



Ralph Thornton and the Inspiration for the Ralph Thornton Community Centre

Born in Toronto in 1905, James Ralph Thornton was described in the classic community organizing book *The Power to Make it Happen* as “one of the original moving spirits in the Riverdale community”. He was an independent taxi driver for much of his working life, a beloved local community leader, and a good neighbour whose front living room was an organizing centre and place of respite.

The late 1960s and 1970s were turbulent years in Riverdale as they were elsewhere. On both sides of the Don River the City was busy with its urban renewal schemes. People’s homes were expropriated to make way for new housing but the Expropriation Act of that period meant that people lost about a third of the value of their homes when they were forced to sell to the City. Ralph Thornton was a key community organizer against the City’s plans and helped people stay united in the fight. Though unable to stop the city from demolishing homes they were able to force a big change to the Expropriation Act in 1968, requiring that owners be paid enough to buy a comparable home. This was such a big change that the city abandoned the idea of tearing down neighbourhoods because it was too expensive to pay people fair value for their homes. Don Mount Court, the Ontario Housing Corporation’s development adjacent to Ralph’s home on Hamilton Street, was the last urban renewal scheme of the City of Toronto.

Ralph was at the fore of many other community efforts to shift power to the working class residents of Riverdale who were directly affected by policies on housing, income security (including welfare) and planning. Disgusted by the Riverdale Hospital’s policy of excluding the public from its cafeteria in the early 1970s, Ralph Thornton tackled the hospital head on. The hospital changed its policy and invited Ralph to become a member of their board of directors. Ex-Toronto mayor John Sewell said that this was how Ralph got things done – by being outspoken, pragmatic and on the side of justice and fairness.

Ralph’s community work might be described today as a combination of direct action and lobbying. In the 60s and 70s his way of working was both radical and instrumental in neighbourhood renewal in Riverdale. Community organizer Dale Perkins said Ralph “was a pillar of the early organizing campaigns that peaked in 1972 when the Greater Riverdale Organization was formed... Ralph was the community’s very finest patriarch and leader. Long may his spirit prevail”.

Though Ralph died in September 1974, others through the Greater Riverdale Organization continued to find ways of giving local residents a voice in how decisions were made and City resources used. After the post office at 765 Queen Street closed in 1975 it took five years for it to become a community centre supported by the city but governed by a volunteer board of local residents. The centre was named after Ralph Thornton to honour his work and “spirit”, as well as those of the many other residents who fought for healthy, just and liveable neighbourhoods.

“If we had more people like Ralph, the city would be a much nicer place, there would be more equality, fairness and consideration for others – we would have a society and city that we could be proud of”.

John Sewell