

Community Profile

Ib Fynbo named Citizen of the Year

By DANIEL SCHWAB

After Essex's natural gas explosion in 1980 destroyed the then two-year-old Home Hardware on Talbot Street, its Danish immigrant owner refused to let his dream of managing a successful business go up in smoke.

An eight-by-10 square foot garden shed carrying a new line of inventory was soon erected near the charred remains, and a persevering Ib Fynbo had his store back in business.

For the better part of his life, the 67-year-old has been on the path of a vast entrepreneurial venture. His early days of attending night classes at a business school in Ringsted, Denmark was the starting ground to opening Essex's Home Hardware and Home Furniture stores that currently employ 60 people.

But it's Fynbo's blend of entrepreneurial gusto and charitable volunteerism that has won him the 2006 Citizen of the Year award, according to the committee in charge of making the selection.

Members of the commit-

tee, made up of representatives from the Town of Essex, the Knights of Columbus, the Rotary Club of Essex and Heritage Essex, decided in July that Fynbo's contributions to the community, both economically and charitably, were worth recognizing.

"(Fynbo) has been involved with the town for a very long time," said committee member and former K of C Grand Knight Tom Bonneau. "He's always there to help groups with fundraising."

Along with being a member of the K of C, Fynbo's service work extends to a number of local groups, including the St. Vincent de Paul, Rotary and the Business Improvement Area, of which he is a founding member.

"(Fynbo) can turn a negative situation into a positive one," said BIA Manager Marlene Markham-Gay. "He's always got new ideas and is very enthusiastic about the BIA."

Often times, Fynbo's enthusiasm for business and his sensitivity to social con-

cerns have come together for a single cause.

Before becoming co-president of the Essex branch of St. Vincent de Paul, he served on the finance committee for three years in the 90s.

"The committee in those days," Fynbo explained, "put forth a good effort but there was still some inability to understand business. So I was drawn in as a business person to see if I could help straighten out some of the shortfall. We went from red to black in a substantial amount."

Fynbo says his understanding of business and economics has guided him during his long career in retail. When he came to Canada in 1965, one of the first things he studied was the Canadian consumer - what they wanted and expected from a business. At the time he had just completed his studies at the University of London in England, where he enrolled "mainly to learn English."

After meeting and marrying his wife Clemence two years later, he worked in



Citizen of the Year - Ib Fynbo

stands in front of a display case at his Home Hardware store on Wilson Avenue in Essex Sept. 14. Fynbo has been named the 2006 Citizen of the Year for his charitable and entrepreneurial efforts.

wholesale for an importer for 13 years.

"Then I knew I was ready to open a store," Fynbo said. "I always wanted a store. In the company I was in, I couldn't go further ... I couldn't test how good I was when I was on the line."

It could be said that Fynbo was "on the line" when the store he always wanted, a Home Hardware built in 1978, was reduced to a small garden shed with a sparse inventory.

"We were out of business for seven months," Fynbo recalls about the effects of the explosion. "At the time there was a lot of press that said the government

should've helped out more. I didn't think so. You're in business, you're insured, you take care of yourself. That's what entrepreneurs are all about."

In 1982, Fynbo bought the property where the Wilson Street Home Hardware now stands.

In the years following, Fynbo expanded the store's nine major departments, including electrical, plumbing and paint.

When large, U.S.-based hardware franchises began popping up in the area in the early 90s, Fynbo decided it was time to expand his business to include a building centre and lumber yard in 2002.

"We hated what we saw in lumber yards," Fynbo said. "There was mud, disorder, five guys standing around a counter saying 'what do you want?' So we said it could be done better."

He took a three-day trip to Ottawa, visiting 13 building centres along the way, talking to managers for ideas and insight about consumer preferences.

"People think I built the building centre, but it came from the demand," Fynbo said. "It's built on asking the customer and listening to them. You let your customer take you to where they want the store to go."

When it comes to being an entrepreneur, Fynbo said he's always followed a single philosophy - the only failure is not following an idea.

For now, the grandfather of five considers himself retired, but still pops into Home Hardware from time to time, helping to guide his son Philip with the store's management.

"I don't think you can have all this energy and then just shut it off at retirement," Fynbo said.

The Citizen of the Year dinner will take place at 6 p.m. Oct. 14 at Holy Name of Jesus Parish Hall.

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