

## MCI Gordon Kohl Memorial Award

July 13 2014

By Donald Fisher

Before we proceed with our MCI Gordon Kohl award, we would like to take advantage of this moment to congratulate Gisèle for winning the *Prix d'excellence en environnement* of the *Fondation Estrienne en environnement* in recognition of her 25 years of effort protecting the environment of Estrie. There is not a single individual in Québec who is better deserving of this salute! Congratulations, Gisèle !

We would like to read a wonderful short paragraph written by Gordon Kohl in 1987. Gordon Kohl; one of the MCI founders. The man who graces our award with his name. This is what he wrote 27 years ago:

*MCI with its modern, well- equipped office and its exceptional reference library, stands after 20 years of efforts at new heights. This will continue so long as we are fortunate enough to have with us a Stewart Hopps. For those of us who have been privileged to work with him, the experience has been one of a lifetime.*

Now, let's take the liberty of slightly updating Gordon Kohl's message and read it again.

*MCI stands after 47 years of efforts at new heights. This will continue so long as we are fortunate enough to have*

*with us a Gisèle Lacasse Benoit. For those of us who have been privileged to work with her, the experience has been one of a lifetime.*

We know Gisèle will not be discomfited with a comparison to Stewart Hopps. He was one of her heroes and the first person to win the Gordon Kohl award.

Gisèle's contribution to MCI can be split into two time zones: 1990 – 1996 followed by 2002-2014. We will be talking mostly about her second 12-year tenure during which time she served as president for 8 consecutive years. Maybe there were a couple of dedicated 4-year MCI presidents if we go back to the early days but for some years now, prior to Gisèle, the norm of a MCI presidency has been 2 years in office.

So..... Gisèle ruled as présidente for 96 months and it seemed with each month a building block was added to her concept of what MCI should stand for in the community.

*Before I forget, as an aside, unlike most other kinds of volunteer work, working with the environment can also involve the law. Several times Gisèle has been forced to report to the municipality when a citizen has decided to ignore the environmental protection rules installed by that municipality. These are unpleasant moments and can have the potential of doing damage to old friendships. It is times such as these that Gisèle probably*

*wishes she had chosen to be a volunteer for her old university instead of MCI !*

To continue... In a nutshell what Gisèle wished for the community was to protect the watershed of Lake Memphrémagog and be ready to fight anyone or anything that endangered that undertaking. Patrolling the lake and testing the water was just a start. In the long run, the lake would only be capable to reflect the health of its own watershed and it was time to give that watershed a health check.

Back in 1990 and 1992 Gisèle fought to protect (a) Magog Bay from the construction of a gigantic hotel on the bays of the lake and (b) fought to contest a plan to cover the beaches of Magog Bay with artificial sand. To help, she took a leadership role to help regional environmental groups who were presenting briefs to BAPE hearings. The result? Victory! both (a) and (b) damaging initiatives were abandoned. *(BAPE stands for Bureau of Audiences Publiques en Environnement).*

In December of 2004, two years following her return to MCI, Gisèle participated actively in presenting a brief to BAPE to oppose the idea of a promoter exchanging parcels of parkland in order to facilitate the building of a giant development in parc national Mont-Orford. In June of 2005 BAPE made public its report: *The proposed exchange and construction of 1400 housing units would harm the ecological integrity of the park.*

2006 gave birth to Coalition SOS Parc-Orford, made up by MCI plus other like-minded organizations. Gisèle became a moving force in the coalition. It all paid off. After a 4-year battle the coalition was successful in reintegrating 459 hectares of park, which earlier, had been confiscated from the limits of Mont-Orford by the government of Québec. Some of this success can be attributed to Coalition SOS Parc-Orford depositing at the Assemblée nationale in Québec a petition signed by 86,000 names and a turnout march of 12,000 people in the streets of Montréal, which was one of the largest environmental demonstrations ever held in Québec.

Also in 2006, Gisèle prepared and delivered a brief to: “The Commission of Transport and the Environment of the National Assembly of Québec”

From 2006 to 2010 Gisèle never left the bedside of the Parc-Orford patient. Although her attention to this Orford file could have been described as a full time job, she took it on like a bump in the road.

There is no rest for the wicked. In 2006 a number of municipalities warned their residents to not use water from Lake Memphrémagog owing to the presence of cyanobacteria (or blue-green algae). There are more than 170,000 people who use this water source.

Gisèle immediately set up a basic surveillance network for cyanobacteria and forwarded the results to the Ministry of the Environment (Officially known as MDDEP). By 2007 a new surveillance team had been created and now had about 25 volunteer residents from different sections around the lake collecting information for the Ministry. Gisèle organized information meetings for citizens, the distribution of a brochure for residents in the drainage basin, offered courses on replanting trees, published information about soil erosion and reducing sources of phosphorus.

By 2008, phosphorus had become the *bête noire* for creating cyanobacteria. It is the presence of phosphorus that is the biggest culprit in this situation. It is encouraging that phosphorous readings between 1996 and 2011 have dropped, reflecting Gisèle's efforts but she claims we still need significant improvements. Three Canadian sectors of the lake are still above MCI's target threshold.

The cyanobacteria crisis threw light on Gisèle's leadership when it came to dealing with this scourge. In 2010, the Ministry of the Environment asked MCI to submit a brief on the health of Québec lakes to the Parliamentary Commission of the Québec National Assembly as it pertains to cyanobacteria. Several recommendations put forth by Gisèle were retained by the government .

It was around about this time that Gisèle had a vision whereby MCI should and could offer a programme that would protect the natural environment across the Lake Memphremagog watershed. In the process she took the approach of voluntary conservation and selected help from conservation experts to present the programme. It was featured on our MCI site and reproduced in a brochure.

In just a couple of years the programme has borne fruit. One landowner has offered approximately 60 hectares of his property plus two other landowners have committed to a piece of their land on a total surface of approximately 120 hectares.

MCI also had success meeting with Memphrémagog MRC and 4 municipalities: Austin, Potton, Magog and Stanstead . So far, MCI and Austin have agreed to share a conservation project to produce an ecological profile of the natural areas in the municipality as well as the delimitation of the Millington wetland.

Additionally, MCI has worked with Magog in establishing an ecological link for wildlife between Mount Orford and Lake Memphremagog. On top of that, MCI has worked hand in hand with Magog to identify and value its natural areas.

Owing to Gisèle it appears that MCI is well on its way to establishing a healthy Lake Memphremagog watershed in Québec.

At the start I read a wonderful short paragraph written by Gordon Kohl. Now I would like to read a wonderful short paragraph written by our Directrice générale, Johanne Lavoie. It appears in the latest MCI bulletin and is the final paragraph of her excellent tribute to Gisèle. She wrote:

*“ Tenacity and environmental passion have marked her tenure. Thanks to her, MCI is now an indisputable environmental leader in Québec. Much to our delight, she is still on MCI’s Board of Directors. Thank you Gisèle!”*

Gisèle - for myself, I would like to thank you for cheering me up when I’m driving on the highway. As an example, I could be on the way to the dentist and feeling grumpy. A car passing me displays on its back window the MCI sticker. All of a sudden I cheer up when I see that autocollant, it’s not faded, it’s not torn, it’s not a relic, it’s not just a memory - it’s very much alive and healthy. I cheer up and mutter to myself: “Thank you, Gisèle”.

Merci Gisèle !