

Westmount Profile: Nicole Forbes

Selling multi causes

By LAUREN SWEENEY

Nicole Forbes began a career of spearheading community, volunteer and political causes as an Expo 67 hostess for the Italian pavilion. And she's been selling ever since.

Whether it's been chairing the Quebec liberals' fundraising campaign in 1987, working as development officer for the Orchestre Métropolitain through the '90s, or managing Westmount's demerger office, her work inevitably involves drumming up support for a cause.

"I've always been a salesperson," she says. Even now as District 6 city councillor, she's busy promoting the Art Westmount open studio weekend this Saturday and Sunday, October 11 and 12.

And not only did Forbes initiate the city event two years ago so Westmount artists could exhibit their work to the public at large, but she is even opening her own home as an exhibition site for two participants whose studios are located outside Westmount.

"It's a lot of work," she explains. But it exemplifies some of her many volunteer and professional initiatives over the years.

Among them are helping launch Block Parents in Westmount, co-founding the Enfants des Neiges preschool on Côte St. Luc Rd., working for the federal side in the referendum and at former Westmount MNA Richard French's riding office, representing him at events he was unable to attend.

Grassroots politics

"I've always done grassroots politics," she says, though she views her own role on city council as promoting the community rather than being a politician.

While it has been more than 40 years since Nicole Forbes greeted Expo 67 visitors, that experience speaks volumes about the way she was already shaping her independence. "I may have had a privileged background, but I always did my own thing," she explains.

As the grand-daughter of Paul Bienv-
enue, Expo's first commissioner general,

she reckons she could have worked at many of the plum positions offered. But, "No way!" she says. "I'm my own person. I was going to find my own job!" Having studied in Florence the previous year and learned Italian, she became one of the few hostesses at any of the foreign pavilions who did not come from the country involved.

"Our uniform was so chic, so Italian. We had little butterflies at the back of the shoes. It was the best time imaginable. We met people from all over the world." Forbes also became involved in the organizing committee for all hostesses.

A few years earlier, after earning a baccalaureate, she had declined another of her grandfather's offers: to become a debutante. Despite being "a party girl," she says, she wanted to study in Italy. This stemmed from his many business trips to Italy to purchase pasta-making equipment for Catelli-Habitant, the family-owned business. Even now, her home reflects the sunny Mediterranean yellows and golds and has a distinctive Sicilian flavour. "I was Italian in another life," she explains.

Strong and protective

Born in Montreal, eldest of five siblings, Forbes grew up in a bilingual home. "I was very motherly and learned to be strong and protective. We're all athletic - we used to ski, jumping over all the rocks."

She entered St. Paul's Academy in grade 3 when the family moved to Westmount from Hampstead and back to family roots. "My great-grandfather, Tancredi Bienvenue, had built a Finlay house at the southwest corner of Montrose and Mount Pleasant.

"We lived at 318 Kensington, in what is now the Wrights' home. There was a vacant lot next door where we used to climb over the fence to play. And I remember how wonderful it was when the arena was first built, before it was enclosed. We girls used to stand around the outside waiting for our heartthrobs to invite us to skate with them."

Her memories also include wonderful weekends at the country home in St. Marguerite near the Alpine Inn with horseback riding at Mont Gabriel; also



Nicole Forbes adjusts her shoe in front of the Italian pavilion at Expo 67

summers at Kennebunk.

After Italy and the Expo experience, Forbes studied political science, languages and art history at the University of Vienna, obtaining a BA from Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) in 1972. She worked for a travel agency, married and turned her attention to raising her two children Rafaele and Alexandre Mackay Smith and two step-children, Michelle and Mathew.

That was when she co-founded Enfants des Neiges, benefitting from the advice of her mother who had founded École François-Michelle for children with special needs. It was soon after her 12 years with l'Orchestre Métropolitain that she ran the demerger office.

Forbes continues to play tennis and golf, spends weekends at Georgeville and enjoys music - opera in particular. She also plays the flute and does flower arrangements, "the only artistic talent I have!"

Describing herself as a perfectionist, she says, "I hate blatant errors. It drives me nuts." She is becoming more tolerant and patient with the years, however. "I don't think I'll be a gripey old lady!"

And, she adds, "I'm having the most enriching experiences on council. I get to work with such extraordinary people."