

Thompson, Fred

Ontario pays honor to Belleville-born man

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By CP-STAFF

A man born in the Belleville area has received the Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship from Premier William Davis for his volunteer work of supplying clothing and sports equipment to needy native peoples across Canada.

Fred Thompson, one of 13 recipients to receive provincial honors during the weekend, is a man who's been unable throughout his life to do much to help himself but won the award for helping others.

In 1975, believing Canadians paid too much attention to the needy in other countries and too little to their own, Thompson started Can-Aide, a foundation specializing in bulk shipments of clothing and sports equipment to needy native peoples across Canada. He co-ordinates collections and shipments (more than 20 tonnes last year) from his Ottawa apartment.

One man who knows him personally, Ottawa journalist Dave Brown, describes him as "a man who doesn't look like a winner. He has a speech impediment compounded by ill-fitting dentures. His nose is too small, crooked and doesn't properly support his glasses."

He made his living as a parking garage attendant, secretly living in the garage and sleeping in the booth for about 15 years.

His earliest recollections are of an orphanage at Port Hope after his birth, about 1930, near Belleville. The orphanage closed when Thompson was 13 years old and he was sent to the Bowmanville reform school for lack of any other shelter.

Yet in reform school, he said, "You learn to read the faces around you. You get to know the ones you can approach and the ones you can't. Then it's a simple matter of avoiding those you don't feel comfortable about."

Applying those skills, Thompson became what he himself terms "the best darn beggar in Canada" for collecting materials for his cause, earning the respect and close association of such people as John Diefenbaker, Stanley Knowles, former Ontario lieutenant governor Pauline McGibbon, former Supreme Court justice Emmett Hall and many other government officials.

Yet despite the success of his foundation, Thompson travels often by hitchhiking, occasionally by bus, and lined up to receive his medal in a rented suit.