
BRIEFING NOTE

About Margaret Alice Canning

Life

A prize and double scholarship winning graduate of Parkdale Collegiate in Toronto, Margaret Canning was an Edward Wilson gold medalist graduate in 1944 from Victoria University, University of Toronto. She returned to the University of Toronto and completed the BLS programme with honours in 1965. Her first positions were with the Etobicoke Public Library as a children's librarian at Brentwood and as branch head at Albion. She returned to the Faculty of Library Science and completed her MLS degree in 1973, again with honours. Subsequently, she worked for Brampton Public Library as head of the Chinguacousy Branch.

In 1976, Margaret Canning joined the North York Public Library as Assistant Division Head and was responsible for the York Woods Branch. From 1978 to 1982, she was York Woods Area Branch Head. While in the position, Ms. Canning was instrumental in developing and maintaining close relationships with local community service groups and organizations.

From 1983 until 1987, Margaret Canning was Manager of Special Community Services. She was responsible for a wide range of services from Online Reference, Inter-Library Loan, Link Community Information Service, Audio-Visual, Bookmobile, Shut-Ins, and Adult Literacy. In 1985, she represented the Canadian Library Association on the Literacy Committee of the Book and Periodical Council. Margaret Canning retired from North York Public Library in January 1988. She died in August 2007.

Contributions to North York Public Library

An article in the December issue of North York Public Library's *New Notes* summarized Margaret Canning's achievements:

"During her years in Community Services, the department expanded significantly. Its Adult Literacy Program, for example, expanded to four locations from one. The Information Network Office became a reality, videos were added to our Audio Visual Services, operations in AV, LINK, and

Interloan were computerized and a position was created to allow a librarian to work full-time on providing services for people who have disabilities." (*New Notes*, December 1987)

While working at York Woods Branch, Margaret Canning noticed adult customers who were requesting spelling and easy-to-read books. In 1978, she hired a part-time teacher to pilot the Adult Literacy program. It soon became clear that the teacher could not meet the demand for reading and writing instruction. The first group of volunteer tutors was trained in 1979. The part-time coordinator's position was extended to full time. During this period, Ms. Canning also initiated plans for Leading to Reading, a children's reading practice program, which began operations in 1979.

In 1983, when Margaret Canning became Manager of Special Community Services, a second Adult Literacy Program location was established at 5145 Yonge Street. She offered temporary space to the fledgling Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, an umbrella organization that continues to offer support to existing and developing literacy organizations in Toronto and York Region.

During the 1980s, Margaret Canning lobbied for and oversaw the establishment of three additional Adult Literacy offices. Funding was a constant issue. She made sure that grants were obtained to staff these locations.

During the planning stage for North York Central Library, Margaret Canning worked with the architects to design the dedicated space where the Adult Literacy Program continues to operate. Features included shelving for Adult Literacy materials, carrels for pairs to conduct tutoring sessions, desks for public computers, and staff work space. These features established a basic model for subsequent literacy offices.

Contributions to Toronto Public Library

In 2008, the Adult Literacy program celebrated its 30th anniversary. The program has nine locations in branches across the city, Adult Literacy collections in 52 branches, 17 deposit collections in community literacy programs, and permanent staffing to support instruction, collections, and outreach.

The philosophy on which the Adult Literacy program was initially based established a model for program delivery, which is still being used today. The program is based on the fundamental belief that adults who need basic reading and writing instruction work best in a one-on-one relationship, rather than in a classroom setting. Once basic skills are developed, adults can effectively move to a class and make progress. The program relies as it did in the beginning on members of the community to volunteer for two hours once a week.

In the intervening years, the Adult Literacy program has won three Canadian Library Trustees Association awards for excellence. The program continues to pioneer approaches in serving the needs of adults who want to improve their literacy skills. Adult Literacy staff continues to build strong relationships with community groups and organizations to help create links between the services offered through the Adult Literacy program and the people who could benefit from one-on-one instruction, Adult Literacy collections, and the opportunity to volunteer.

Resources Consulted

1. *Board Highlights*. North York Public Library. North York, Ontario: 1982-1987
2. "Correction to Margaret Alice Canning Obituary." Faculty of Information Studies. University of Toronto. Toronto, Ontario: October 1, 2008
<http://joomla.ischool.utoronto.ca/content/view/1405/66/>
3. "Historical Overview of Leading to Reading." Volunteer Tutor Package. Toronto Public Library. Toronto, Ontario: May 2000
4. "Margaret Alice Canning Obituary." *Globe and Mail*. Toronto, Ontario: August 30, 2007
5. *New Notes*. North York Public Library. North York, Ontario: December 1987