



Coll's Corner

A Pioneer's Passing

Big Oil in Canada has more of a conscience and a soul today because of the trail that Hazel Gillespie blazed, torch in hand



OUR INDUSTRY, AND INDEED CANADA, lost one of its best and brightest with the passing of Corporate Social Responsibility pioneer Hazel Gillespie in late February, at the age of 61. Hazel endured three battles with cancer over the past 15 years and still only retired following the Suncor-Petro-Canada merger in 2009.

From 1997 to 2001, I had the pleasure of working a couple of doors down from Hazel on the 49th floor of the west tower of the Petro-Canada building. A major part of my role in those years was project managing the company's annual report, which demanded very long hours for five to six months of the year. These 14, 16 and 18-hour days were referred to as "Hazel hours" because that was a typical day for her as Petro-Canada's community investment director, whether she was still in the office working the details of a corporate partnership or attending a fund-raiser in the community.

It seems crazy in retrospect, but my initial impression of Hazel was that of a typical workaholic – no social life to speak of, an inefficient micro-manager caught up in the minutiae at the expense of

the big picture. Hazel was a different breed altogether.

She was driven by an incredible and authentic desire to make the world a better place – to the extent possible given the mandate of her job. It had zero to do with ego or protecting her position in the company. Not only was she truly able to see the big picture, she also had the gift of making everybody around her feel a little bit special.

She constantly challenged 'business as usual' and was always on the hunt for creative solutions. In the process, she stewarded loosely framed 'goodwill' and 'community investment' plans to a whole new level while never losing sight of business drivers.

Hazel was one of the foremost pioneers of the Corporate Social Responsibility movement in Canada. I don't think it's a stretch to suggest that Big Oil in Canada has more of a conscience and a soul today because of the trail that Hazel blazed, torch in hand.

Looking back, it seems natural that this would be her destiny and her legacy. Given Petro-Canada's controversial early history – and its desire to connect directly with gasoline buyers – Hazel was the right person, in the right job, at the right time.

The 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, especially the cross-country Torch Relay, were a watershed moment for Petro-Canada, in large part due to Hazel's tireless work to build goodwill and create a national 'community' of followers. The event marked a major turning point in Canadians' acceptance of the 'state-owned' oil company and, as important, it galvanized employees with an ongoing sense of pride, camaraderie and purpose.

At the centre of it all was . . . Hazel.

So much so that, years later, when someone was asked to describe the Petro-Canada brand at a meeting, just two words sprung to mind: Hazel Gillespie. That was one of many wonderful stories from her funeral service, but to me really summed up the impact she had on her company, her co-workers and her many friends.

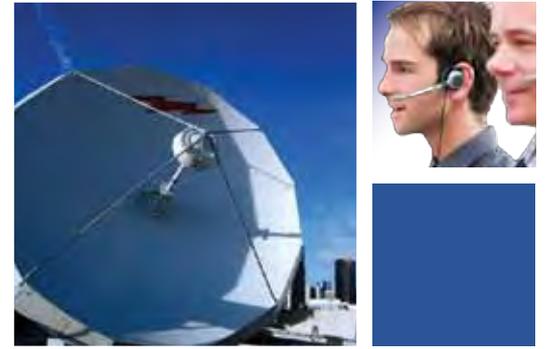
In typical fashion, she planned her own funeral, writing her own obituary and getting in the last word in a poignant video clip that was broadcast to attendees. Her comments were focused on others, of course, and not herself.

And so it seems fitting to end this column with some of Hazel's words that I pulled from a Q&A article on the web.

Q: What advice might you give to other corporations that are interested in expanding or starting a community investment program?

Hazel: I would say don't be afraid of it. I think a lot of companies might like to do it, but they don't know where to start and it is kind of overwhelming to them. Just start small. Find one charity, work with them, and build from there. We really need more people on board on the philanthropic bandwagon and I would encourage other companies to get involved. Everybody can take a piece of the action. If you are a small company you don't have to go at it like Petro-Canada, obviously. Do it in proportion to what is appropriate for your company. It takes a community to keep a community strong, so everyone needs to play a role, individuals and corporations.

I just say, get out there and do something. 



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