

NEIGHBOURS OF
Old Ottawa

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OLD OTTAWA SOUTH, CANAL AND RIDEAU GARDENS COMMUNITIES



Meet Some of the
Board Members of the
May Court Club of Ottawa



Best Version Media

Photo by GioVanni



From left to right: Holly Hesel-Quirk, Donna Shields-Poë and Christine Beelen.

Serving the Ottawa Community since 1898

By Rielly Riggs

Photos by GioVanni

Many neighbours in the Old Ottawa South community would recognize the building of the May Court Club of Ottawa, located on Cameron Avenue with its unique pink door and beautiful gardens. Perhaps some have had a chance to tour inside during an open house event or one of their annual events, such as the popular Christmas market sale.

Equally as unique as its pink door is the story of how the May Court Club came to be and the involvement of its members.

The May Court Club of Ottawa is Canada's oldest service club founded in 1898 by Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the Governor General of Canada. At a May Day celebration, Lady Aberdeen urged 100 young Ottawa ladies, whom she called her May Court, to help those less fortunate than themselves.

In a time when there were no social safety nets, she wanted to provide young socialite women with the ability to help other women and children who were in need.

In 1959, the May Court Club's current property on Cameron Avenue was purchased from the Ewart family – establishing the May Court Club as an important presence in the Old Ottawa South community.

For the past 124 years, the club's members have volunteered and served the Ottawa community through their mission of “enriching the lives of others as well as

our own”. Other May Court Clubs were established across Ontario over the years, with eight other member clubs currently operating. The club's originating office remains in Ottawa, with its 200 members.

Some historic volunteer activities of the May Court Club include opening the first free tuberculosis dispensary in Canada in 1908, contributing to the war effort during both World Wars, opening the library at the Ottawa Civic Hospital in 1925, and establishing the Bargain Box charity shop on Laurier Ave E., in 1971. The shop continues to thrive today, selling gently used clothing and small household goods.

The May Court Convalescent Home opened in 1916 and was also used as an emergency hospital during the influenza epidemic of 1918. In 1997, faced with increasing provincial government regulations and escalating costs, the May Court Club was forced to close its Convalescent Home after 80 years of operation.

In 1998, The May Court Club of Ottawa and The Hospice at All Saints entered into a purchase of service agreement – the facility became the May Court Hospice. Rent-free accommodation and an annual grant to the Hospice are an ongoing part of the club's commitments. The May Court Club sees the Hospice as an important part of its community

outreach and a volunteer opportunity for its members.

The May Court Club of Ottawa currently holds 15 board positions including the current President: Christine Beelen, Vice-President: Donna Shields-Poë, Past President: Dorothy Scorsone and Communications Director: Holly Hesel-Quirk. Each of these ladies comes from differing backgrounds, but are united in their desire to continue the work of Lady Aberdeen and give back to the community.

Christine says that her mother was a major influence on her involvement in community service, as she encouraged her children to give back to the community. Christine currently serves as the President of the May Court Club of Ottawa, the Past President of the Catholic Women's League in her parish, and on the executive of the National Capital Region Branch of the Canadian Authors Association.

“I joined the May Court Club in 2000 when I was on leave from the public service and my son had started nursery school,” she said. Christine recently retired from her 30-year career in the public service.

“Over the years I worked at the library at the Civic Hospital, delivered emergency food boxes to several schools, decorated trees for our Fantasy Trees and Treasures

project, worked on promoting a couple of our fundraising balls, wrote pieces for the Citizen's Kudos page, crafted items for our knitting group and the Aberdeen Artisans, and in 2013 I joined the Board of Directors."

Christine started as the Assistant Treasurer, moved on to be Treasurer, Communications Director, Vice President and now President. In June she will become the Past President.

Taking on the role of President during a pandemic has presented a series of challenges, but Christine says that she has been continually impressed by the ability of the club's membership to evolve and pivot to meet those difficulties. Throughout the pandemic, the Bargain Box staff has kept the store running by establishing safety protocols for both the volunteer staff and customers. The Aberdeen Artisans made masks to sell along with different crafts and culinary goods at tailgate sales in the parking lot and by pre-order online.

"All our meetings have been held virtually – something I am sure our founder, Lady Aberdeen, never foresaw in 1898," she said. "However, she did believe in the talents and strengths of the women who were our first members!"

Of note, Christine explains that one of her distinct pleasures was accepting on behalf of the club the 2019 June Callwood Outstanding Achievement Award for Voluntarism.

"We were nominated by the board of Hospice Care Ottawa in recognition of the support we provide to the May Court Hospice," she said. "Their submission was backed up by several other organizations and government agencies in light of the service and financial support we provide to the community."

These achievements would not be possible without the support and dedication of all club members, who work tirelessly to meet the service needs of the Ottawa community.

Donna – the club's current Vice-President – joined the May Court Club after retiring from her career with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. She was looking for an outlet to do some volunteer work and was introduced to the club by a neighbour. She started volunteering at the Bargain Box, which she enjoyed, and was then asked to serve on the club's Grants Committee.

"Most recently I was involved in the Fundraising Committee as convenor of an online auction run with the Bytown

Auctioneers in the fall of 2021 to raise money for the club's community giving," Donna said. "Our largest charity is, of course, the Hospice at May Court but when we can raise additional funds we support other community projects."

The Past President of the club, Dorothy Scorsone, also joined after retiring in 2006. When she is not reading, knitting, playing the piano, swimming, or spending time with her grandchildren, she volunteers full-time with the May Court Club.



The Queen's Chair (pictured above) is likely the first "throne" used when Ethel Hamilton, the club's first President, or "May Queen", called her court together for its first meeting on October 22, 1898. The impressive chair is at least 125 years old!

Dorothy previously served on the Member Services and Aberdeen Artisans committees, worked as a cashier at the Bargain Box and participated in many of May Court's fundraising activities. As Past President, she is the liaison with the May Court Hospice and sits on the Hospice Care Ottawa Board of Directors as an ex-officio member. She has served on the May Court Board of Directors as Assistant Treasurer, Treasurer, Vice President and President. This year, she is also the Nominating Committee Chair and Assistant Treasurer again. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Dorothy has organized all of the May Court online Zoom meetings.

She notes that she loves to see members of the community at their tailgate sales and Christmas craft markets. "Currently these are done by online order and curbside pickup and advertised on Facebook," she said. "When we can open up again, they will be in-person at the club with posters on the street."

The club's current Communications Director, Holly Hesper-Quirk, has been a member for over 22 years.

"After the birth of my first child, I was looking to make new connections and contribute to the Ottawa community," she explained. "I learned about the May Court Club from the Junior League of Toronto. I had phoned them to see if they had an Ottawa chapter, and they referred me to the May Court."

Over the years, Holly has been involved in different committees and has helped at various May Court fundraising events, including Fantasy Trees and Treasures and the Silver Screen Ball. She convened a fashion show fundraiser for the former Emergency Food Box Program (now Munch and Learn) for school-age children and is currently involved in helping to promote the club's visibility within the community.

"I live close to the club and often enjoy walking there and stopping by some of my favourite places in the neighbourhood for coffee, scones, oatmeal or gelato along the way!" she said.

In 2023, the May Court Club will celebrate 125 years of service in Ottawa. Starting as a collection of young women who were encouraged to support women and children in need in their community, they have evolved into a vibrant group of women of all ages who volunteer thousands of hours in service and in raising funds to help where it is needed.

Neighbours in the community can get involved by supporting the club's variety of fundraising activities, including a visit to the Bargain Box or tailgate sales. In the past, they have organized fun events such as balls, concerts, theatre, fashion shows, ladies' nights, wine and scotch tasting, and line dancing (including a virtual version this year!). All of their members are looking forward to resuming such activities once public health restrictions allow.

For more information on the May Court Club of Ottawa, including how to become a member or support their activities, please visit <https://maycourt.org>.

Do you know someone who just moved to the area and would appreciate an introduction, someone involved in charity work, a neighbour with an interesting hobby, someone who won an accomplishment, neighbours who are recently retired, have been living in the neighbourhood for a long time, or a family with a new addition? We are currently looking for feature residents so send an email to rriggs@bestversionmedia.com and nominate your neighbours to be featured!