

Honourary Life Members

Donna Cruickshank

CANS Honourary Life Member 2011



For Donna Cruickshank, it is hard to tell where the Construction Association of Nova Scotia (CANS) stops and she begins.

As an employee for 28 years, Cruickshank's life has been deeply intertwined with CANS and the evolution of the construction industry as a whole.

So much so, that for many people Cruickshank is synonymous with the construction association in Nova Scotia.

Growing up however, she never imagined her life in the industry.

Born and raised in Halifax, Cruickshank moved to Sherbrooke, Nova Scotia at the age of 15 to carry out her remaining years of high school.

A few years later in 1978, she returned to the city and enrolled in a secretarial program at Mount Saint Vincent University.

Upon graduation, Cruickshank began working for a personnel agency. It was then that a job opportunity with CANS changed her destiny.

"I heard about a great clerical job at the Association," she says. "My boss at the time knew it would be a perfect fit and said, 'even though I love having you work for me, I want to recommend you for this position'"

This encouragement prompted Cruickshank to apply and ultimately, begin her lifelong journey with CANS in 1983.

"What originally drew me to the Construction Association was the variety," she recalls. "From the mix of office-related duties to the special events we were part of – I knew almost immediately that I had made the right decision."

Cruickshank has seen many changes over the years.

During the early years at CANS, Cruickshank's major role was producing the project bulletins. Using stencils, typewriters and

machinery cranked by hand, she would help make and distribute more than 800 copies to CANS members and stakeholders each week.

"On those days, you always wore something you hated because it'd be ruined by the ink," she says with a laugh.

Cruickshank enjoyed many other things too, like the challenging environment that allowed CANS staff and volunteers to grow and expand professionally.

According to Cruickshank, the diversity of projects and issues faced by the industry ensured no two days at the office were alike.

"Depending on what you were working on, you would meet and collaborate with new members and volunteers every day," she says.

She also remembers being asked how she was not bored working for the same organization for more than 20 years.

"My answer surprised people," she says. "Working with so many incredible people towards a variety of goals meant it was a challenge just to find the time to get things done. You can't be bored in an environment like that."

In addition to her position with CANS, Cruickshank also represented the organization with the Mechanical Contractors Association of Canada. Cruickshank regularly travelled across the country with her colleagues and volunteers for the mechanical contractors section to discuss common industry issues. Her role provided insight into what was happening provincially and nationally within the construction sector.

"I quickly learned that while there were different issues in the different areas of construction throughout Canada, no matter where you go; everyone wants to do their job safely and efficiently and get paid," she says. "We learned just as much from the similarities faced by other associations as the differences."

Other career highlights included accounting, balancing the budget and working with bid depositories.

"It sounds silly, but I got a lot of satisfaction working with the numbers," says Cruickshank. "Everything the Association does flows through the books one way or another. I loved the responsibility of maintaining the budgets and the accuracy."

As an employee who enjoyed working in the background, Cruickshank loved that everything at CANS was a team effort.

"It didn't matter how big or small your role was or whether you were directly involved in a project, we all felt a part of its success," she says.

Cruickshank identifies the formation of the Nova Scotia Construction Safety Association (NSCSA) as one of the many proud moments during her time with CANS. The work of staff and the CANS Safety Committee led to the creation of the NSCSA, which aims to improve working conditions and make occupational health and safety a priority in the province.

"We were a big family and everyone shared a deep sense of pride in what we had accomplished together – it was a big milestone for us," she says.

Cruickshank describes her most rewarding experience as watching CANS develop and grow within the construction industry.

Even though she recalls a time of lifting and manually processing giant blueprints and drawings for her project bulletins she says, "it was more than just adapting with technology."

It was the evolution of the organization as a whole.

"While we had committees, the majority of our staff resources were dedicated to construction project information and related activities," she says. "It's been rewarding to be a part of the transformation into an association that plays a key role in the industry."

During her 28 years with the organization, Cruickshank witnessed the number of staff double and membership grow to more than 700 firms in the non-residential construction industry.

"All those years, I never entertained another job," she says with a smile. "Some offered more money but CANS had really become a part of me."

Cruickshank is modest when asked about being recognized as this year's Honourary Life Member, "I just went to work every day trying my best and loving my job – that's where the passion and dedication stemmed from. I was constantly surrounded by these incredible volunteers and staff who gave 150 percent. One of these people was Carol MacCulloch who served as CANS president for 20 years. Carol's leadership and commitment was

always an inspiration – I just fed off the energy and enthusiasm." In fact, it was working with those incredible people that made it so difficult for Cruickshank to retire.

She attempted to retire along with her husband in 2007, however, it didn't take Cruickshank long to miss the daily interactions with staff, members and volunteers.

"It was a big transition for me," she says. "CANS had become an integral part of my life and I struggled to let it go."

In 2009, then-president Carol MacCulloch asked Cruickshank to return part-time for committee work. She went back three days a week and assumed the position of Secretary to the Board.

Since then, many of her colleagues have described Cruickshank as the backbone of the organization and were sad to bid her farewell this past year in what she describes as her, "final retirement."

Spending a much-deserved break in Sherbrooke, Cruickshank remembers that she once lived and breathed CANS, "I always said it was in my blood."

It is fitting that Cruickshank's journey with CANS has come full circle: her son recently began his own career with the organization.

Similar to Cruickshank, her son never foresaw a future within the construction industry.

"He started three years ago as a summer student while obtaining his Bachelor of Commerce. It was never in the plans but he's still there and he's never looked back," she says.

"While my work with CANS has ended, it's nice to know that the industry continues to play a major role in the lives of my family," Cruickshank says with a smile. "I wouldn't have it any other way."
