

Past Chinook Arch CEO to receive honorary degree from University of Lethbridge



Roughly 30 years ago a group of community-minded people came together with a vision: a library system that would unite southwest Alberta libraries to share resources efficiently and cost-effectively, thereby enhancing the services offered in each respective community. This vision became a reality in large part thanks to the passion and determination of Margaret (Maggie) Macdonald.

For her invaluable role in the creation of Chinook Arch Regional Library System, past CEO Macdonald will be presented a Doctor of Laws, honoris causa from the University of Lethbridge during a June 1 Convocation ceremony.

In 1988, the southwest Alberta region was the last remaining area in the province which did not have a regional library system. That fall, a steering committee was formed with representatives from 25 libraries. The committee applied for and received

a grant to hire staff to assist with the development process. Macdonald was hired in late 1989 and began work as a Project Development Officer in January 1990. Her position was to oversee the development of a plan of service and a budget and then to present it to potential member library boards and municipalities, hoping to build membership.

“After establishment of Chinook Arch, as founding director I had a dream job which was exciting, challenging, and very satisfying,” recalls Macdonald. “It was an incredible honour.”

The creation of Chinook Arch was not without challenges. Development and establishment of the system coincided with cutbacks in public sector spending in Alberta; provincial funding for new projects was being reduced. Local municipalities also needed to be convinced to contribute new funds for library services they had not previously funded. The steering committee, along with Macdonald were steadfast and in just 20 months were able to obtain agreements from 22 municipalities and 20 library boards.

“Maggie was very devoted to Chinook Arch, and in the system’s early years she attended countless meetings to get buy-in from library boards and municipalities,” says Robin Hepher, current CEO of Chinook Arch. “It’s important to consider the historical context: in the early 90’s there were public sector cuts going on all over the place, and then along comes Maggie, convincing the municipalities to invest NEW money into library services. It took a tremendous amount of work.”

Once the system was created in 1992, another funding roadblock arose. The province would not immediately provide the operating grant that was provided to all other systems upon their creation.

Chinook Arch began doing significant fundraising to develop the system – something that was continued for major project developments over the years.

Fortunately, thanks to collaboration with Lethbridge Public Library, they were able to make a running start on establishing system services.

“Enormous credit for the development of the system also goes to Lethbridge Public Library and its then Chief Librarian, Duncan Rand,” says Macdonald. “He was involved and supportive from the beginning. Thanks to this support we were able to get the system up and running in record time.”

Looking back on her nearly 30 year career with Chinook Arch, it’s impossible for Macdonald to pinpoint one achievement that she is most proud of. Highlights of her career include building a regional library service that now serves more than 99% of the regional population, developing technology driven library service that allowed the system to stay on the leading edge of technological development in libraries, and working with the Kainai Board of Education to develop a model of service that established a public library in Stand Off – the first public library on a reserve in Alberta.

“Libraries are a community space and a place that allows so many to learn so much,” says Macdonald. “Collectively these achievements, along with others, have created a high quality and innovative regional library service. Thanks to Chinook Arch, residents of even the smallest community have broad access to resources and information services.”

Like many librarians, Macdonald initially chose a career in libraries because she loved books and reading; however she found her passion in the form of public libraries and the important role community development and collaboration played in their success.

“Maggie was very dedicated to seeing rural libraries grow and succeed,” says Hepher. “She was always keen to deliver high-quality service to our members and was skilled at getting buy-in from our municipal partners. This means that Chinook Arch enjoys a stable base of funding and political support that positions us to serve our member libraries, and the public, very effectively.”

Thanks to her foresight and dedication, Macdonald leaves a legacy that will continue to benefit those who call southwest Alberta home for years to come.