

Connecting the Past and the Future: Verdun Bourdon

Charlene Kopansky.

Founder & President of The Canadian Aquafitness Leaders Alliance Inc. International Presenter



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You have an interesting life. Retired from a solid career in civic service you've enjoyed concurrent years in the performing arts. You've survived life-threatening health problems. In retirement you have a pension, a nice home and a good partner. What do you do for an encore?

If you're Verdun Bourdon, you are not retiring to a rocking chair or spending a lot of time next to the fridge. He's made a third-age career teaching others what he knows about health and fitness. He's done it the best way--by example--in person.

It was exercise that saved his life. When Verdun applied for a job as an aquafit instructor in his new home-town of Burlington, he didn't have the certification for the job. People who get the credentials for this occupation usually earn them when they're younger. It's physically demanding.

Verdun Bourdon, at 76, is more than a bit past what most people think of as their prime, but his energy, ability and dedication have gained him a following in the Burlington Ontario swimming pool world where many of his students are his age or older. A good many are half his age.

Verdun was born 24 September 1937 to Louise Geroux and Omer Bourdon. He grew up on the edge of Toronto. He admiringly describes his father as someone who knew how to do everything—he was a farmer, a grain handler, a factory work. Verdun's mom, a self-taught professional dressmaker, sewed ballet, theatre, and skating costumes, some designed by Frances Dafoe, a

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Canadian Silver medalist figure skater in the 1956 Winter Olympics.

Verdun himself, perhaps because of these family associations, has always been active and throughout his life participated in theatre, figure skating, Glee Club, ballet and Scottish Country Dancing (he is a certified teacher). He is versatile, adventurous and seemingly made more flexible by new experiences, good and bad.

As a young man he took ballet lessons “by chance.” A friend he liked was teaching ballet at the Janet Baldwin School of Ballet and Verdun decided to try the classes. As one of a small coterie of male ballet dancers he found himself being offered roles in most of the ballets that the innovative and highly regarded Baldwin produced. Verdun appeared in numerous Baldwin recitals in Toronto. He attained the Royal Academy of Dancing Male Advanced Certificate and he taught professional classes at her studio. A series of summer engagements with fledgling artistic companies followed: he appeared in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and sang and danced in musicals in Winnipeg at the newly established Rainbow Stage. He choreographed and performed musical reviews. He danced at the CNE in the summers of 1961 and 1962: you may have seen him in *The Grandstand Show*.

Verdun started his working life in 1955 with the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) as a clerk. From that time on he always had two “jobs”, one a “job” job and another that nurtured his artistic passions. At the same time that he worked for the TTC he worked as a coach for the Scarborough and the Nobleton Figure Skating Clubs and at times his part-time income from skating clubs

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exceeded his full-time salary from the TTC.

In 1960 Verdun worked for the City of Toronto as a clerk fielding telephone complaints about garbage pick-up. That job was a “temporary” position that unexpectedly turned into a 33 year long, permanent and full-time career. He moved up in the City bureaucracy, eventually to become Coordinator of Payroll & Personnel--Parks and Recreation.

During one belt-tightening period, it looked like Verdun would be in charge of “retiring” his fellow workers before he himself was left to “turn out the lights” and retire early, too. Fate in the form of a series of serious health problems intervened. In 1991 and 1992 Verdun was hospitalized for pulmonary embolisms that required major medical interventions. He had surgery for a perforated gall bladder. He describes these life-threatening experiences as life-changing events: after he recovered he took early retirement as a more thoughtful person and one who was very thankful to be alive.

Verdun and Jim, his partner of 50 plus years, moved from Toronto after their century home became irreparable. When Burlington friends pointed out the virtues of the smaller city, he and Jim relocated into the same quiet neighbourhood in 1999.

Verdun joined Margaret Colquhoun’s aquatic class at Tansley Wood pool. (Margaret was another highly-regarded Burlington aquatics instructor for whom participating in aquafit had been a life-altering experience.) Margaret was his instructor, and became his mentor and booster: when a position as aquafit instructor was advertised by the City of Burlington Margaret encouraged Verdun

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to apply. He was offered the position conditional on certification by Canadian Aquafitness Leaders Alliance (CALA). Verdun responded enthusiastically to the courses and compulsory training sessions.

Verdun's contract with the City of Burlington is part time, but Verdun is in demand at all the city pools and he frequently fills in when other instructors are unavailable.

If earlier jobs, achievements and activities appear unrelated to Verdun's present calling they nonetheless give us clues as to what led to his present situation. The dramatic health episodes in which he came near to being "past tense" fired his desire to improve and maintain his health. A job as telephone problem solver may have given him empathy for other people's problems, for which he is now much appreciated. He has won respect and good will through his obvious affection for his students and his efforts to make every hour they spend with him fun and interesting. He paces the classes so each person can achieve a sense of accomplishment as they move their bodies freely and painlessly in warm water. They like it that he custom-edits the CDs that accompany his classes (a favourite is *Hooked on Classics*). Some mornings just about everyone in the pool sings along with show music from the 30s, 40s and 50s.

Not that the hours of physical activity don't take a toll on his own body. Although he is invariably upbeat he confesses that he gets pretty tired and cites herbal supplements for keeping him up to the task. He takes a nap every afternoon. Before dinner he relaxes with Jim and a Scotch or enjoys the

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occasional glass of wine “for his health”. He plays with his smooth-haired dachshunds, Coco and Buffy.

Verdun Bourdon didn’t even know about aquafit as a youth but there is a strong connection between his deep regard for the activity now and his enthusiasms of the past. He is proud of his work with a mostly-senior population. He believes his efforts make a difference in his students’ lives as well as in his own. He has earned good will and admiration in his new, post-retirement, life. His dramatic encore is a great example to us all of possibilities yet to be.

Contributed by Marcia Sweet

CALA is proud to provide opportunities for people of all sizes, shapes and fitness levels. One is never too old to learn or inspire others.

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