

Boomhower, Ralph

There are two things Ralph Boomhower has enjoyed in life — being generally active and enjoying other people's company.

A bum knee and other ailments have seriously curtailed the 59-year-old's ability to play sports or be too physical nowadays but they haven't diminished his zest to be with and help out people.

"I want to be around people. I'm a people person. It's as simple as that," said the College Street West resident and former Belleville firefighter.

Even three years into retirement, he's still around people, be it helping feed the hungry to brightening a child's Christmas.

"My philosophy is that I'm here to help out people, to smile and laugh with them and to just be with them. Retirement hasn't changed that one bit."

It was his physical prowess in gymnastics and other sports that got Boomhower involved with helping others while in high school.

The Belleville native said he was often called upon by teachers to help instruct phys ed during his three years at Belleville Collegiate Institute and in his graduating year at Moira the year it opened in 1959.

After graduation, he moved to Toronto and spent the first summer working for the Canadian National Exhibition as a trampoline instructor. (He wouldn't recommend anyone have a trampoline because of the injury factor).

After a stint with a Toronto factory, Boomhower decided to go to Kingston. From 1963-69, he served as physical education director at the YM-YWCA.

"I enjoyed working with the children, seeing their expressions as they accomplish something new," he said. "They're just a joy to work with and it's so rewarding within yourself to watch them grow and develop."

He decided to return to Belleville in 1969 when a vacancy came up with the Belleville Fire Department. He got the job partly because he was physically fit "and not afraid of heights."

He stayed with the fire department for 27 years and loved every minute of it.

"How can you not be happy because you're working with others to help protect people's lives?"

He had to retire from the fire department three years ago because of a knee injury suffered while fighting a fire 16 years ago at Cherney's furniture store on North Front.

"My right knee deteriorated to the point where I couldn't perform



Ralph Boomhower

Photo by Crombie McNeill

A real

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people

person

my job adequately to protect my fellow firefighters or the public."

He opted to retire instead of sitting behind a fire dispatch desk.

"I'd rather be out with people."

Boomhower remembers helping out with the Belleville Firefighters Toy Drive in his first year on the job. He was hooked and served as toy drive chairman for many years. He's still involved in the program but in a more limited capacity.

"Seeing the faces of youngsters when you deliver the presents makes it all worthwhile."

In retirement, Boomhower and his wife, Betty, have also become involved with the Salvation Army's soup kitchen program and Christmas Sharing as well as helping out with local blood donor clinics.

Boomhower said he's joined the Wharf Street Debating Club — "where we have a lot of fun" — and the Masonic Lodge.

He's even started working on old convertible cars.

But, above all, he'll continue connecting with people.

"I can't sit around. I have to do something with people."