

Steel Oct 18/03 p. D2

Gerry Edwards came in to the Royal Canadian Legion on Pinnacle Street for a good game of cribbage nine years ago.

And she's never left.

The 68-year-old Edwards has been a key member of Legion Branch 99 since finishing those first few crib games and has done worked hard for the branch to benefit her fellow comrades.

Edwards' dedication to the Legion cause and especially her work as ways and means chairman for the past eight years have earned her Legionnaire of the Year honours for 2003.

She was attending the legion's Honours and Awards banquet when her name was called for the top honour.

"It was a total surprise...I know I'm around here a lot and I volunteer for as much as possible even though with the my health the way it is, I've had to slow down a lot with my Legion activity."

The retired switchboard operator said she's honoured to be Legionnaire of the Year.

"It's nice to be recognized by the Branch and my fellow comrades for all the hours I put in...it makes you feel good about yourself," said the widow who lives on North Park Street with her 10-year-old beagle, Charlie.

It was her love of cribbage that got her inside the Legion in the first place, not too long after the death of her husband, Allan, in 1993.

"I love a good game of cribbage and some people told me there was a senior's club operating out of the Legion building and they played crib every Tuesday. So I decided to come down and join the club and play crib."

Edwards dropped into the Legion on other occasions to read a book "and eventually members welcomed me into their groups."

So she joined the Legion's Ladies Auxiliary and then, in the fall of 1994, became a full-fledged member.

Edwards has been the ways and means chairman ever since.

"I've been there too long but I keep getting re-elected," she laughed.

She is responsible for suggesting ideas on how to raise money in the Legion's lounge and games room, through events like entertainment, dances, card games, sports and other activities for its members and guests.

Her ideas have led to the Legion's decision to hold dances every other Friday night in the lounge as well as afternoon entertainment every other Saturday.

"The idea is to bring more members into the lounge and make use of all the facilities available to them," said Edwards, who is not involved with renting the Legion's top two

floors for banquets, weddings and dances.

Edwards still belongs to the ladies auxiliary and has been on the poppy committee for the past six years. She has also served on the honours and awards committee for two years and special events co-ordinator for one year and continues to help out with the breakfasts for the needy held every other Sunday morning.

"I have never worked at a bingo. I prefer playing bingo," she said.

Edwards said the Legion has been a big part of her life over the past decade.

"I'm glad to be involved because it keeps me busy and in the company of my fellow comrades. They're a good group of people and I enjoy making this like a second home."

She never misses cribbage games held at the legion every third Sunday afternoon, followed by a dinner.

"You win some and you lose some in a friendly game of crib but you always win with your fellow comradeship," said Edwards.

The Toronto native spent almost 40 years as a switchboard operator prior to joining the Legion.

Edwards left high school after Grade 11 to work in a retail store. A few years later, she took a switchboard operator's course at Bell Canada and went to work for some finance companies and Woolco in Toronto.

She married her husband in 1963 and left work to raise two sons and a daughter. She returned to her career, on a part-time basis.

The family moved to Belleville in 1977 after her husband retired and Edwards went to work at Sears in the Quinte Mall.

She spent 18 years as switchboard operator before retiring in 1996.

"I've always enjoyed telephone work," she said.

Edwards said there's another benefit to being a Legion member.

"I still do a lot of telephone work here with the ladies auxiliary. I still have my hands on the switchboard at the Legion."