Prophets in Their Own Hometowns

Why we shouldn't turn a blind eye to local visionaries

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There's an old joke that says an expert is someone from out of town.It's an idea that makes us laugh, in part because it has too much truth to be comfortable. The idea isn't new, of course.

The Gospels use much the same line, with Jesus saying "I tell all of you with certainty, a prophet is not accepted in his hometown." Basically, the folks at home will always see you as that crazy carpenter's kid, and they won't pay a whole lot of attention to the vision you're trying to share.

This is a real challenge for communities—and Niagara's no exception: when it comes to articulating a vision, to sharing a passion and enthusiasm for a new direction, familiarity sometimes breeds contempt. But without local vision, we're left with travelling self-help gurus and rubber chicken luncheon motivational speakers with one-size-fits-all recipes for success. Vision is presented as something that can be poured into the community from some outside source.

Recently, I saw a quotation from Rabelais, the French philosopher of the early 16th Century. "A mind," he said, "is not a vase to be filled, but a fire to be lit." In this sense, a community's vision is not something to be introduced from outside, it's something that expresses itself in the actions of people at the local level. Real vision is not a series of lectures or statements, it's the idea that catches on and changes a place because people see their community—and themselves—in a different way.

I suspect Rabelais's comment caught my eye because of where I saw it—at the funeral of one of Niagara's true visionaries, Gene Luczkiw. Gene passed away in October after a brave battle with cancer, but his life and accomplishments stand as a model of what vision can and should do for our community. After a successful early career as a teacher, Gene founded the Institute for Enterprise Education where he mentored hundreds of young entrepreneurs, developed education theories that changed the way teachers in Ontario are trained, served as an advisor to some of North America's most successful corporations, raised millions in venture capital for new companies, and helped launch local programs like the Niagara Entrepreneur of the Year Awards.

Gene's greatest strength was his constant, unceasing and deeply felt enthusiasm. It bubbled out of him, and washed over everyone around him. You couldn't help but get carried away by it. And like Rabelais described, it lit fires. It energized people to go out and do new and exciting things, to get up off their behinds and give new ideas a shot.

Gene and I travelled together to Europe quite often, and I used to watch as cabinet ministers from across the EU would trip over each other to get five minutes of Gene's time.

His ideas and vision excited people, and his opinion was sought after around the world. Prophets being what they are, though, he didn't always get the same welcome in his hometown.

And although Niagara was always first in Gene's heart, he ultimately relocated his Institute to Burlington, where local government authorities lured him with opportunities for closer collaboration and support. I think that's a cautionary tale for Niagara… sometimes we're so focused on the next big vision to emerge from Toronto or New York or London, that we don't recognize the prophets in our midst.

Of course, Gene has the last laugh on this front too. During his too-short time with us, he lit an awful lot of those fires that Rabelais was talking about. Thanks to Gene, there's a whole new generation of teachers, community leaders and entrepreneurs that see this community in a very different way. They've caught fire with his vision, with his ideas—and with his enthusiasm.

Just the other day, I was talking to Greg McCandless and John Savio, the owners of a St. Catharines-based company called the Scandic Group. Through his work, Gene Luczkiw had cultivated a range of exciting business contacts across Finland, Europe's leading centre of high tech industry. Working on the foundation built by Gene, Greg and John described how the Scandic Group has helped more than a dozen Finnish companies come to Canada—and they've all made Niagara their base of operations. Gene lit a fire, and the next generation of entrepreneurs is fanning the flames.

That's the lesson I take away. Real visionaries don't just describe grand plans, or voice grandiose theories. Real vision is something that passes from hand to hand and person to person. It sparks the imagination, flares up into action, and warms the whole community. It catches fire. We've been fortunate to have some of these visionaries in Niagara in the past—let's make sure that we help the next generation of visionaries succeed in their own hometown. **BN**

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