

The Fife and Drum

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Joe Gill inspired and led The Friends over 25 years, helping preserve and revitalize Fort York during a time of massive change

by Andrew Stewart

We lost one of our founding leaders this week. Joseph Gill died on 19 February at the age of 84. Joe helped establish The Friends of Fort York in 1996, which was registered that year as a charitable organization. Two groups of volunteers were brought together under the FoFY umbrella: one to support historical programming and interpretation, including the Fort York Guard; the other to monitor land use and development in the Bathurst/Strachan neighbourhood. Joe belonged to the first group and, on becoming chair of the Friends in 1997, was a leader in establishing the Fort York Festival (1997 and subsequent years). As The Friends grew, he helped unify and coordinate all its endeavours, serving as treasurer and as chair for many years. Joe has said that he thinks our greatest accomplishment, as an organization, has been to engage in precinct planning and development issues and to provide a critical appraisal of the City's own stewardship of Fort York National Historic Site and its precinct.

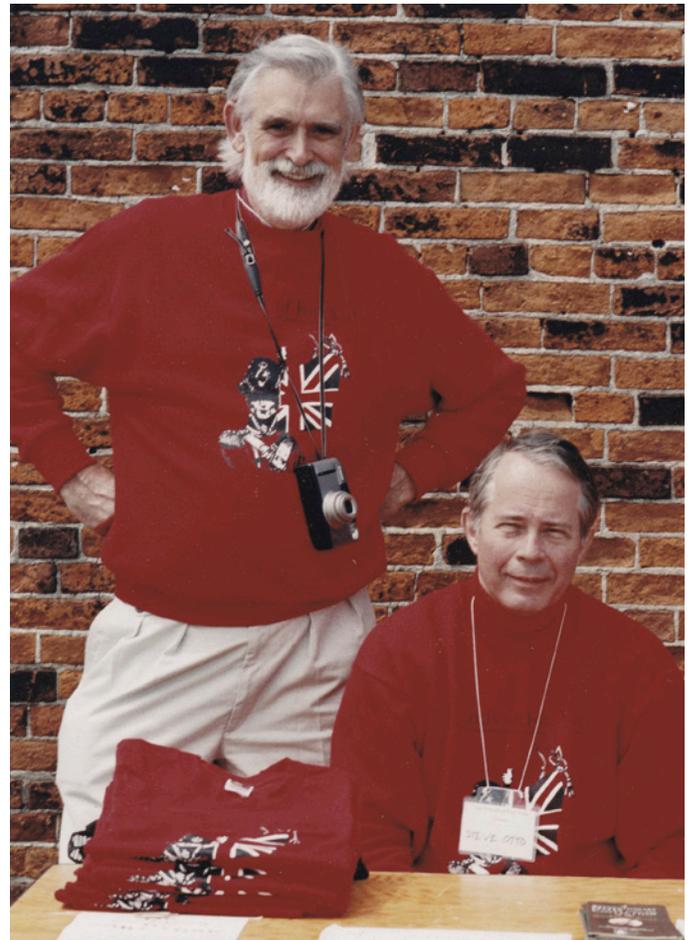
His interest in history started early in life, perhaps because his father taught history, as did Don Gibson's father. He knew, following retirement as a partner at Ernst and Young (formerly Clarkson Gordon) in 1994, that his volunteer activities would focus on history. As a Chartered Accountant, he brought tremendous competence, financial skill and connections, as well as his personal passion for Fort York, to the new organization, which enabled The Friends to manage its affairs professionally and accomplish a great deal of charitable work in harmony with other individuals, agencies and the Fort's owner, the City of Toronto.

Joe has been a tireless advocate and leader of efforts to restore programming to the Fort following elimination of the Fort York Guard from the City's budget. Joe led The Friends in fundraising for the Guard by running parking operations with volunteers during the CNE and other events. This resulted in a legacy of hundreds of thousands of dollars which continued to fund the Guard. Without this fund, and his careful stewardship of it, the Guard would not exist.

He truly championed and embodied a spirit of collegiality and optimism that prevailed at Fort York during the 1990s and early

2000s, when the fort was being sidelined in a changing landscape, especially during the years of municipal amalgamation and the loss of the Toronto Historical Board, which owned and operated Fort York before the City of Toronto subsumed Fort York and other sites into its new division, Economic Development and Culture.

Initiatives that will be remembered and identified closely with Joe are the considerable fundraising efforts he undertook and



Joe Gill and Steve Otto at one of the early Fort York Festivals (photo by Catherine Naismith)

managed, together with his executive committee colleagues, on behalf of The Friends (donations, memberships, dinners and parking operations). He started up the period-themed Georgian Dinners, which were an annual fund-raiser for the Fort, playing on one of the strengths of the Fort as a centre of culinary history. He is also in large part responsible for the revival and expansion of the Fort York Guard. In partnership with the City of Toronto, we put 15-25 young people in uniform at a cost of \$50,000 - \$140,000 per year. The fundraising to do this each year and the ability to manage it with volunteers is astounding, in retrospect. Fort staff worked seamlessly with volunteers (FoFY) throughout this period to great effect, training, mentoring and presenting an outstanding, award-winning corps of paid university students each summer for over 25 years, since 1995, when FoFY first undertook to do this. The Guard's demonstrations of artillery firing, fife and drum music, drills and battle tactics performances

were historically accurate and great crowd-pleasers. The Friends were proud to provide summer youth employment and, at the same time, provide a living interpretation of history at the Fort. The programme's great success is a testament to Joe's vision and tenacity, together with that of his close colleagues.

As is so often the case with people dedicated to a cause, the Fort reaped the benefit not only of Joe, but also of his partner, Jane Kennedy, and of their entire family who turned out to support events, especially during the years of the Fort York Festival and the labour-intensive parking operation, for more than a decade, that depended on volunteers and employed students working under the hot summer sun and late into the evening. Joe was recognized by the Arts and Letters Club in 2010 when he won their annual award for a non-member making a significant contribution to the arts in Toronto. He retired from the board in 2019.



Joe (left) with Fort York Executive Committee colleagues (l to r) Nancy Baines, Richard Dodds, Steve Otto and Geordie Beal, December 2007, in the Blue Barracks, Fort York National Historic Site. (photo by Andrew Stewart)

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