

## **About Arnie Stewart**

When he was a child in Northern Ontario, Arnie sold copies of his local newspaper hoping to make enough money to buy a meal. Ironically, he couldn't read the headlines. One of 12 children, Stewart's parents always had more important things to worry about than making sure each one could read and write, and he often went to school hungry.

As a result, Stewart fell behind in school. He was 16 when teachers finally told him it was time to move on. He was in Grade 5 at the time. "They told me to go to the mines and make some money and that's what I did", Stewart said.

After being laid off from his mining job in 1964, Stewart hitch-hiked his way south, hoping to join the U.S. Army. With just \$6 to his name, Stewart was sent back to Canada. "They thought I was crazy," he said. "All the Americans were trying to get into Canada to get out of going to Vietnam, and here I was, a Canadian, trying to get over there." Broke and hungry, Stewart slept in a parked car in the city of Niagara Falls for two months before what he called "the best thing in my life" happened.

Hungry and desperate, Stewart pondered smashing a window at a grocery store when he saw two pretty high school girls enter a local diner across the road. They shared their fries with Stewart, and over time, one of them went on to share her life. Determined to support his new bride Barbara, Stewart camped out daily at the Canada Manpower Centre, looking for work. He finally found it when a placement worker found a job that didn't require reading – a position laying sod with the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission.

He worked there throughout his career and had high praise for the company for sticking by him. "It was hard over the years, but everyone there has been very supportive," Stewart said. After years of hiding his literacy problems and counting on his amazing memory and charm to get him through each day at work, his supervisor took Arnie aside one day and told him he had figured out Arnie's problem. Once Arnie felt safe enough to admit to his literacy challenges, his life began to change.

He was matched with a tutor through the local Laubach Literacy Council in Niagara Falls. As his reading skills began to improve, so did his confidence and curiosity about adult literacy and other adult students' experiences. He bravely began to tell his story and strove to make positive change for other adult literacy students.

He served on the Laubach Literacy of Ontario (LLO) Board since 1996, first as Student Representative, and later as Vice-President. He served as a member-at-large, and chaired the Public Relations and Fund Development Committees. Arnie served as a Board Member of Laubach Literacy of Canada (LLC). He was the national student representative, and Chair of LLC's national student committee: TREE (Teamwork to Raise Equality and Education), which he helped create. He was also a director on the board of the Ontario Literacy Coalition, as well as Chair of their Learners' Council.

Arnie took his literacy message to the public. He and his wife Barb were featured on literacy awareness TV commercials, called "What Did You Learn Today?" He agreed to be a "poster boy" for

LLO's outreach program to attract learners and tutors. His "I learned to Read" poster aimed at learners, and his "teach someone to read" poster aimed at volunteers are still being used to this day.

Arnie's life story was featured on TVO's "Person 2 Person" show in 2005, and copies of that interview are often used in tutor-training workshops to sensitize tutors to the challenges faced by adult literacy learners.

Arnie was a popular guest speaker at AGMs and at schools. He had a natural ability to present his story in a humorous and meaningful way. He particularly enjoyed speaking to young people about the importance of not being afraid to ask for help, the core fear that held him back from realizing his potential.

Arnie's contributions were recognized when he was honoured with Canada Post's Flight for Freedom Achievement Award in 1999 and for several years Laubach Literacy Ontario (LLO) presents the Arnold Stewart Individual Achievement award to a student who exemplifies Arnie's values and commitment to adult literacy.

Of all the accolades Stewart has received, his greatest pride was that his son and daughter achieved post-secondary education and successful careers. "I broke the cycle," he used to say, with tears in his eyes.

Lana Faessler, Executive Director of Laubach Literacy Ontario, had high praise for the legacy that he left behind. "It was his passion to pass on to the other adult learners, to give back to the community," she said. "He never wanted money or glory. He didn't have a self-centred bone in his body."

Arnie envisioned a world where everyone had the ability to read, write and achieve their potential – to fully experience their world.