

AGING SYMPOSIUM- OCTOBER 1

Dr. Raina has asked me to talk about being a donor. As I thought about it I realized how the decisions to be a donor and the decisions to give to particular issues, projects and organizations are very personal. So I am going to talk about what motivated me to be a donor, why I chose to give to McMaster and finally why I chose Aging.

As I went along this path, I met other donors and realized that we all came at our decisions from very different perspectives but with a common belief that we could make a difference. So while I do know that you will find as many exceptions to what I say today as there are other donors, I also think there are threads and attitudes that unite almost everyone who makes a commitment to charitable giving. Hopefully, I can share some of those unifying perspectives in telling you my personal story.

I am fortunate to come from a family that believed in giving back to the community. My grandfather was one of the early participants in what later became the United Way. He also helped support an old age home and a home for unwed mothers. My father followed in his footsteps and as someone who spent most of his life in Ottawa he became involved over time in a broad range of activities. As a McMaster alumnus, he even served on the Board of Governors for a number of years. At the same time my mother was associated with Carleton University both as a lecturer in medieval studies and eventually as a member of their board of governors. When my father died she was asked to take on some of his boards and became increasingly involved in the areas of health and aging. She was

Chair of the Board of St. Vincent's – a home for the elderly. She was involved with Bruyere – another facility specializing in caring for the elderly. She was one of the non-nursing members of the Canadian Nursing Association Board and regularly funded educational opportunities for the nurses at Bruyere. She was involved in the regional health council as well as the Council on Aging.

As you can tell, I am rather proud of what my parents did for their community but it also goes a long way to explaining why I am here today. We were taught that you gave back to your community either by giving money or time – whichever you could best give. But also, I couldn't help but absorb some of my parents' interests and some of the knowledge they had of the issues facing the institutions they were involved with.

I had the good fortune of working in Ottawa for ten years while my mother was very active in the community. Every Friday night we would have dinner together and our conversation tended to be around our professional activities so I, more than most of my siblings, absorbed a lot about health and aging issues. I only realized in reflection that she was in her 70s when she was the most involved – a wonderful example of optimal aging.

Like most people, my donations started off small and were largely local and social in nature. The United Way and the Salvation Army were regular beneficiaries. Then about ten years ago things changed. My mother advised me that I would be inheriting a certain amount of money from a trust my grandfather had set up. I was fortunate enough that I didn't need it and I had no dependants so I asked my mother if she wanted me to put it

aside to pass on eventually to her grandchildren. Her comment was that she would much prefer me to use it to support something I believed in. It made me step back, look at what I was currently doing and focus on what I wanted to do in the future.

So why McMaster? First I should say that McMaster had more or less lost me for the first thirty years after my graduation. I can say that this was in marked contrast to my Graduate School, which seemed able to track me down wherever I was and find a reason for keeping me connected to them. But Peter George – who was McMaster’s president at the time and a former professor of mine from my undergraduate days – was a master at reaching out to alumni in an attempt to reconnect. In my case he asked me to be on the Board of Governors. Now when I was in Ottawa I had been on an advisory board for Carleton and later on the advisory board of the business school at UBC so I had a pretty good sense of the issues facing universities. But the Board of Governors not only gives you a sense of the challenges, it also provides you with very good insight about where the university is trying to go and the range of activities and programs it offers. Another privilege of serving on the board was being exposed to some of McMaster’s best teachers and researchers and as you all know, we have some truly outstanding people.

I expected each of the things I just mentioned to be part of my board experience, but a fairly regular part of our meeting agendas included reviewing both naming opportunities and programs specifically supported by donors. It gave me a wonderful perspective on what a larger donation could do.

So I decided early on that I would contribute to a university. The good news for McMaster was that I felt that the amount of money I had could make a difference at Mac but would be insignificant at my graduate studies alma mater ... the Harvard Business School.

Both institutions had family connections in that my father was a Mac grad while my mother went to Harvard. Since I was using family money for the donation, I decided I wanted to do something honouring my parents and an endowed chair seemed to be the right solution and, given my mother's interests, Aging the right area. As I explored this opportunity with the university I knew that I didn't want to fund research into a particular disease or condition facing the elderly. Instead, I wanted to explore how people could deal with the issues of aging in such a way as to maintain their good health as long as possible and stay as independent as possible for as long as possible. I also knew that this was not purely a medical issue but a social one as well. What was so attractive about McMaster was that it was small enough that there could be interdisciplinary work undertaken in this area. And that essentially is how the concept of Optimal Aging evolved.

But as I funded this chair I learned something else. I happened to donate shares and by the time they were sold, there was more money than required to fund the Chair. When I was asked what we should do with it I suggested the money be used to kick start some work in the area and I remember vividly Dr. Kelton's pleasure at getting some operating funds to go with the chair. We all agreed that since we wanted to encourage

interdisciplinary work and since the Chair was in the Faculty of Health Sciences that we would award a post-doctoral fellowship in the Faculty of Social Sciences .

By the time that I decided I could give more to the University I was far more conscious of the difference in impact between endowed gifts and gifts given in the form of operational funding. I understand why universities like endowed funds since they provide a stable cash flow over time but for a donor who would like to have an impact it is not as attractive a proposition.

I decided that this time I wanted to do something that could have a more immediate impact, play to McMaster's strengths and position the university to take a leadership position in Aging since it was not at the time an area that was receiving much focus. To get something going requires up front investment and I felt that if the university couldn't leverage my funds by the end of seven years then there probably wasn't a demand for what we were doing. When we discussed how to do this we ended up with a two-pronged approach. The first prong was to raise the profile of McMaster's aging research, and to become a recognized hub for discussion and debate on aging as well as a publicly recognized and trusted source of information on health related aging issues. This led to the creation of the Optimal Aging Portal and to the Knowledge Translation events.

The second prong of the approach was based on the recognition that if we didn't do innovative research in this space then we really didn't have a right to claim a leadership role. That led to the idea of providing seed money for aging-related research projects and

specifically, projects that supported the concept of helping older adults stay healthy, stay active and stay engaged in their home communities as long as possible. Our hope was that this data would provide a foundation that would allow researchers to pursue other funding from more traditional sources like the major granting agencies.

And so here we are today. You have heard from a number of the researchers about what they have been able to do by accessing the Opportunities Fund. The Portal is up and running and is well regarded by those who access it and the Knowledge translation events continue to go from strength to strength and attract a large number of attendees as well as on-line participants.

And apart from this there are a number of smaller initiatives I have sponsored, whether it be educational tools on how to deal with the elderly, skill development opportunities in various aspects of knowledge translation or, most recently, research into identifying and helping older adults at risk of mental health problems.

There is a reason I keep giving what I can and that has to do with a number of people in the room. It is not just that you did what you said you would but you have shared with me the results of your work. It may seem obvious that these things are important, but sadly, they are not always part of the donor experience. I have been part of the discussion on how we improve the portal, I have attended a number of the public events and I have had researchers explain to me what they are working on and what they are trying to accomplish. This not only lets me know that the money is being spent as agreed but also

provides me with far more understanding of the issues and gives me a chance to see the quality of the people working on the projects. A number of other people, including Parminder, have talked about what is going on in the area of research on aging and shared their vision of what McMaster can do. We are about halfway through the funding horizon of this initiative. A number of researchers have been able to obtain additional funding for their projects. The portal is a wonderful resource – we now have the challenge of getting more people to know that it is there. While many individuals in this room are viewed as major players in the field of aging we have not yet been able to leverage that into being viewed in Canada as THE university that is the leader in the field. We have achieved a great deal, but there is much work still to do.

What I hope I have been able to communicate is that each donor has his or her own reasons for giving and their own specific interests. The common thread that runs through our giving is that we want to feel that we can make a difference. But only you – the people who are part of the university and putting our donations to use – can tell us if we are making a difference, can let us know what areas not only need funding but why they fit within our specific interests and how anything we give can make a difference. It doesn't hurt to be thanked every once in a while, especially if that kind of information is part of the communication!

My experience has been exceptional and everyone I have met has been generous in sharing his or her knowledge and interests. And to make it work it has to be a shared responsibility. Lorna Somers and Susan Denburg have been superb at keeping me

informed and involved but it is the interaction with people like Parminder Raina, John Lavis, Maureen Markle-Reid, Brenda Vrkljan and Dawn Bowdish to name but a few that has helped cement my relationship with McMaster.

Most donors, I expect, are like me. We are amateurs when it comes to the issues that are important to us. You are the professionals and the experts. We may give relatively small donations to your work simply because your field is our area of interest, but the big gifts, that gifts that make a difference to you and truly get donors engaged, depend on your ability to provide a specific vision, describe a specific need and communicate the specific impact of our donation both before and after the gift.

When that happens, I can tell you from experience that it makes giving a joy and, let's be honest, it makes donors like me more likely to give again.

Keep up the great work.