

From the Father of the “Great One” to Recipient of the Order of Canada: Media, Celebrity, and Walter Gretzky

Abstract

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On Feb. 12, 2010, retired Canadian hockey superstar Wayne Gretzky lit the outdoor cauldron to open the 21st Winter Olympics in Vancouver. That he was chosen by the organizing committee to perform such an honour was entirely understandable. Gretzky fits the type of popular hero defined by Orrin Klapp in his 1948 essay “The Creation of Popular Heroes.” Gretzky the sporting legend is “essentially more than a person; he is an ideal image, a legend, a symbol. (p. 135)” Even for casual hockey fans, Wayne Gretzky’s accomplishment in the athletic arena made the selection as the final torch bearer a logical one.

The Power and The Glory

Gretzky’s prowess in hockey goes beyond dominating. His impact on the game remains lasting. He started skating at two on the Nith River by the family farm where his father had been raised, in the hamlet of Canning, Ont., and further developed his skills on a backyard rink at his parents’ house in the nearby city of Brantford. Wayne Gretzky emerged as a Brantford minor hockey player of considerable talent throughout the 1960s. By the time he was 11, he had garnered national attention for his skills. (Gretzky and Taylor, 1984, pp. 52, 54 and 78). His career progressed to the point where, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, he was the dominant player in professional hockey, establishing and holding numerous records in the National Hockey League (NHL) many of which still stand today. Nicknamed “the Great One,” he retired from the game in 1999 to considerable fanfare. After retiring as a player, he became involved with Canada’s entry in the Winter Olympic Games as an executive and promptly facilitated Canada’s

first gold medal in Olympic hockey competition in fifty years in the 2002 Salt Lake City Games. For the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, he served as an ambassador of the bidding committee and helped the city secured the Games (Vancouver Ecstatic Over Winning Olympic Bid).

Somewhat less understandable, at least on the surface, was the choice of Wayne Gretzky's father, Walter, to carry the same flame in the hours leading up to the final handoff. While the son would routinely credit his father for flooding that backyard rink and working with him as a young player to develop the skills which catapulted him to the top of his field, Walter had never excelled at sports himself -- although he did reach a high level of junior hockey before quitting to get married in 1960 (Gretzky and Taylor, 1984, p. 266). Yet Walter Gretzky's public persona has evolved far beyond his role as father and mentor, to national celebrity and a newsworthy figure in his own right. The press, in particular Brantford's daily newspaper, *The Expositor*, has chronicled his social evolution, from hockey dad to stroke victim to an inspirational community leader for whom charity work has become the main focus of his life.

The purpose of this paper is to note the changing public image of Walter Gretzky, examining his emergence from a supporting role in his own son's story to leading-man status in his own life, and that of his community, with the support, encouragement and boosterism of *The Expositor*. We will see how this partnership of man and medium creates a celebrity that fulfills a number of functions for a small-city newspaper, such as:

- celebrating the community-building activities of a local person of interest;
- serving as a conduit to inner-circle details about the activities of an even larger but more inaccessible national celebrity with local ties, his son Wayne;
- conveying the type of eternal, mythical story found in every society, which is imbued with archetypes such as the Hero, the Victim and the Good Mother;
- promoting certain values espousing the elder Gretzky as a cultural celebrity that represents a Canadian identity.
- Gretzky's own emergence as a hero does not follow classical lines, as we will see, and his hero status is defined differently from that of his son.

Media and Celebrity

As a phenomenon, the creation and popularization of the celebrity industry has blossomed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Yet, celebrity in itself and its attendant curiosity by the public are not a recent development. Indeed, the business of celebrity has been in existent for over two and a half centuries and it is not until the “rise of urban democracy, the two-hundred-year expansion of its media of communication, together with the radical individualisation of modern sensibility” that changes the nature and the magnitude of fame in the past decade or so (Inglis, 2010, p. 5). For discussions below, it is important to understand what we meant by celebrity.

Historian Fred Inglis (2010) made a distinction between celebrity and renown. Renown is based on accomplishments in some socially, politically, and culturally prominent and clearly defined roles. Implicit in a person's renown is a reciprocal

relationship between his/her accomplishments to society and deference by the public to those accomplishments. As much as renown means being publicly well-known, the deference is toward that person's role (or office) but rarely, although not impossibly, to the person himself or herself. Celebrities, on the other hand, can be as simple as their special quality that "propels society to care more about them than about other people" and that with "a collective public, some type of mechanism for distributing information..., and interest in these people for reasons other than any contribution they make to society" establish their status as celebrities (Currid-Halkett, 2010, p. 6).

Evidence that the media has an important role in the making of celebrities in our times are plentiful. Whether through the traditional print or the latest technology in social media, reports of celebrities' public and private activities are heartily consumed by the celebrity fandom (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Holmes and Redmond, 2006; Inglis, 2010; Currid-Halkett, 2010). Whatever the medium, the promotion of celebrities are not value-free. In their publishing of celebrity happenings, reporters, editors and similar purveyors of public information target certain people and not others not only because they believe those stories would resonate with the readers but, intentionally or not, propagate and perpetuate certain social norms and mores (for example, McLuhan, 1964; Whannel, 2002; Jackson, 1994; Jackson & Ponik, 2001. West, 2003).

As a popular cultural institution, sport, of course, is also an important avenue to disseminate values, norms, and mores deemed crucial to the fabric of society since the beginning of organized sports in the late 19th century until today (Cavallo, 1981; Mrozek, 1983; Hartman, 2001; Birrell & Cole, 1994; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Whitson &

Gruneau, 2006). While it is true that cultural diffusion through sport seldom is an uncontested exercise, athletes, as the most visible manifestation of the meaning of sport, are often held up as representatives (and results) of these values. This is especially true for the more successful ones (Andrews, 2001; Billings, 2003; Jackson, 1994; Jackson & Ponic, 2001. West, 2003; Leonard & King, 2011). Yet, Walter Gretzky never achieved renown as an athlete and the only noteworthy achievement in his life appeared to have been his siring of Wayne in 1961 (Gretzky, 2001, 3-4 and 29). As we shall argue, his celebrity status, derived in part from his son's fame, nevertheless provides a platform for the media, in our case, *the Brantford Expositor*, to extol certain desirable traits, values and what it means to be a Canadian.

Walter Gretzky, Father of the Great One

Born to immigrant parents from Eastern Europe, Walter Gretzky grew up in the family farm just outside Brantford, Ontario. Gretzky married Phyllis Hockin in 1960, and the newlyweds moved into the city where he worked as a lineman and repairman for Bell Canada before his retirement in 1991. The couple had their first child, Wayne, in 1961; subsequently three more children, Kim, Glen, and Brent, completed the Gretzky clan. Up until 1961, Walter Gretzky's life would have been relatively common except for two events in that year, the birth of Wayne and the fact that Walter suffered an injury that left him in a coma (Gretzky & Reilly, 1990; Gretzky, 2001).

From all accounts, Walter Gretzky is a dedicated family man. Both Walter and Phyllis loved their children equally despite Wayne's achievement of fame early on. They devoted time to their children's well-being and, of course, their sporting activities. In

fact, a later editorial tribute asserted that Walter “is legendary throughout Canada as the world’s No. 1 hockey dad” (*Expositor*, 12 Nov. 2010, A8). Wayne Gretzky recalled that Phyllis would not go out on Friday nights because he needed a pair of skates or hockey sticks, not to mention her chauffeuring of the children to practices and games. Of course, much has been made about Walter turning the family backyard into a skating rink in the winter time so Wayne could practise whenever he wanted (Gretzky & Reilly, 1990).

Currid-Halkett (2010) defines “celebrity residual” as the “difference between how much we should care about someone (their measurable talent) and the amount that we actually do (their fame)...” (p. 30). While talent certainly can be a pre-requisite for celebrity status, celebrity residual is sometimes a double-edged sword. Wayne Gretzky’s talent began to show when he began to compete in organized hockey at the age of six and his dominance in every game and league he played in only grew each year. As Gretzky’s fame in hockey rose, both he and his father were not always treated with admiration and respect. The young Gretzky (1990) recalled that he won the scoring title by 238 goals when he was ten years old and drew national attention. This sudden attention brought both positive (as in fame) and negative reaction, even from his home town and some of his teammates’ parents. He was called names and, one time, booed when he was introduced in his home arena. With Gretzky’s prowess as a hockey player at such a young age, Walter as his father also became well-known in Brantford and people would hurl insults at him. It got so bad that Phyllis, whom most people did not recognize, had to find another seat far away so she could no longer hear the inflammatory remarks. The negative side of residual celebrity was a major reason for the younger Gretzky to leave

Brantford and his caring parents at the age of fourteen in order to continue his hockey career. To Walter's credit, he took all the abuse in stride.

Throughout his career, Wayne Gretzky had the spotlight on his game whether he played in junior hockey, the World Hockey Association, or the NHL. On occasion, the media might allude to the way the older Gretzky's role in shaping his son's hockey skills. Up until the 1980s, when Gretzky and the Edmonton Oilers dynasty drew the attention of the Canadian public every winter, Walter Gretzky remained in the background as a confidant and supporter of his famous son.

The Trade, Canadian Identity, and Walter Gretzky

On August 9, 1988, the Edmonton Oilers announced a trade with the Los Angeles Kings. Edmonton would receive cash, two Los Angeles players, and three first-round draft picks in exchange for three Edmonton players that included the team's captain, Wayne Gretzky. Under Gretzky in the 1987-88 season, the Oilers had just captured its fourth Stanley Cup in the past five seasons. The main person of interest in this trade, Gretzky, was the most valuable player in the playoffs and was at the prime of his career at 27 years of age. Outside of Edmonton and even the hockey world, Gretzky had become somewhat of a national treasure if his selection as a member of the Order of Canada in 1984 for his contribution to the sport is any indication. While trading players is a common occurrence in professional sport, the Gretzky trade went well beyond that -- in Canada the Gretzky deal is simply known as The Trade. Its magnitude encompassed much more than an exceptionally gifted and successful player moving to a different team. The shock, disbelief, furor, grief, and angsts in Canada that followed give a glimpse of

Canadian perception of its identity especially in relationship to its southern neighbor (Bakegeorge, 10 August 1988; Gretzky 1990; Jackson, 1994; Jackson & Ponc, 2001; Allen, 2008). While the trading of Gretzky, no doubt, represented a major loss for Edmonton, why would it elicit such national attention even if hockey is Canada's passion? Furthermore, what was the elder Gretzky's part in this incident even though the spotlight was clearly on Wayne? To understand the impact of The Trade and to examine Walter Gretzky's role, one must examine the context under which it happened.

Jackson (1994) suggests that Canada went through a crisis of national identity in 1988. When Brian Mulroney took office as Prime Minister in 1984, he vowed to improve Canada-United States relationship which was at best cool under the former Liberal government. Yet, many criticized him for negotiating a free trade agreement with the United States, decrying the proposed agreement as a path towards the Americanization of Canada. Proximity and powerful American military, media, and economy have always made many Canadians uncomfortable if not suspicious of their southern neighbour. It is therefore not surprising that critics saw the free trade agreement as one more threat to Canada's political sovereignty. Many believed that this agreement would allow American unfettered access to Canadian resources and, at the same time, pushed domestic industries into extinction making Canada a dependent satellite state. In the 1988 federal election, free trade with the United States dominated the debates (Ayres, 1998).

As the country debated the merits and pitfalls of a free trade agreement with the United States in 1988, The Trade, to a degree, became an example of what the mighty American dollar (as presented by Bruce McNall, the Kings' owner) could do to Canadian

businesses. One report from New Orleans, where the Republican National Convention was taking place, was headlined, “Gretzky trade: And now we’ve stolen him from right under your noses”. The report went on to cite several California delegates. Lother Khachigian, for example, stated that “It was robbery pure and simple.” Bob Stonum, from Mariposa sympathized, “I think you guys in Canada ought to be real unhappy... I wouldn’t have thought you’d let go of someone of his stature” (*Expositor*, 18 August, 1988). These comments did not help to alleviate the fear that Canada would lose in any dealings with the United States whether it be the pending free trade agreement or, perhaps even more importantly, the Canadian pastime.

While American capitalism may represent the strong arm(ed) takeover, other critics of Mulroney’s ambitious free trade agreement worried the softer and more subtle tactics in American imperialism. Especially for those in the cultural industry, some demanded exemptions in whatever free trade agreement with the United States to counter a cultural takeover (Mulcahy, 2000; Gagne, 2002). For some observers of the Gretzky trade, the “soft” American takeover came in the form of one Janet Jones. About two weeks before The Trade, Gretzky married Jones in Edmonton, in what was termed as Canada’s Royal wedding. An American actress, Jones was perceived by some, mistakenly, as the influence behind Gretzky’s willingness to leave Edmonton. In the highly charged atmosphere after The Trade was announced, an irate Edmonton cab driver blamed Jones. “Without that wife, he would never go.” A woman called to a radio show complaining that Jones had Gretzky “wrapped around her little finger.” Another caller averred that “Jones is the equivalent of Yoko Ono, whose marriage to John Lennon was

blamed by some for the break-up of the Beatles” (Bakegeorge, 10 August 1988; Gretzky, 1990; Jackson, 1994).

Throughout these tumultuous times for Wayne Gretzky and his family as well as the Canadian public, Walter Gretzky remained a calming influence as well as a source of insider information in this heavily and internationally covered news. The day after the deal was announced, Walter told the Brantford paper, “It’s disappointing leaving the Oilers. But he’ll do well, he always has no matter where he’s going. It’s the pride he has.” (O’Leary, 10 August 1988). Implied in his statement was a belief in his son’s affection for Canada and that leaving the country would not change Canada’s most famous son. When rumors surfaced that the Kings promised to pay Wayne Gretzky \$5 million plus a percentage of ticket revenue, Walter rebutted them, saying, “there are a lot of dreamers in the world. If he got \$5 million, there would be no sense in playing.” On sharing ticket revenue, he admitted that it was a good idea but “it gets complicated. Nobody likes doing that” (*Expositor*, 25 August, 1988, A1-2). He summed up the prevalent Canadian sentiment in an interview with *Newsweek* regarding his son’s move to California. “You Americans think you buy anything we have. That’s not the way I feel, that’s reality” (Barol, 1988). In essence, Walter dismissed greed as a reason his son for agreeing to play in Los Angeles and attributed the move to American capital imperialism. American purchasing power, however, would not alter Gretzky’s love of the game. Moreover, his answer on ticket revenue sharing suggested a sense of “simple-ness” uncorrupted by success.

For all the publicity and media coverage, Walter remained in the background as

his son continued his stellar career in Los Angeles (even though Wayne would never win another Stanley Cup as a player). Canadian hockey public eventually and some reluctantly accepted the fact that their national treasure now resided in the United States. They reminded themselves that the young Gretzky still wore the maple leaf (as he would do in the Olympic Games as a player and then an executive) and some began to express pride that Gretzky reversed the trend of American cultural diffusion by exciting the American public of the Canadian winter pastime. A Brantford resident expressed his hometown pride by telling others that he was from Wayne Gretzky's hometown. As an aside, he added a compliment to the father by lambasting Peter Pocklington, the Oilers' owner who, by this time had incurred the wrath and blame on dealing Gretzky to Los Angeles. Pocklington, Mario Fera sneered, "five years ago who wanted to be prime minister said he was like a father to Wayne. That remark must have insulted Walter Gretzky more than Wayne" because Pocklington "sold his so-called son" (Fera, 17 August 1988). Fera's secondary reference to Walter Gretzky would soon be a thing of the past as Brantford (especially the Expositor) would begin focusing on the elder Gretzky in the following decade.

Walter Gretzky and the Making of a Celebrity

In 2008, Walter Gretzky stood before Governor General Michaëlle Jean at Rideau Hall to receive the same honour his son had received twenty-four years earlier. Though several distinguished Canadians were similarly honoured at the same ceremony, the elder Gretzky was the headliner in print and online media reports. One such account appeared on Dec. 12, 2008, at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) website. In

“Gretzky’s dad among 46 given Order of Canada,” CBC News mentioned Walter Gretzky in both the headline and lead of its story, ahead of former politicians and retired justices. The transformation of Walter Gretzky into a national celebrity did not occur in a vacuum and the award was by no means a celebration of his life. As his famous son’s career wound down in the nineties, Walter’s life became the focus of the *Expositor*’s coverage. In no small measure, the Brantford newspaper became Walter’s greatest booster that, in part, helped to promote his status from being the father of the Great One to a national celebrity. But how and why did an ordinary telephone worker whose major accomplishment until then was the siring of one of the greatest hockey players of all times emerged as a celebrity? And why did the national media, in general, and, the *Expositor*, specifically, pay so much attention on Wayne and Walter Gretzky? Indeed, detractors questioned the appropriateness of Walter Gretzky’s selection to the Order of Canada ((CBC, accessed 12 Dec. 2010).

Stories of Gretzky, both Wayne and Walter, persist because newspapers offer far more than simply a reporting of the day’s events; they also represent a modern method for conveying a society’s timeless, mythic stories – much like the oral storytellers of ancient times.

Lule (2001) posits that “archetypal myths can be found every day within national reports, international correspondence, sports columns, human interest features, editorials, and obituaries... Any discussion of journalism that does not account for storytelling and myth will miss a vital part of the news” (p. 3). According to Lule, seven types of societal

myth are perpetuated by their persistent appearance in the form of news stories, he writes – the Victim, the Scapegoat, the Hero, the Good Mother, the Trickster, the Other World, and the Flood. Wayne Gretzky's story is unqualifiedly the story of the Hero: "the humble birth, the early mark of greatness, the quest, the triumph, and the return. The news daily brings us stories of the Hero, stories that proclaim – but also help define – greatness." (p. 23) Walter Gretzky's story is somewhat more complex, however. It has elements of the Hero story, in that it was through the crucible of the father's efforts that the son achieved greatness, but this is not a perfect fit. In fact, Gretzky is more of a mentor to his son the hero; a supporting player. And that is the level to which some commentators feel Gretzky should be properly assigned. It is an important role, to be sure, but hardly the stuff of membership in the Order of Canada.

If Walter Gretzky is indeed a hero for our times, as suggested by *The Expositor* on Nov. 12, 2010 ("Walter Gretzky: A hero for our times"), he is a different kind of hero, one who leads by example and leaves the world a better place by his efforts. He is an accessible type of hero, an everyman who is recognized and promoted by *The Expositor* as a community role model. His type of heroism does not require special skills and talents, as does Wayne's; it is within the grasp of every citizen to do what Walter Gretzky does if s/he has exceptional dedication. His charitable work – in raising millions of dollars for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and other causes through golf and hockey tournaments, public appearances, autograph signings and visits to hospitals – reveals him to be the type of person William Wordsworth had in mind when he wrote, "That best portion of a good man's life/His

little, nameless, unremembered, acts of kindness and love.” (Stanza 2) But do such actions make Gretzky a hero?

Walter Gretzky’s stroke in 1991 has a lot to do with a transformation that the *Expositor* sees as a valuable lesson for all.

The present-day Walter Gretzky was created solitary, vulnerable and alone. It took him years after his debilitating stroke to begin to feel like life was worth living; recovery was a painful process requiring much therapy. For much of the time he was in his own world; his family members refer to that as the period “while you were still sleeping.” (Gretzky, 2001, p. 5) The weight of insignificance was definitely pressing against him. Gretzky also had his soulmate to turn to: his late wife, Phyllis, who worked tirelessly with him and his private therapist, Ian Kohler, to bring him back to health. Gretzky has often spoken of how Phyllis’ kind, loving ways helped him get through so much, (Ibid, pp. 160-61) and he has transformed that feeling into a general love of life which keeps him motivated to continue helping in his community.

Two of Lule’s other types of news story myth run closer to Gretzky’s story line than does the traditional Hero archetype – the Victim and the Good Mother. With his aneurysm-induced stroke, Gretzky became a victim at a crucial point in his life. Just 53, he had retired earlier in the year and was looking forward to a life of “fishing, and more fishing.” (Beare, 2010, par. 18) The subsequent coverage by *The Expositor*, both during the crucial early days when his life was on the line and in the years immediately afterward, when it became clear that recovery would be a difficult process, are very much stories in Lule’s Victim pattern: “Plans, careers, dreams and lives can be shattered in an

instant by a lightning strike, a rare disease, a betrayal. Life must be lived in the presence of death.” (Lule, 2001, p. 22)

Following Gretzky’s recovery, his community involvement began in earnest, and it is here we see a third Lule archetype becoming evident in the Walter Gretzky story. Despite the obvious gender difference in the name assigned to this archetype, it is apparent that Gretzky’s life has taken on the pattern of the Good Mother: “The news tells stories of good and kind people who comfort and care for others. Sometimes these are politicians, celebrities, or stars who volunteer (perhaps quite publicly) for relief works or holiday charity. Other times the news finds models among us. In features and human interest stories, the news suggests that models of goodness may be all around us. It’s a comforting, consoling – but possibly confining – portrayal” (pp. 23-24). In any event, it is clear that through these definitions, there exists a justifiable social reason for a newspaper such as *The Expositor* to continue telling stories about Gretzky’s community initiatives. There is also a practical reason. *The Expositor* and Gretzky have developed a symbiotic relationship over the years; the newspaper has provided publicity for his events and good deeds, and he has in turn provided inside information about superstar Wayne and the family which otherwise would be off-limits to the public. Walter Gretzky’s accessibility has helped keep Wayne in people’s minds as a local boy worth championing, even though Wayne’s fame and fortune mostly were achieved long after he left Brantford in his rear-view mirror. But there is even more to the story than that. The late *Expositor* sportswriter Ed O’Leary suggested in a Feb. 22, 2010, interview:

He’s a newsworthy person. The stuff we write about Walter

Gretzky now is good for us to run. It attracts readers. And he has developed himself through his charitable works. Walter Gretzky has become a national hero through his efforts, donating his own time to better other people – but only if it's a worthwhile cause. Walter does not do it for any financial benefit whatsoever. (O'Leary, interview by author)

Generosity, sympathy, and selflessness are not the only two qualities trumpeted in the *Expositor's* stories on Walter even though the stroke, and the recovery process, was transformative in Gretzky's evolution into the man of community involvement he is today. Once he emerged from his tentative early days and began to live again for real, a new personality developed in Walter Gretzky – an uninhibited merry soul who lives for the moment and celebrates by immersing himself in the community. (Ibid)

The late Ted Beare, *The Expositor's* sports editor during the 1970s and 1980s, recalled the pre-stroke Gretzky well and said he was a very different man in those days. He first met Gretzky in the late 1960s, before young Wayne's exploits were becoming nationally known. Walter, in his job with Bell, would routinely visit *The Expositor* – about twice a week, Beare recalled – to maintain and repair the same phone lines and teletype machines that would later carry stories about his son's hockey exploits to and from newsrooms around the world (Beare, interview with author).

“I got to know Walter really well, as I did the whole family. Walter was a very shy man – that's hard to believe now – and he didn't want to be prominent in the public eye at

all,” Beare said in a March 21, 2010, interview. *The Expositor* respected those wishes, in no small part because Gretzky had become a friend to both Beare and O’Leary, who had just joined the newspaper in the early 1970s. Gretzky himself still has fond memories of those times: “Everybody at *The Expositor* was so friendly, and it was a wonderful atmosphere,” he recalled in a March 5, 2010, interview. “I would find out from them what’s going on, and it would give them a chance to interview me. I got to be good friends with Ted Beare and Ed O’Leary... I know most of the staff at *The Expositor* and there’s not one person who isn’t friendly and wonderful. Not one.” (Gretzky, interview).

Gretzky knew when it was time for a serious interview, O’Leary recalled, and when it was time to just chat. “Walter would come in and fix the (phone/wire) lines and, while he was fixing the lines, he had to wait to test them,” O’Leary said. “While he was waiting to test them we’d go upstairs to the cafeteria and have toast and coffee, or whatever, and we’d talk.” (O’Leary, interview)

Those conversations were rarely about his famous son, even during the record-breaking NHL days of the 1980s. “He would stop by the sports department and talk about hockey,” getting the late scores and other bits of news and information, Beare recalled. “The thing I remember about Walter... all that time Wayne was getting all these goals and getting all this publicity from all over the place, but Walter would never bring up the subject of Wayne unless he was asked. (And when he was asked, he responded) never in a boastful way at all.” (Beare, interview) *The Expositor* was in an enviable position; by making friends with Walter Gretzky and letting him talk about Wayne in his own good time, reporters such as Beare and O’Leary were getting exclusive access to details about

the life of a national celebrity and his family.

Gretzky's passion for helping the less fortunate – and his admiration of that same quality in others – can be traced back to his early days growing up on the family farm in Canning. One of his neighbours in that small farming community was *Expositor* employee Susan Baxter. Gretzky recalled working on the tobacco harvest for Baxter's parents, Harvey and Louise Dafoe. He was about 20 then and Susan was a toddler. "I used to drive the tractor and she used to sit on my lap when I cultivated the tobacco that her mother and father grew," Gretzky said. "I made my money in the summer working on her mom and dad's farm." (Gretzky, interview) In 1974, Susan Dafoe started working at *The Expositor* as a circulation clerk. Now, working under her married name of Baxter, she has memories of Gretzky from the early days, the period of Wayne's emergence as a hockey star, and his post-stroke days.

"There's 17 years between us," Baxter said in a March 5, 2010, interview. "When he was a young man my mom was the teacher at the one-room school in Canning. I don't know for sure whether mom was Walter's teacher, but she taught his sister Ellen." Ellen had Down syndrome. "She tried to include Ellen in the classes." (Baxter, interview with author) Gretzky remembered the situation in his 2001 autobiography *On Family, Hockey and Healing*, written with the help of author Moira Farr.

I remember thinking it would be a good idea for Ellen to
attend the one-room schoolhouse along with the rest of us.

Mrs. Dafoe, the teacher, was a wonderful, smiling,

redheaded woman, very kind, whose husband started one of the first tobacco farms in the area. She was an absolute angel. I persuaded her to let Ellen come, and for a few years, she did. I'd usually walk Ellen to school, and (Walter's brother) Albert would walk her home. I did have to stand up for her sometimes and defend her against the kids' teasing. I would always do that. (p. 20)

Despite Gretzky's early relationship with the *Expositor*, many of the stories were about his son Wayne instead of Walter. Between 1974 and the aneurysm which led to that life-changing event in 1991, only 17 stories appear in the *Expositor's* archives. All but two of those focus on Wayne, quoting Walter Gretzky in reference to his son, accepting an award on his son's behalf, or helping his son run the first of the family's fund-raising ventures, the Wayne Gretzky Celebrity Tennis Classic in support of the CNIB. The exceptions are the last two stories before the aneurysm. On May 6, 1991, Beare wrote of the surprise retirement party Gretzky's family held for him at a local community centre, attracting more than 400 well-wishers. And on June 1, 1991, columnist Sam Colaiacovo riffed playfully on the success of that party to write, "What Brantford needs is Walter Gretzky as mayor." While the article still nods to Gretzky's mentorship role with Wayne, it also suggests that he is finally beginning to emerge as a recognizable individual not only within the community but on a national level:

There is no question that Walter has come into his own as

one of the country's most recognizable figures. The other day, an article about lacrosse in Canada's largest newspaper, The Toronto Star, mentioned Mr. Gretzky as being a celebrity. The paper didn't feel it necessary to mention his son until much later in the story. (Colaiacovo par. 5)

Gretzky's reputation as a kind, giving man continued after the aneurysm. On Oct. 7, 1992, not even a year after the event and with Gretzky clearly not recovered at this point, *The Expositor* published a story on his first post-stroke public appearance, a press conference to sell Wayne Gretzky calendars as a fund-raising initiative to help the CNIB. Writer Jim Beatty notes in the final paragraph, "Mr. Gretzky, who is continuing his recovery since suffering a brain aneurysm on Oct. 16, 1991, did not give a speech at the ceremony but posed for photographers to promote the calendars." (Beatty par. 18) Whether he wanted to be or not, the Great One's father was now poised to fulfill the role Lule defines as the Good Mother, all with the support and recognition of *The Expositor*. Gretzky wasn't ready to embrace the role at the time, however, and it wasn't until three years later that he began to re-emerge in a significant way. By 1994, however, with the encouragement of his friend Bob Coyne, he was back coaching minor hockey. In a Dec. 31, 1994, story, *Expositor* sportswriter Paul Maher notes how Gretzky was rejuvenated by playing an honorary role at an international tournament named after his son:

Gretzky was so relaxed and at home at the tournament, he even joked that his coaching skills hadn't been lost thanks

to a brain aneurysm he suffered in October 1991.

...Gretzky's position at the tournament is primarily to award (medals to) the championship players – no small event for those visiting. His presence draws cheers from the crowds and wide eyes from those receiving the medals.

(Maher par. 16, 18)

That set things in motion, and they have yet to stop. Over the course of the next two years, Gretzky took part in an advertising campaign for Big Brothers of Brantford and District, raised funds to send his novice hockey team to Los Angeles (*The Expositor* sent two staff down to cover the tournament) (Bailey par.10), helped establish the CNIB golf tournament in his name, handed out stuffed bears and signed autographs at a hospital, then dropped the opening puck at the same Wayne Gretzky tournament, later bringing young players to his home to see his son's trophy room. He also volunteered for the annual food-bank Christmas Baskets program and would routinely donate signed memorabilia from the Gretzky collection to be auctioned off for charity. These actions, and more, won him *The Expositor's* annual Citizen of the Year award for 1996. "It's so nice to be able to do things for people," he said in January 1997, when his nomination was announced. "We take so much for granted. I did, too, at one time, but when you've been given a second chance at life as I was, you learn never to take any good for granted any more." (Marion, *Expositor* 14 Jan. 1997) Gretzky was named as the award's winner that month, delivering the homespun response of "Suffering catfish!" and his brand of accessible (Canadian) citizenship was lauded by its sponsor, *The Expositor*, in a Jan. 31,

1997, editorial:

Walter's claim to fame is that first, and last, he's a dad.

He's the kind of dad who leads by example. He's the kind of dad who shares in the accomplishments of his family.

He's the kind of dad who makes his home a warm and loving place, and then willingly shares it with friends and strangers alike.

And what Walter has done, particularly in the last three years, is to become "Brantford's dad." When there's an ill child who needs a lift, Walter, Phyllis and the other Gretzky family members help out. When there's a community effort that needs a boost, Walter's there. When somebody speaks ill of their home town, they're there to defend it. (par. 6 and 7)

Brantford's dad, yes, but in Lule's terms, also very much the Good Mother. By 1997, Gretzky had emerged for *The Expositor* as the news archetype that keeps on giving and, over the past 15 years, that story has continued to grow. Wayne Gretzky retired from hockey in 1999, then joined Canada's Olympic program as an executive and the NHL's Phoenix Coyotes as coach. As of 2010, however, he had no official role in hockey. His press file has simmered in recent years, but his father's remains vital and active as he expands on his role in the community. "There are a lot of people here who admire Walter more than they do Wayne," *Expositor* reporter/columnist Susan Gamble said. "It's not

because he fathered Wayne; it's because of who he is now.” (Gamble interview with author)

Consider some of the highlights found in his *Expositor* file – all of which touch on Gretzky's community involvement – since that 1996 citizenry award:

- sees his plaque installed on the city's Walk of Fame in 1999 beside that of telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell; (Yates)
- named Ideal Father of the Year by Variety Village in 1999; (Canadian Press 8 Nov. 1999)
- becomes an official spokesman for the Heart and Stroke Foundation in 2000; (Habib)
- receives rare Paul Harris fellowship from Brantford Rotary in 2001; (Gamble 6 March 2001)
- publishes autobiography in 2001 with help of writer/interviewer Moira Farr, in support of Heart and Stroke; (Gamble 13 Oct. 2001)
- named honorary Doctor of Laws from McMaster University in 2002; (Canadian Press 2 Oct. 2002)
- inducted as member of the Order of Ontario in 2003; (Baillie 6 Feb. 2003)
- has hotel wing named in his honour in 2003; (Marion 14 Feb. 2003)
- sees life story, Waking Up Wally, filmed and shown on TV in 2005; (Gamble 3 Nov. 2005)
- sworn in as “Lord Mayor” of Brantford in 2007; (Marion 20 Feb. 2007)
- inducted into Brantford and Area Sports Hall of Recognition in 2007; (O'Leary 22

June 2007)

- inducted as member of the Order of Canada in 2008; (Zronik 29 Dec. 2007)
- has teddy-bear named after him as fund-raiser for Brantford General Hospital Foundation; (Beales 2 Oct. 2009)
- carries Olympic torch on final day in 2010. (Gamble 13 Feb. 2010)
- has a public school named for him. (Gamble 9 Jan. 2012)

“For him, I know the awards are special, but he gets his real reward out of volunteering and helping people as much as he can, anyhow, anywhere,” his daughter Kim is quoted in the pages of his autobiography (Gretzky 2001, p. 219). And he certainly does not see himself as a hero, *The Expositor’s* O’Leary said.

Not in his mind. Walter is simply Wally from Brantford.

You can go to McDonald’s on King George Road many mornings and he’s just in there joking around and laughing, and carrying on with everybody. People pull off the highway (403) just to see him. (They get to McDonald’s and) there’s Walter Gretzky having fun, telling jokes, singing songs... and they’re just amazed. They just can’t believe it’s the father of Wayne Gretzky... It’s part of his appreciation of life. He just appreciates his life a lot more than he did before. (O’Leary interview)

This public approachability has developed as a side effect of his stroke (Gamble interview) and it is what separates Gretzky from other pillars of community. It is also the

key to his continued symbiotic relationship with *The Expositor*, as both a conduit to Wayne's life and a news source in his own right. "He has no inhibitions," Gamble said during the March 1, 2010, interview. "He'll sing to me, and he was clowning around (at *The Expositor* offices) last week. He's almost clownish but my goodness, people respond to him." Requests for Gretzky appearances have flooded in since he began working for the Heart and Stroke Foundation in the mid-1990s, Gamble added, and he will respond whenever possible, especially if he gets to play in a golf tournament.

In 2002, at *The Expositor's* suggestion, Gretzky took a borrowed camera to the 19th Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he was going as a guest of Wayne, the general manager of the gold-medal Canadian men's hockey team. Gretzky was to document his journey to Salt Lake City and share the resulting photos with the newspaper's readers. The ensuing 24-page tabloid section, titled "Walter's Golden Memories," represented just another chapter in the long, intertwined history of *The Expositor* and its favourite community booster/Wayne Gretzky camp insider (*Expositor* editorial 16 March 2002). For a while, however, the success of the project seemed in doubt because of Gretzky's continuing memory issues. He had been an avid photographer before his stroke; now, 10 years later, he did not remember how to work a camera. Still, his instinct to perform good deeds for his friends won out. "He couldn't report back on a daily basis," Gamble recalled, "and the family warned us, 'Don't put the pressure on him.'" So she took a camera to his house to show him how it worked. This was the first time Gamble had ever talked with Gretzky on a personal, one-on-one basis, and he has become a mainstay in her personal tidbits column, "Word Has It," ever since. (Gamble

interview)

It could be said that *The Expositor* exploited Gretzky for its own purpose; certainly, this was the first time he had ever completed a specific task on the newspaper's bidding. As with most of his activities, however, the benefit flowed both ways. "*The Expositor* can take credit for bringing Walter back to his love of photography," Gamble suggested, and a donation was made to his favourite charity, the CNIB, from the profits of the special section.

He was so proud of the pictures he came back with.

Fairview Photo donated the camera and told him to keep it.

We gave him a "junior reporter" badge after the Olympics.

He was really proud of himself. He gave us pictures not only of the Olympics but of Wayne and the kids playing hockey at home, with the tipped-over laundry basket. The family wondered if those should be released but Walter said, "No, I took these for you guys." We went over to show him the first tabloid that came out with his photos. He was just so tickled. (Gamble interview)

Memory problems persist for Gretzky, however. Asked on March 5, 2010, what he recalled of the experience, he initially drew a blank. After a few cues were provided, some details returned to him: "I just remember I was so nervous and so excited – snapping, snapping, snapping – and it was wonderful" (Gretzky interview). The cognitive issue is significant in terms of its effect on Gretzky, to be sure, but he has learned to cope,

and he has even noticed a secondary benefit which has helped him go about his day-to-day life of social interaction and community involvement on a real-time basis:

Most significantly, I'd say the greatest change of all is that I don't worry about the little things in life the way I did before. And worrying really was a big part of my life for a long, long time. All that seems to have been swept away, which I consider to be a good thing, too. I enjoy life now, much more than I ever did before. Why not? I guess I have a sense of how short and how precious our lives really are, and I want to get the most out of mine and offer what I can to others I meet along the way. (Gretzky 2001, p. 6)

A superb illustration of this Gretzky post-stroke mindset can be seen in the ongoing tale of his relationship with Daniel Eickmeier, a student at W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind in Brantford. Eickmeier was 10 years old when he came to the Gretzky home in October 1995, looking not for an autograph of a piece of memorabilia, but for a serious conversation. As Gamble writes in a Sept. 25, 2000, story:

Earlier that month, Daniel's dad – Ron Eickmeier – had a malformed artery that burst, causing a stroke, similar to what happened to Walter four years earlier in 1991. The elder Eickmeier, a neighbour to the Gretzkys, was in a wheelchair, and left speechless, almost cutting off communication between him and his blind son.

Walter's heart went out to the youngster.

"I told him that sometimes it just takes people longer than others to get better," Gretzky remembers.

And that was the start of a beautiful friendship. (Gamble, Expositor 25 Sept. 2000)

Two years later, Gretzky decided to take Eickmeier to a Toronto Blue Jays game. He arranged for him to meet not only the radio play-by-play team for the American League baseball team, but also the boy's favourite player, Roberto Alomar. Alomar, a former Blue Jay who had returned that day as a member of the Baltimore Orioles, promised to hit a home run for the boy – and delivered. Other special moments have followed: a tour of the local radio station, a ride-along with a city cop, a chance to drive a golf cart on the open greens of a nearby course, playoff games with Gretzky at his home and visits from Gretzky's famous son. The bond between the two developed to the point where Gretzky, during a surprise visit to W. Ross Macdonald for choir practice, was recognized by the boy simply by the touch of his hand. (Ibid)

Conclusion

The Eickmeier story serves as a parable, in that it reveals the character of Walter Gretzky the celebrity, his relationship with his community, and his relationship with *The Expositor*. First, there is his instant connection with the blind, which the Gretzky family as a whole has pursued since establishing Wayne's tennis tournament for the CNIB in the 1980s and which continues with the senior Gretzky's own annual CNIB golf tournament. Then, there is the stroke connection. Eickmeier's father has suffered as Gretzky has, and

the boy needs some guidance in how to deal with this situation. Gretzky also emerges in his role as everybody's favourite father – and Lule's Good Mother archetype – when he takes it upon himself to care for the youngster and do what he can to ease his confusion and cheer him up. Gretzky the revered sportsman also shows up in this tale. Calling in favours from throughout the sports community, he arranges for the Blue Jay game, and the meetings with the broadcast crew and Alomar. He cannot be credited for arranging Alomar's home run, of course, although the thought of a divine connection certainly satisfies the mythical imperative of the Gretzky story. It definitely makes for great copy, and allows *The Expositor* to continue triumphantly in its role as Gretzky booster.

Gamble offered her own theory on Gretzky's evolution into his current role.

“So how did he become Saint Walter?” she asked. “He always started off being Wayne Gretzky's dad but, I think, because of the stroke, he became a hero in his own right.” There are three factors at play in this unique recipe, she suggested: “One – he did something important, as the parent of Wayne. Two – he survived a near-death experience. And three – he turned all of that around for community good. You have a lot of people with one or two of those (factors). But three? You can come up with someone like a Terry Fox figure, but even that's not quite the same” (Gamble interview).

The elder Gretzky's community involvement and charitable work fit neatly into the *Expositor*'s needs. As Wayne Gretzky's career wound down in the United States, it was Walter who stayed in the community. In 1991, another hockey player with huge potential was drafted by the Quebec Nordiques as the number one overall choice.

Labeled “The Next One” (after the “The Great One”), Eric Lindros refused to play for the

Nordiques citing the size of the city and the lack of marketing potential for Lindros. After sitting out for one full season, the Nordiques eventually traded Lindros to Philadelphia. To many in Quebec, Lindros (who was born in Toronto) was considered someone who rejected the one of the two official cultures in Canada. To others, Lindros preference for an American market team re-ignited the latent fear of American capital imperialism (Wallace, 1991; Swift, 1992; Scher, 1992). It did not help matters when the Quebec franchise was relocated to Colorado four years after the Lindros' trade, followed yet by another Canadian NHL franchise, Winnipeg which moved to Phoenix. Amidst the furor of losing another (potentially) great Canadian player to the United States was the accusation that Lindros' parents had a strong influence on Lindros' refusal to report to the Nordiques. Walter Gretzky and his wife came out like true patriots. Despite his son's fame and fortune in the United States, Walter did not turn his back to his community and country. By association, his good work and attributes came to represent a Canadian identity. His qualities, generosity, sympathy, humility, selflessness, and spontaneity, to some degree, became what it meant to be Canadian through the coverage and promotion by the media.

Walter Gretzky has evolved from a shy, quiet man, most famous as mentor to his heroic son, to become the lead character in his own drama. *The Expositor*, with deep roots in the Gretzky story, has been there every step of the way to record that voyage and support his efforts during his emergence as a significant person in the history of Brantford and Canada.

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