

# A Community Leader

## with a community-first approach to giving



*Russell Grass Sr. and Linda Grass*

### **Russell Grass is our nomination for the 2022 CCA Community Leader award**

If there's one story – of the many – that exemplifies Russell Grass Sr.'s community-first approach to giving, it's this.

In 2008, Waterdon Construction, the general contracting company Russell founded in 1983, was awarded a contract to perform ventilation upgrade works at the Ottawa Ronald McDonald House. It wasn't a huge job, and Russell pledged early on that his company would donate a percentage of its profits on the job back to the charity – far beyond what the original scope of work called for.

Not long into work on the project, Russell noticed that the entry doors to the building weren't equipped with automatic entry systems. When he asked why, he was told there wasn't money in the budget to fund that upgrade. That didn't sit well with Russell. This was a building designed to care for children with illnesses that very likely could leave them with mobility issues.

The following day, Russell returned to the site, and told the home manager that Waterdon and its trades would donate and install the door operators in the building free of charge.

Sometimes, it's the smaller gestures that make the biggest differences.

### **Making a difference where they can**

Russell Grass and his wife Linda came from humble beginnings. They earned their success through hard work and opportunity. A member of the Ottawa Construction Association since 1996, Waterdon Construction has carved out a niche for itself as a successful general contractor that provides quality construction work in the public, commercial and industrial sectors throughout Ottawa and surrounding areas.

Today, the Grass Family employs 106 people across three companies – Waterdon Construction, Merlin Doors and Alloy Fabrications – while Russell and Linda split their time between Ottawa and Fort Lauderdale, Florida.



"Ottawa has been great to my family," Russell says. "I know how lucky I am to have what I have, and I know that so many other people across our community are nowhere near as fortunate. That's why it's important to me, and to my family, to make what contributions we can when we can to make a difference where we can."

It's difficult to know where to begin listing the charitable partnerships Russell has forged over the years under his own initiative and through the companies he helped found, such is the breadth and depth of his work.

The support of Ronald McDonald House continues. Waterdon sponsors the home's fundraising golf tournament annually, and contributed \$10,000 to each of the 2021 and 2022 lotteries in support of the home's expansion plans.

Each year, Russell and Linda purchase and donate gift cards to the Stittsville Food Bank that in turn gives those cards to families who use them to purchase gifts for Christmas. Waterdon employees, meanwhile, donate toys to Toy Mountain each holiday season, with the company matching each.

While their children were growing up, Russell and Linda made a point of donating to their schools. Even actions as simple as donating scrap metal to the welding program helped support the community. They also showed to their kids how important giving back is to them.



*The staff at The Ottawa Mission show off their new van, thanks in part to Waterdon Construction.*



## Remembering Garry

Waterdon's connection with the Elizabeth Bruyère Hospital dates back to 2020. Long-time Alloy Fabrications employee and shop foreman Garry McCurdy passed away in the summer of that year. Garry and his wife Sheila were personal friends to Russell and Linda.



In his last days, Garry was a patient at the Elizabeth Bruyère Hospital. Russell chose to honour his friend's memory by matching donations to the hospital in Garry's name. The hospital honoured Garry in turn with the installation of a remembrance bench in its campus gardens.

In later years, Russell and Linda made a point of donating new iPads to Candlelighters, a not-for-profit organization that provides programs and services to young cancer patients and their families. The devices helped keep the kids connected with their schoolwork and their friends while they received treatment for their illnesses.

In the past, the family has sponsored Dreams Take Flight Canada, which takes a group of children from the National Capital Region and nearby communities on a fun-filled, one-day adventure to the Magic Kingdom at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Waterdon, meanwhile, has also been a corporate sponsor of the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Waterdon Construction also recently helped deliver a special concert series in support of the Elizabeth Bruyère Hospital, and was only too happy to donate the down payment for a van on behalf of The Ottawa Mission, whose vehicle died unexpectedly one day.

There are countless other initiatives the Grass family has supported over the years. Some are as seemingly minor as donating the money for a local softball team to buy new jerseys. Others are more eye-catching, as you'll see in a moment.



## The Queensway Carleton Hospital Foundation says thanks

Thank you Waterdon Construction Ltd. for your incredibly generous donation of \$10,000 to QCH Foundation to purchase two new Electronic Vital Signs Monitors for QCH, in memory of Shireen Hall.

This essential piece of equipment monitors and records a patient's blood pressure, pulse, temperature and oxygen saturation levels and then the information is uploaded directly to the patient's electronic medical chart so the healthcare team can access and review the results in real-time – meaning safer, more efficient care that benefits both the patient and staff.

"Waterdon always looks to support our community and institutions where either family or staff have been personally impacted. The staff at QCH worked tirelessly and with empathy through one of the most difficult periods in history, to care for Shireen Hall, my late mother." – Neal Hall, Senior VP, Waterdon Construction Ltd.

On behalf of our patients who will greatly benefit from this equipment, thank you!



Neal Hall (left) and Russell Grass Sr (right) present Waterdon's donation to Shannon Gorman, President and CEO of the Queensway Carleton Hospital Foundation.

### A drive to better the community

If there's a thread that unites these contributions, it's the drive to better the community. That notion isn't expressly articulated among Waterdon's company values, but it's hinted at through notions like Respect ("We treat everyone with dignity and professionalism."), Teamwork ("We achieve true success when we all work together."), and Versatility ("We always find a solution; no excuses.").

The COVID-19 pandemic shone a harsh light on inequalities in communities across Canada. Those with means generally fared well through lockdowns and isolation; those less fortunate tended to struggle more.

It was during this period that Russell and Linda and Waterdon judged that there was more they could do to support their community.

In 2021, they helped to fund construction of a dedicated facility for men's health at The Ottawa Hospital. The \$1-million donation was motivated in part by the family's experience with care at the institution. Linda received care at the former Breast Health Centre, Russell's brother required critical care twice through the Division of Urology, while Russell himself also receives care through the Division of Urology.



### Tour the clinic

Join Dr. Stuart Oake, Head of the Division of Urology, Department of Surgery at The Ottawa Hospital, as he introduces the [Grass Family Men's Health Clinic](#) in this video prior to its opening in 2021.



Linda and Russell at the grand opening of the Grass Family Men's Health Clinic in 2021.

The Grass Family Men's Health Clinic opened in June 2021 at The Ottawa Hospital's Civic Campus. The clinic provides a dedicated space for excellence in men's healthcare and research, as well as opportunities for collaboration among hospital teams to examine these important healthcare issues. It is the first clinic in Canada to provide this kind of care.

"It can be difficult when facing a health scare," says Russell. "We know this from personal experience. So, we believe it is important for there to be a clinic, right here in Ottawa, that is dedicated to men's health issues. From research to diagnostics and testing to ongoing care — we wanted to be part of ensuring the people of Ottawa had access to this kind of excellent care."

The fact that construction is also a male-dominated industry isn't lost on Russell, who wants to help break down stigmas around discussions about men's health.



*Linda and Russell with Jennifer Van Noort, the Vice-President, Philanthropy and Leadership Giving at The Ottawa Hospital Foundation.*

That same year, Waterdon Construction matched all Father's Day donations to the Heart Institute Foundation. The initiative was so successful that they agreed to repeat it for Father's Day 2022. In addition, the Linda and Russell Grass Foundation matched all donations during the recent National Nursing Week Appeal in May.

"We hope that by offering to match donations, it will encourage other donors to give, maybe even give a little extra because they know it will now have double the impact for the Heart Institute," says Linda. "When I was being treated for breast cancer, the nurses gave me strength. I built personal connections with them, if we can do something that helps nurses get the funds needed to advance their skills and knowledge and buy the equipment that helps them do their jobs more efficiently for them and their patients than it's a win-win."

What followed was an easy decision. Russell and Linda subsequently announced that they are leaving a legacy gift of \$1 million to the University of Ottawa Heart Institute Foundation. It was their way of ensuring that future generations have exceptional heart health care.



*The University of Ottawa Heart Institute Foundation paid tribute to Russell and Linda Grass for their legacy gift of \$1 million.*

"We want better than basic health care. We want the best health care, so we stepped up," Russell explains. "So many people do not understand that, unless donors give generously, we will not have the specialized equipment we need to have the best. We shouldn't have to travel outside of this region for the best care possible for our hearts. There is a story behind every gift we give to charity. Our family, including my parents and brother, have been affected by heart disease. The Heart Institute is world-class. To think we have this incredible cardiac centre in a city of a million people is amazing. We just needed to help."



## A family legacy

There's no denying that the Grass Family has made – and continues to make – an indelible mark on the Ottawa community. No matter the cause, no matter the occasion, they give freely and give generously.

There is, however, one final side to this story still to be told. And that is how philanthropy has become ingrained as a family tradition among the members of the Grass family.



*In the spring of 2022, more than 20 members of the Waterdon team shaved their heads to show their support for colleague Isaac Mackie as he received treatment for cancer. The group raised \$10,000 for The Ottawa Hospital, and Waterdon matched that donation.*

The Grasses' three children are now adults, and Russell and Linda have five grandchildren. They beam with pride when they talk about the ways their family has embraced community building and philanthropy.

They have encouraged their grandchildren to choose a charity and present reasons why it's a good choice for donations. The family will then make a gift to the organizations the children have selected and start the children on a lifetime of giving back.

Just as importantly, Russell and Linda's philanthropy has become instilled in their larger family – their work family. Giving back is now an important part of the workplace culture at Waterdon Construction.

In the spring of 2022, long-time Waterdon employee Isaac Mackie was diagnosed with testicular cancer. In a show of support, Isaac's colleagues shaved their heads and donated money in support of the cancer clinic at The Ottawa Hospital. The group raised \$10,000, with Waterdon corporately matching each donation for a total contribution of more than \$20,000.

## Russell Grass, Community Leader

Is there a single, defining moment in his career that makes Russell Grass an obvious choice as a recognized Community Leader? There's not. And frankly, that's just fine with Russell, who generally prefers to keep a low profile.

Look closer however, and you'll see a pattern of giving by Russell, Linda, their family members, their companies and their foundation. Since the earliest days, Russell has been only too happy to lend his support to community endeavours of all shapes and scopes and sizes. He does so not to be recognized and celebrated, but because, to him, it's the right thing to do to make his community a better place.

That's what makes him a Community Leader.



*Russell and Linda enjoy time with the family.*