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Good citizen overwhelmed with honour

By Roger Knox -
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Cass Ruby mistakenly congratulated acting Vernon Jubilee Hospital Auxiliary president Margaret Cousins for some kind of honour, upon seeing Cousins holding a bouquet of roses at the hospital.

But the rose bouquet Cousins was holding was actually for Ruby, who was named the 2007 JCI Vernon Good Citizen of the Year Tuesday, although she nearly spoiled the surprise by showing up early and heading to the cafeteria, where well-wishers, including Cousins, had gathered to make the Good Citizen presentation.

"Everybody lied to me," laughed Ruby, when asked about the honour.

Lured to the hospital under the guise of attending a meeting to help the Vernon Jubilee Hospital Foundation with fundraising ideas, Ruby, a long-time auxiliary volunteer, was stunned to see more well-wishers gathered in a VJH foyer to honour her.

She received several flower and balloon bouquets, and will be honoured with a spot in Saturday's annual Vernon Winter Carnival parade.

"I'm shocked," said Ruby, 83, tears streaming down her face, lower lip trembling, when JCI Good Citizen committee chair Alisa Briggeman announced her as this year's winner. "I'm normally a talker. I'm speechless."

Known for her big smile, encouraging words and outgoing personality, Ruby has brought innovative ideas to change the profile of volunteerism, and has rejuvenated enthusiasm for the hospital internally, as well as in the broader community.

She was the driving force behind celebrating VJH's 100th year, and also came up with the idea of the "Adopt a Room" program that became a marketing focus for the foundation's Paint A Brighter Picture campaign. VJH was adopted out and redecorated to commemorate its 100th year in Vernon in 1997.

A resident of the North Okanagan for 40 years, Ruby and her late husband, Martin, ranched for many years on Salmon River Road. She established the Neighbourhood Watch program in the Salmon River Valley in 1998, where she got residents and the authorities involved. She did fundraising for the project, organized meetings, put together a community newsletter and orchestrated Salmon River Valley community get-togethers.

Ruby has also been involved with such programs at the Cattlemen's Association and the Canadian Red Cross.

She has been a member of the VJH Auxiliary since 1991, and served as its president in 1995-96.

"Cass is wonderful," said Cousins. "She's so kind, so loving, so caring. She helps anybody in need. All-in-all, she's a great person and I'm happy to call her my friend. That lady can pull any group together. She's a ray of sunshine."

Ruby is the fourth auxiliary member to be named Good Citizen of the year, joining Leona Law, Pat Collins and Betty Ladyman.

Among the well-wishers, and among the people Ruby jokingly threatened to kill after surprising her with the award, was Vernon Mayor Wayne Lippert.

"This lady does so much for this community and this hospital," said Lippert, in one of several hugs he gave the Good Citizen. "She has worked very, very hard, she's always willing to give of herself."

"She

does what a lot of great volunteers do, and that's give someone else the credit when she deserves it. She's one of the true icons of the community."

In announcing the award, former JCI Vernon branch president Nikki Mulder said nothing slows down Ruby.

"Cass continues her spirit of generosity to this day with countless hours spent volunteering," said Mulder. "She is always looking for ways to make the community a better place."

Ruby called being named Good Citizen of the Year "the nicest thing that has ever happened to me."

"That's why I love this city," she smiled.