

The Governor General's Caring Canadian Award



Jutta Mason

Toronto, Ontario

Born in Germany, Jutta Mason came to Canada with her family as a child, living in different places across Canada before settling in Toronto, in the 1970s, with her own young family. Over time, she developed a keen interest in the role of public spaces in cities, where people might come to know each other and find friends.

In 1984, Mrs. Mason moved to Toronto's Dufferin Grove Park neighbourhood, a block from the park itself. She and some neighbours began to try small experiments to enliven the park and open it to the talents of the many newcomers to the area. Children helped to build stump tables; artists produced theatre; the shopping mall across the street paid for music concerts. Gradually, over the years, the ordinary people of the neighbourhood used their gifts to turn the park into a shared commons. Mrs. Mason and her neighbours described themselves as "friends of Dufferin Grove Park," insisting that this was not a membership group but a statement of fact about anyone who felt a connection to the park. Dufferin Grove Park has since become something of a success story, with two community bread ovens, a skating rink, a clubhouse and innumerable planned and spontaneous activities. Most of all, it has fostered a sense of community, helping to attract new residents to the neighbourhood.

Thousands of citizens now flock to the park for summer dance and theatre performances; for Friday night communal suppers (made from organic ingredients from the Park's organic farmers' market); for pick-up games of ball and hockey; and to the water play areas where children build waterfalls, dams and forts. Such is the park's impact that its fame has spread beyond Toronto. Visitors come from out-of-town to learn from its success.

Mrs. Mason's dedication, tirelessness and vision for what a park and a community could be have won her many accolades, including the Jane Jacobs Prize, in 2001. More importantly, she has shown what can be achieved simply by doing the work she wanted to do: being a volunteer.

Mrs. Mason challenges members of the community to discover what they want and then to follow through with their own efforts. She has inspired communities across the city to claim their parks as true meeting spaces. In Toronto alone, as a result of her vision, there are many other community parks that wouldn't have come into being without her inspiration. Mrs. Mason deserves to be honoured for her original and unassuming work, and for her unflagging determination to make the city a better place. She personifies the value of volunteerism.

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Writer Michelle Landsberg, who nominated Mrs. Mason for the Caring Canadian Award, has put it best: "If Canada had 1 000 Jutta Masons, the country would be transformed. Neighbourliness, co-operation, performance arts and participatory sports would flourish, television sets and Nintendos would lie idle, and residents would be enjoying wholesome organic meals together, playing, dancing and debating ideas."



The Caring Canadian Award was presented to Jutta Mason on April 17, 2012, at Rideau Hall.
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