodger notes, "*He* was a natural leader."

That is not to deny the importance of a positive environment on the development of a successful leader. From a very young age, Rodger has had the great fortune to be

supported from all different angles in her trajectory: “I was blessed with an amazing mother who is still alive at 101 ½. She was a role model because she was a university graduate when it wasn’t usual for women in her day...And my father, too, he made me think I could do anything and that’s an important thing for a young woman to have.” Her parents instilled in her the importance of a solid foundation and provided the support and the model to achieve her full potential. Family is the top priority in Rodger’s life.

Throughout her career, she has had to make sacrifices that have offset her work-life balance at times, but most of the time it is her family that has pushed her to get back in the game. When she was considering going back to work full-time after taking time off to raise her three children, it was her middle daughter that came up to her and said, “Well, mom, you don’t particularly like doing laundry.” It was not without the occasional feeling of guilt that Rodger resumed her working life but she always did, and continues to do, her best to be there for them when her family members need her. “I think women have to think about their lives in chunks,” Rodger explains. “You know about having it all? It’s been said many times—that—and I think you can have it all—I think I’ve had it all—but not at the same time.” Support, not only from your family but also from your peers and staff, is an element conducive to successful leadership.

Rodger jokes that one of the skills she utilized most when she returned to work was her mothering skills: “A lot of how you deal with bringing up children applies to how you manage a team and bring them together.” Organization is a key element of this and something she takes very seriously. Rodger has cultivated her organizational skills through numerous different mediums. While attending McGill University, she acted for two summers as an assistant to the warden of her residence, Professor Muriel Roscoe,

tending mostly to administrative work. When she saw inefficiencies in the room assignment system, she took it upon herself to devise a new visual charting system to reduce confusion and streamline the whole operation. Rodger has taken this principle of straightforward planning and management with her to every position she has filled, including her position as Acting Director of McIntosh Gallery. When Rodger was asked to fill this esteemed role she had been on the strategic planning committee aiming to reinvent McIntosh. The problem was multifarious and, coming up with 7 strategic goals, they took off in pursuit of the dream: a recognized and identifiable art gallery with a strong relationship to the university, especially the Visual Arts department. Wherever she sees a problem, she tackles it head on, equipped with an efficient plan of attack. This applies as much to the work she is assigned as to her relationships with those who work with and under her.

Honesty really is the best policy for Rodger, who explains that cutting straight to the point is the most efficient and effective way of leading a team. That is not to take this proposition in a negative light however; it is important to let the people you are working with know that you value their opinion and allow them to be heard just as much as you want to speak yourself. In that sense, you have to follow—or listen—in order to lead. Sitting down and resolving problems when they surface is her idea of conflict resolution—no beating around the bush, as she would say. She attributes this part of her character to her father, who, much like herself, was assertive and industrious. Rodger deems it important to care for those who view you as a leader. The more people under you who believe in you and your goals the more likely they are to come to fruition. She takes this solicitous attitude into her work and makes it a personal goal to ensure the

artists she works with are in the most favorable circumstance they could be in under her authority. Functioning under the model of her old boss from Museum London, Brenda Wallace, Rodger tries to focus on the artist she is working with, which, she notes, is not always the case in the cultural sphere. Wherever possible, she would try to hire artists for jobs around the museum out of the sheer respect she has for people who devote their lives to the arts, despite the challenges and obstacles this sort of lifestyle presents. This respect of hers has been cultivated through her life experiences watching women struggle to reach professional levels designated for men.

Rodger is respected and commended as a leader in the arts and culture community, overcoming the pigeonhole women in the professional realm can find themselves in. Gender is not a restricting element for Rodger, but this does not mean she hasn't received her fair share of condescending remarks from impertinent individuals. When her husband's secretary retired with a Masters and a slew of other professional qualifications, Rodger volunteered to help her husband at his medical office until a replacement could be found. On one particular occasion, she describes an encounter with an arrogant woman who boomed in asking questions that were not relevant to her husband's specialty. Her first words to Rodger were, "I'm an educated woman"; from the beginning this woman held a haughty attitude toward "the secretary." When Rodger regretfully informed her that she could not be of assistance, the woman proceeded to pat her on the shoulder and say, "Oh, I forgot. You're just the secretary." These blatantly patronizing and disrespectful comments were a first for Rodger and she considers the occurrence a true learning experience on how people treat others they perceive to be inferior.

The challenge of being a female and reaching for an influential role is something familiar to Rodger. Watching women be underestimated and discounted are experiences that have caused her to seriously respect strong and persistent women in the public sphere and in her own private one. Women like her mother, and Muriel Roscoe, all provided a great example for Rodger as a young woman growing up in a world dominated by the boy's club. Restrictions on women were heavy and brutal and inhibited them from progressing to competitive standards with their male counterparts. The perseverance of these women in Rodger's life modeled her into the woman she is today and gave her the drive to take advantage of every opportunity that arises. Being a female hasn't hindered her in her ability to lead. When speaking with her you get a sense that her gender is neither an impediment, nor a factor in her course; it is as if there are no limitations or obstacles in being a female that are worth any mention because they cannot impede her. The influences and icons she mentions in the public sphere are intelligent female authors, artists and politicians, such as Margret Atwood and Hillary Clinton. When accepting her YMCA Women of Excellence Award for contributions in Arts, Culture, and Heritage, Rodger presented a speech about a local female artist who had gone relatively unnoticed by the art community in comparison to a male counterpart who has received ample attention. For females in the professional sphere, "I think there's been a lot of progress," Rodger explains, "but I think there are still mountains that have to be climbed."

Judith Rodger is an exceptional woman with a soft spot for helping and educating. She encapsulates everything she describes a leader to be and everything a leader is that you cannot put into words. A desire to help any and everyone—the community, her peers, the environment—and an empathetic side that balances out her inexorable nature,

her passion to remain true to herself and yearn for achievement all frame this interesting and intelligent woman. Like the Ed Zelenak sculpture she helped save that identifies the small building on Western's campus we know to be McIntosh Gallery, Judith Rodger is a one-of-a-kind, incandescent essential character within the London art community.