

SOCIETY

Mending message

Finding comfort in making a long-held secret public, Jacques Demers brings the issue of low literacy to London

IT'S RATHER FITTING that a play on words was the impetus for bringing Jacques Demers to London in November, because the Canadian Senator and hockey icon will be here to talk about literacy.

"We were throwing around ideas about how to mark our twentieth year," says Amanda Burdick, director of information with Literacy Links South Central, a non-profit literacy information and referral network. "Someone said, 'Twenty is a score,' and that led us to think about sports. Of course, when you think, 'He shoots, he scores,' you think hockey. And that led us to Jacques Demers."

Demers will be the keynote speaker at Facing Off With Literacy, an evening event to be held at the London Convention Centre on November 10. Appointed to the Senate in 2009, Demers is a former professional hockey coach who won a Stanley Cup and two Jack Adams Awards as NHL coach of the year. Demers managed to hide the fact that he was functionally illiterate for decades, fearful that it would damage his career. By the time he admitted his challenges with reading and writing he was in his sixties.

Burdick says having a high-profile personality like Demers share his story publicly helps reduce the stigma associated with illiteracy and encourages people to seek help. She hopes the event will also help raise literacy awareness in the greater community. The functional illiteracy rate in Canada is about 14.6 per cent, but Statistics Canada says between 42 and 47 per cent of Canadians struggle with literacy in some fashion, even when newcomers are excluded.



Jacques Demers

"Very few people are totally illiterate, but there are different shades of literacy," explains Burdick. "It is a concern when people don't have the literacy skills they need to succeed in daily life. It's not just reading and writing, but math skills and digital literacy are also a huge part of it."

With Western, Fanshawe College and a range of private schools in the city, London is often perceived as having a very educated demographic. However, a chunk of the population is comprised of middle-aged workers who went to work in the manufacturing and automotive sectors straight out of high school. When those sectors started to weaken and workers were laid off, their struggles with literacy came to light.

It can take a while for people to work

up the courage to admit they have a problem, says Burdick, because there is still a stigma attached to being illiterate. The good news is there are a range of literacy resources and programs available to adult learners, and most of them are free.

For the November event, Literacy Links South Central is partnering with other literacy service providers to bring Demers to London. Through partnerships with business sponsors, Burdick says the aim is to keep ticket prices affordable. "We are trying to ensure that those adults who are struggling with literacy challenges are able to attend."

For more information on the Facing Off With Literacy event, contact Literacy Links South Central at 519-681-7307 or visit www.llsc.on.ca. KYM WOLFE