

# One man's communal passion

Saturday, 12 August 2000

by Cameron Smith

It's a truism, Larry Rooney is saying, that "If you plant a seedling in good ground, you've got a better chance of getting a good tree." The same thinking applies to people, he says. "The healthier a community, the better the chance of a healthier person."

He has lived this belief all of his life, first as a priest, until he became disillusioned with the Church and left, then as a participant in the Therafields commune that thrived in Toronto during the nineteen seventies and eighties, and finally as a psychotherapist and the executive director of Phoenix Community Works Foundation, located on Dupont St., just west of Spadina Ave.

In the world of foundations, Phoenix is modest. Its budget last year was \$500,000. But the breadth of its vision is remarkably all-inclusive, and it's a reflection of Rooney's thinking.

The projects it funds range from environmental (the planting of trees in Toronto back yards), to cultural (it has a program, named after the poet bp Nichol, to aid aspiring poets), to social (it assists those in need of psychotherapy, who lack funds).

"We have this great myth of individualism," says Rooney, "that suggests people can live free of interdependency. The great focus is on 'I' instead of 'we' or 'us.' But not only does the myth have no basis in reality, it's destructive," Rooney says. "The importance of community and society far outweighs the importance of the individual."

His commitment to that ideal propels Phoenix into giving help to the Toronto Disaster and Relief Committee in dealing with homelessness. And to co-sponsoring a project that assists women facing long-term poverty to develop economic skills.

It also has made Phoenix part of the project to disinter Garrison Creek in downtown Toronto to "regenerate open and green space," and has used Phoenix's fundraising skills to help Men Walking Against Male Violence.

Rooney, now 64 years old, comes from Kirkland Lake, where his father was a miner. He grew up with memories of hard times, of battles to establish unions in the mining industry, of the terrible Kirkland Lake strike in the winter of 1942 when Liberal Premier Mitch Hepburn sent in a platoon of provincial police officers to break the strike.

"I was brought up with community involvement," he says. "That's what the North is all about. Interdependence. Helping each other."

Phoenix supports a program to promote affordable housing for seniors. It co-sponsors a local undertaking to collect and sell donations of used building materials, and is funding the making of a film with the working title *Surviving High School*, which will deal with sexuality and the choices facing high school students.

Phoenix is all that has survived of the Therafields commune. In fact it was called Therafields Foundation when it was created in 1973. At its height, Therafields had 500 to 600 members dedicated to "alternative living." It owned 15 properties in downtown Toronto and a farm near Orangeville. In the nineteen eighties the commune fractured and disbanded.

The sale of the farm gave Phoenix its only endowment fund, which is now about \$130,000, large enough to pay Phoenix's administrative expenses from interest it generates, but that's all. Phoenix has no employees. The money in its budget is raised by Rooney, who took over running the foundation in 1975. "For 25 years," he says, "it's been my passion."

That passion has propelled Phoenix into backing a play about seniors who are losing independence, and a musical that celebrates the pioneer spirit of women in Canadian history and in the Yukon today. It puts Phoenix behind a Ghanaian immigrant organization seeking to build affordable housing, and behind a different organization providing medical assistance in Central America and the Caribbean.

It's what has brought Phoenix to support a campaign battling popular misconceptions about mental illness, and to assist the Toronto Environmental Alliance in several of its programs.

At 64, Rooney is beginning to cut back on his psychotherapy practice, but his passion is still grand -- and the community we call Toronto is the better for it.