

# Volunteering Draws on Career Expertise



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by Gillian Crowley

“What’s next?” is an exhilarating yet daunting question upon retirement and even more so if one takes early

retirement. For some, developing new hobbies and travelling is not enough. That was true for Susan Reece when she retired after 30 years in a high-powered career in publishing and returned to Canada from England to settle in North Saanich. In retirement she wanted to continue to apply her abilities, but under less stressful conditions.

“I’ve always gotten a buzz from being busy,” says Susan. This is an understatement from the woman who is currently Board Chair of Victoria Literacy Connection. For fun she volunteers weekly at the Horticultural Centre of the Pacific, hosts fundraising readings for the Sidney Literary Festival, judges the Sidney Library’s fiction contest, tends her own huge garden, plays piano and takes music appreciation courses.

Susan has always been driven to succeed. On graduating with degrees in history/English and another in education, she discovered teaching jobs were drying up in Ontario. Not easily discouraged, Susan obtained a job with Oxford University Press, Canada. Her strong work ethic soon propelled her to become a school sales manager at age 25, the Sales and Marketing Director of Oxford University Press Canada at 28 and its President at 36. In 1999, then a single mom with a young daughter, Susan made a life change and moved to England to head up the International Division of Oxford University Press. Under her leadership, the OUP shifted its operations to become a local publisher in international markets, boosting its annual sales from £50 million to £250 million.

Susan says: “I loved the job and the people, but the travel was brutal.” In 2009 she and Henry, her new partner and also an

OUP executive, decided it was time to slow down and enjoy early retirement. These two globetrotters eventually found a stunning waterfront property in North Saanich that captured their hearts. At age 52 Susan faced the “What’s next?” question. Considering the average lifespan of Canadian women is now 84 years,\* there could be another 30+ years ahead.

Based on her skill set and interests, Susan felt she had a natural affinity with literacy as she’d always valued reading and books. She started volunteer tutoring of adults at Literacy Victoria (as it was then known) and in 2011 was asked to join its board. A few years later, the organization faced tough times when government funding cutbacks threatened its existence. Always up for a challenge, in 2015 Susan, now board chair, helped the members make some tough decisions which included staff cutbacks, a move to smaller quarters and a partnership with the READ Society that focused on literacy for children and youth. The merged organization is now Victoria Literacy Connection.

Drawing on her career experience, Susan says what she could offer a volunteer board is “business toughness and rigour.” She also helped them focus on goals and the methods most appropriate for their learners. As her tenure ends, Susan feels satisfaction that Literacy Victoria is now on firm financial ground and in a position to help all ages improve their literacy.

Susan observes that it’s easy to say “yes” to too many volunteer jobs in retirement and eventually get overwhelmed. Her advice? “If you’re going to volunteer, pick one or two things and focus on them. That way you can do a better job, the organization gets more out of you, and you don’t burn out.”

\*World Health Organization report, 2014 ✨