

# 'Consummate gentleman'

AT 82, LAWYER MERV VILLEMAIRE HAS MELLOWED, BUT HE IS STILL IN THE OFFICE BY 8:30 A.M.

By Carol Jankowski

Photography • Rainer Leipscher

**AT 82, LAWYER** and ex-Kitchener councillor Merv Villemaire claims he's mellowed, although that's not a word that comes to mind as he leaps from topic to topic, anecdote to anecdote, in a lively hour of spirited conversation.

"He's a real people person, genuinely interested in what's going on with you, especially if something untoward is happening. Then he'd want to know how it turned out," says Mark Schumacher, a partner in the firm of Sorbara, Schumacher, McCann LLP where Villemaire serves as counsel. "People here absolutely love him. He's the consummate gentleman; he treats everyone the same."

Villemaire's daughter, Caron Gall, the person he says knows him best, describes his inspirational pep talks this way: "When he asks someone 'How are you?' he doesn't want the pat answer everyone else wants of 'I'm fine.' He truly wants to know exactly how you are feeling and takes the time to listen.

"He has an intuitive, uncanny sense of when his children and grandchildren are in need of these (talks). There have been countless times when I required his advice and just at that very moment the phone rang and it would be Dad, wondering how I was doing. He knows exactly what to say to



Among the guests honouring Mervyn Villemaire at a Waterloo Law Association dinner are his son John Villemaire (left) and daughter Caron Gall (right). With them are (left to right) Rita Levato, Julia and Luke Villemaire and Francine Gall. Mervyn Villemaire was presented with the Coulter A. Osborne Award.

boost morale, problem-solve or simply explore the meaning of life."

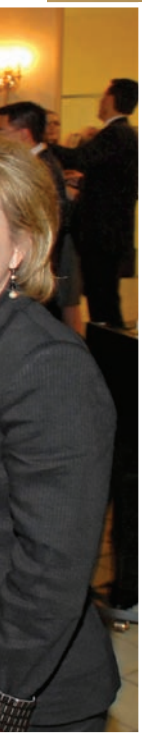
Schumacher, who went to high school with most of the Villemaires' six children, remembers an era when Merv "wanted to get things done the way he wanted them done. He was aggressive." And now? "He's obviously mellowed."

Energetic and disciplined, Villemaire is at the office by 8:30 a.m., right after church,

Monday to Thursday. He sees clients mainly for wills and estates and no longer goes to court. It's not an overly long day, Schumacher says, "but he goes to a lot of funerals. He must know a lot of people."

Villemaire joined SorbaraLaw when he started worrying about who would look after his clients if something happened to him. He promised Sam Sorbara he'd stay five years. That was 10 years ago, and he's ►

Mervyn Villemaire, a lawyer and former Kitchener councillor, is this year's recipient of the Waterloo Law Association's Coulter A. Osborne Award.



▶ looking forward to moving to the firm's new offices at the former Bauer Estate on Union Street in Waterloo.

Merv's wife, Claudette, agrees he's mellowed, but she adds, "he's still a talker. He needs people around him; he likes action."

With a hint of Ottawa Valley accent lingering in his deep voice, Villemaire speaks so clearly that no judge ever had to ask him to repeat himself. One of the things he's happy to discuss is the Coulter A. Osborne Award for "integrity, comity and beneficence in professional practice and public life," recently presented to him by the Waterloo Law Association.

Comity? Beneficence? Claudette simply calls it an honour given to "a decent, fair, honest, hard-working guy."

The award, named for the Kitchener lawyer who became associate chief justice of Ontario and later the province's integrity commissioner, is "one of the nicest things that's happened in my career," Villemaire says.

"When you're on your way to 83, after practising law for nearly 56 years, you don't know what anybody thinks of you," he says. Yet the speakers' remarks at the awards dinner were so generous he could feel his mom and dad's pride as they "looked down on me from paradise." His family was well represented, including four of his children, Caron and John, who live here, Tom, who lives in Belleville, Mark, of Kingston, plus grandchildren.

One of the dinner guests was a cousin, former Detroit Red Wings forward Ted Lindsay, another Renfrew boy who at 84 is still active in the Ted Lindsay Foundation, raising money for research into a cure for autism. Villemaire points to a portrait of the two men that hangs in his office and says neither of them is ready to retire: "They'll have to carry us out."

In talking about law, he often mentions the importance of courtesy, even among adversaries. Over the decades he's tried not to



Above: Mervyn Villemaire (right) is joined by Steve Grant, a trustee; Pam Hebner, president of the Waterloo Law Association; and Coulter Osborne, after whom the Coulter A. Osborne Award is named. Below right: Ron Craigen, Sean Sullivan, Ross Wells and Lesley Love, all with Gowlings.



Above: Tom and Diana Villemaire with Mark and Jennifer Villemaire.



judge clients, even those who were clearly authors of their own misfortune. "I try to remember that not everyone had the benefits I had of wonderful parents, wonderful friends."

"You would never think that someone as opinionated as my father would be humble, (but) he truly is," Caron says. "He can readily say 'I'm sorry' if he feels he has wronged you, and he has taught us the meaning of forgiveness."

Villemaire handles legal matters for the

Waterloo Catholic District School Board, which honoured him with the Chair's Award for leadership in student services in 2007. He has also served for 11 years on the board of the Catholic Family Counselling Centre, now known as Mosaic Counselling. In 2005, the agency named him its outstanding volunteer.

Catholicism has been a dominant influence throughout his life, and references to faith crop up easily in his conversation.

"You need some foundation," Villemaire



Among other guests at the dinner, held in the Walper Crystal Ballroom, were (left to right) Charlotte Langill, Ron Nightingale, Jennifer Black, Eric and Cynthia Davis, and James Gittens.



explains. “The priests at St. Mike’s (St. Michael’s College at the University of Toronto) were very helpful to me, and my faith has helped me through setbacks,” including the death of a daughter, Francine, in childhood and the loss of grandson Bernie Gall in December 2008.

“You bleed in your heart more when your children are hurt,” he reflects, thinking of Caron’s devastation when her son died at 23. He smiles gently at a memory and adds, “Eight people are walking around with Bernie’s organs.”

“Life is difficult, and when you understand



Above, Ron Sills, retired justice of Supreme Court, and Bruce Frazer, justice of Ontario Court. At left, Lorna Fenton and Michelle Frigon.

that, it becomes easy,” Villemaire continues, quoting his favourite writer, M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Travelled*. Harold Kushner, best known for *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, is another author he admires.

Caron teases that he has “single-handedly kept the self-help book industry thriving.” To her, his interest “shows his eagerness to be the very best he can be.”

When the Villemaires visit their son James in New York City, Claudette is drawn to theatre and shopping; Merv browses in bookstores. He hopes God lets him live long

enough to read all the books he has at home, but jokes he may have to help out by buying fewer of them.

He stepped out of municipal politics after 15 years on Kitchener council, including eight on regional council. “By ’79 I’d had enough,” he says. “I thought the best thing was to get out and give someone else a chance.”

Local politics are on the menu the last Wednesday of each month when the Senators, an informal assembly of ex-councillors and “the bureaucrats we liked,” meet at the Breslau airport café for lunch.

Twenty years ago, there were 35 Senators. Now just a handful are still able to meet, including ex-councillors Bob Wagner, Harold Chapman and George Mitchell, former regional planner Bill Thomson, ex-City of Kitchener solicitor Jim Wallace and ex-treasurer Bob Pritchard.

They debate the expensive rapid transit option proposed for King Street and this fall’s referendum on whether Kitchener and Waterloo should discuss the pros and cons of merging.

Wallace remembers Villemaire as quite adamant about issues when he was on council, sparring with Wallace over legal points. “He’s much like he used to be,” Wallace says. “He’s very bright and likes to have a good argument, he likes to defend his position, but now he’s willing to listen to another point of view.”

Villemaire thinks Kitchener and Waterloo should become one city and name it Waterloo in honour of their shared Waterloo County history. “We could do better with one council in control,” he says.

As for resolutely independent Cambridge, “the 401 is the Mason-Dixon Line. They can have everything south of the 401, but I wouldn’t give them Toyota.”

He approves of the region’s mega-investment in the Waterloo Region International Airport because it’s good for companies like Research In Motion that do a lot of travel. He disagrees with Kitchener pouring more money into its downtown and thinks Charles and Duke streets should have ►



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(Left to right) Ted and Joanne Lindsay celebrate with Mervyn and Claudette Villemaire. Ted Lindsay, 84, a former Detroit Red Wings forward, is Mervyn Villemaire's cousin.



Sebastian Winny, Catherine Malvern and Martha Foote, board general manager.

► remained a ring road.

As for the BlackBerry-for-everyone mentality at city hall, "council is supposed to be there to save us money."

In years past, he was a delegate to federal Liberal Party conventions and still enjoys watching the national scene. In his view, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is "kind of stupid" for wanting to replace popular Gov.

Gen. Michaëlle Jean, whose five-year term expires in September. "If we're going to have a governor general, why not keep her?"

As for Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, "I heard him speak here, and I was impressed." But without some coaching, "there's going to be difficulty in selling him." Villemaire considered running federally,

but after seeing the small flats and hotel rooms MPs occupy in Ottawa, he knew he wasn't cut out to be away from home so much.

The Villemaires will celebrate their 56th anniversary Oct. 2. He first spotted Claudette — “a very pretty little girl” — working at a law office in Timmins, where he grew up. When he asked her out, she worried about the seven-year difference in their ages, wondering what to talk about with an older man.

“We're so opposite,” she explains. “I'm more of a quiet, private person.”


She quickly realized “he's such a character, but a character with a very warm, soft heart.”

They married in 1954, the year he was called to the Bar. They feel blessed to have found each other: “It keeps getting better,” Claudette says of their relationship.

Four things are important to Merv, Claudette says: his family, his faith, his books and golf. Sunday afternoons they play nine holes at the Westmount Golf and Country Club with her sister and brother-in-law, Denise and Jim Uffelman. She and Denise talk all the way along the course, but Villemaire stays quiet and focused, even though he has already played a game that morning.

Claudette calls herself a putterer, but Villemaire is precise and deliberate in everything he does. Right after dinner, he sets up the kitchen counter for breakfast, getting out several kinds of fruit, porridge and “about 20 vitamins,” she says. He gets up about 4:30 a.m. for an hour of exercise, then eats and heads off to mass.

“He has more energy and vitality than someone half his age,” Caron says. “When he has faced a health crisis, he takes a determined role in correcting it, be it a change in diet or increased exercise, a new vitamin. He has as many vitamins in stock as a health food store.

“He has taught us how to age gracefully by being young at heart, eager to learn new things, interested in a wide array of current-event topics. He embraces the saying ‘the best is yet to come.’” 

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