

The Urban Pioneer: A Profile of Greg Thompson
By Aidan Murphy

Greg Thompson, chair of the Urban League of London, as well as curator and president of the Old East Village Community Association, has been a community activist for as long as he can remember. Realtor by day and community activist by night, this “urban pioneer” is a cultural leader involved in neighbourly affairs both on and off the clock. He believes that “the best neighbourhoods are inclusive neighbourhoods” and works hard to strive for exactly that: achieving a healthy, inclusive, and committed brotherhood of neighbours, and thus a holistically better community.

Innovation inspires Thompson, but more so those radicals who find ways of bringing it about. When asked to outline a few of his role models, he replies, “I have thousands.” Perhaps it is this constant flow of influential figures and new ideas that keeps Thompson growing as a leader. A particular author Thompson mentions is Edward Abbey, specifically in relation to his book *The Monkey Wrench Game*. Thompson credits Abbey as the man who “first got [him] thinking.” Another inspiration Thompson highlights is a man by the name Saul Alinsky. Alinsky, often referred to as the founder of modern community organizing, is perhaps best known for his book, *Rules for Radicals*. Upon reflection, Thompson speaks of the incident where Alinsky threatened to “shut down the city of Chicago” by occupying all of the washroom stalls in the O’Hare airport. While discussing this, Thompson remarks, “my role models are people who do small things and get them done.” It is this

microcosmic approach to constructing healthy neighbourhood environments that allows Thompson to be the successful leader he is.

After moving to London, Ontario twenty-five years ago, it was not long before Thompson got his feet wet in community involvement, creating the Old East Village Community Association (OEVCA) two years after settling in this diverse neighbourhood. When asked what brought him to Old East, Thompson replies, “[my wife and I] are drawn to neighbourhoods that have a bit of an edge to them.” As he settled in and grew to know his neighbours, he quickly realized that most felt as if the city didn’t care about them. It was this same frame of mind he found at the doors of each neighbouring house that sparked the creation of the Old East Village Community Association. The association focuses its energy on developing healthy relationships within the community, as well as empowering the peoples of Old East through advocacy, education, and community involvement. Thompson is constantly trying to improve relationships within his neighbourhood, organizing block parties, and shows from local musicians and artists, as well as organizing groups to go out and hit the town; and, as he reminds me with a smile, “you’ve always got to have beer.”

The Urban League of London is a registered not-for-profit umbrella organization for community associations in the City of London, Ontario that was established in 1969. The organization is fuelled completely by volunteers, who focus their time and energy on trying to organize and plan events for a successful and healthy London community. As chair of the League, Thompson acts as Executive Director while also handling the responsibilities of governance on the Board of

Directors. As Thompson states, “the Urban League is all about municipal politics...we deal with neighbourhoods, and neighbourhood interests are always political. They are not only political, but they are *always* political.”

A main focus of Thompson’s within the League is reaching out and getting the younger generations involved. “We build cities for me (old white guys), not you (young adults),” he explains, “so that, to me, is the issue. How do we build a city that works for everyone...where each of our citizens is happy, healthy, hired, and housed ~~for ages?~~” With his eyes fixed on the future, as well as his constant search for new ideas and approaches to problems, Thompson is hoping to shift the way neighbourhoods are built in order to develop a “fairer city.”

Growing up in the belly of Woodstock, Thompson admits, “I have always been a community person.” From a young age, Thompson was a radical environmentalist, but discovered direction for his passion of community involvement when he found work in the cooperative movement, being hired at The Credit Union of Central Ontario fresh out of school. By his own admission, his ending up on the path that made him into a great cultural leader “was all serendipity.” Thompson is a man who would much rather be out in the community doing something than sitting at a meeting discussing it. Inspired by those in the community that are “doers,” he strives to achieve simple, elegant solutions to existing problems, and then moves on to the next. This is also where many of his obstacles surface. Thompson is a leader who understands that one is only as effective as those who support your cause. He comments that in order to lead effectively, one must bring people along by making them believe what you believe, but before one can guide the way, one must find a

consensus amongst these individuals. Thus, in order to lead powerfully, one has to find a balance between talking about ideas, and effectively implementing them.

“Steer, don’t row” is a mantra by which Thompson attempts to live each and every day. He envisions his role to be directing those around him toward a communal goal in which they all believe. One cannot achieve these goals without rowers, but those rowing could never find the way without someone deftly steering. Thompson is a leader who understands the importance of those rowing, stating, “volunteerism is how we get things done...[it’s what] makes the world go around.” With a solid grasp of this, Thompson leads in a style that ensures all are working in unison. He is a man whose passion and leadership style make people share his beliefs and actively get behind them.

At the end of the day, perhaps one of the most important reasons that Thompson is a competent leader is because he is doing what he loves. “Neighbourhoods are in my DNA,” he remarks while discussing how he balances his professional life with his role as a cultural leader. “I don’t [have to balance them] because they are the same thing.” Spending his professional hours making sure people can move into some of the best neighbourhoods, and his personal time ensuring those neighbourhoods are the best they can be, it seems that Thompson has neighbourhoods in his veins and community at heart. As an influential leader, he is working for communities, with communities, and within communities – to be guided, while guiding the way.