

Bill Weiler

Bill Weiler had a vision in 1994. It was made of light and Christmas magic and the retired businessman toiled away in his basement that year to bring it to the children of Waterloo.



These days, thousands enjoy the spectacular holiday light display he imagined in the mid 1990s. Weiler and an ambitious band of retired hydro workers created the first Wonders of Winter Festival in Waterloo Park with just 5,000 lights. Today, 100,000 lights grace the park shaped into everything from dazzling dinosaurs to Santa and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

During that first season, when Weiler spent hours researching how light displays worked in other cities, he personally built 150 wooden outlet covers for the display.

“He’s a volunteer through and through. To know him is to love him . . .” long-time friend, Bill Renaud, said once.

While the Wonders of Winter Festival is the most visible example of Weiler’s love for his community, he has contributed in many other ways as well. Weiler was one of three people who became known as the “Three Musketeers” in the late 1990s for their tireless lobbying for better health care in Waterloo Region.

The group wanted increased funding for health care which would include a large central hospital. In the end, after more than fifty presentations, the central hospital was not approved; however, Weiler’s appeals helped secure funding for expansions at the region’s three hospitals.

He has also supported the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Uptown Waterloo, the Waterloo Community Arts Centre and a City of Waterloo committee designed to ensure accountability to taxpayers. He had a hand in the Canadian Curling Hall of Fame and Museum as well as the Elmira Theatre Company, and a taxpayer group formed to ensure financial accountability by local politicians.

For all of his efforts, Weiler received the prestigious Waterloo Medal in 1997 for community service without thought of personal gain; in 2002 he was named K-W’s Citizen of the Year by the Twin City Jaycees. He has also been honoured with the K-W Sertoma Club’s Service to Humanity Award, and was named Kiwanis International’s Citizen of the Year. Most recently, he received the Queen’s Jubilee Medal in 2003.

On a less serious note, Waterloo city councillors were so delighted by the new light festival that they surprised Weiler with a cake and candles during a committee meeting one evening. Weiler was so surprised by the informal honour that he said, “Aw, I’m not very often lost for words but I am now.”

Through it all, however, Weiler maintains that his many hours spent stamping his feet in the cold every night of that first Wonders of Winter Festival; and time spent in the local library researching health care funding, has all been a pleasure. “I’ve really always enjoyed what I’ve done,” he said once. “It really has never been work, it’s been something that I’ve had a keen interest in.”

While Weiler has received many awards for his work, his greatest reward is watching the light in the faces of those walking through the Wonders of Winter in Waterloo Park.

“What is really nice to me is the amount of people who are smiling when they come in,” he said. “It seems like the parents become children again.”

*Photo courtesy of the Kitchener-Waterloo Record Photographic Negative Collection,
University of Waterloo Library*