



Major Marguerite Downes (1938-2009): Exemplar

Character educators needs look no further than Major Marguerite (Peggy) Downes.

With her heartfelt commitments to family, church, community and country the first black woman to make major in the Ontario Canadian Army Reserve, is in a class of her own as an exemplar. Major Downes retired as Officer-in-Command of Charlie Squadron of the Highland Creek Cadet Corps after a 45 year army career that started in the Royal Canadian Army Militia in Halifax. Major Downes loved working with young people helping them set goals and develop their careers. Her military awards included: the Order of Military Merit and the 125th anniversary of the Confederation of Canada Medal.

Long-standing commitment was the major's hallmark. She was honoured for 50 years of continuous service to First Baptist Church where she founded, directed and was the pianist for the Voices of Joy choir. As the first black woman appointed as honorary aide-de-camp in Ontario, she served FIVE lieutenant governors*. She was a Neighbourhood Watch block captain in the Toronto Beaches community where she lived for over 40 years. She also had longstanding day jobs with the Ontario Ministry of Health, the Ontario Ministry of Labour and as a Commissionaire with the Superior Court of Justice.

In her spare time (yes Major Downes had spare time) she volunteered with the Out of the Cold Program for the homeless and fundraised for the Sickle Cell Foundation's Camp Jumoke.

Major Marguerite Downes raised four children on her own. According to Major Downes' musical friend, the eminent Jackie Richardson, "This was a woman who

was very high rank in the military, so she knew how to organize her life.”¹

Former lieutenant governor Alexander recommended her with the words, “Peggy is excellent in every sense of the word. She has been singled out for awards because of her outstanding work in the church, in the military and in the lieutenant-governor’s office.”

A Canadian to emulate!!

*John Black Aird, Lincoln Alexander, Hal Jackman, Hilary Weston and James K. Bartleman

¹ Shanahan, Noreen “Marguerite Downes: first black woman to make major in the Ontario Canadian Army Reserve, Special to The Globe and Mail, July 8, 2009

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