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Bob Church

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## Health & Community Development in Greater Airdrie

### *A Brief History*

Bob and Gina Church are third generation Airdrie area community members. They recently made a significant donation to the Airdrie & Area Health Cooperative (AAHC) that has enabled ongoing community engagement and operational development of plans for an Airdrie-based health park, digital health, and the possibility of being the first Canadian Blue Zones community.

At a recent AAHC event, Bob provided a history of innovation and community collaboration within the greater Airdrie area. Excerpts of Bob’s discussion follow.

The relatively new Airdrie and Area Health Cooperative is under the leadership of Stan Grad and Mayor Peter Brown, with the help of a group of dedicated board members. With the same spirit and community focus as these modern day pioneers, I want to share a little area history to show that the community of Airdrie has frequently and repeatedly stepped up to take care of community needs in the area of health.

When the Spanish Influenza epidemic arrived in 1918, Airdrie stepped up under the leadership of Dr. W.F. Edwards and local Council. He took charge of the operation, commanding the biggest building in town, the Airdrie Hotel. Originally it was turned into a 25 bed hospital but, at the height of the epidemic, it expanded to 250 beds. Dr. Edward’s nurse was Margaret Kinniburgh, my grandmother Black’s sister. She had graduated from the first class of the first nursing program in Alberta. They had active participation of over a hundred local people including more than 50 teenaged girls who

volunteered including my wife, Gina's, grandmother Beatrice Northcott. The school was closed and their help was offered to make meals, clean rooms and help the sick. Due to the leadership and care of Dr. Edwards and Nurse Kinniburgh, only four Airdrie residents died in this epidemic compared to Crossfield with 28 deaths and Calgary with nearly 600.

The mission of today's Airdrie and Area Health Cooperative is to improve the health of Airdrie and area residents. Stan Grad and his board are the equivalent of Dr. Edwards in 1918. Mr. Grad's teenaged daughter died in a car accident and he was disappointed in the emergency care in the area. He was instrumental in helping to build community support for STARS Air Ambulance, working with Dr. Greg Powell to provide instant emergency service across western Canada.

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Airdrie has been at the forefront of a number of changes to provide for the improvement of the community. My dad was the Chairman of the Rocky View School Board, closing down the local one room schools in the rural area in the 1950s to provide better education to students. As a result, in 1983 Bert Church High School was named after him, followed by the Bert Church Live Theatre.

Airdrie became involved in WWII airforce training when they established the airport just east of town. This involved building a number of large hangars and three buildings for the provision of health care for service members. This was the centre for Spitfire training for the Canadian Airforce. Injured soldiers were taken care of locally in these health care buildings.

After WWII SD and Ron Southern founded what would come to be known as ATCO Trailers, operating out of the hangars at the airport. They later won the contract of the US military to ship trailers to Vietnam for living quarters and health care services for American troops. The local community of Airdrie were active in hauling over 600 trailers by truck from Airdrie to San Diego where they would be shipped to Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

In the 1960s, the Balzac and Airdrie 4H Clubs, under Fred Bell, would be the top two 4H clubs in Alberta. Subsequently, area 4H members were awarded scholarships to attend agriculture shows in Montana and Toronto. As a result of Bell's leadership, area students became leaders in public speaking competitions across Canada.

Also during the 1940s, through the sponsorship of Vic Watson, Agricultural Field Days began. This was a way to bring the community together to learn about farming.

During the depression of the 1930s and 1940s, economic opportunity was limited. The 100 year old United Farmers of Alberta provided opportunities for rural farmers in the community to be involved in agricultural development. My uncle George Church was one of the first presidents of UFA. The success of the UFA represents the community spirit of innovation as exemplified by their involvement with the Famous Five Women in the establishment of UFWA early in the century. This is an example how rural Alberta establishes itself outside of government bureaucracy.

Communities like Airdrie continue to take the lead in getting done what needs to be done. As such it is no surprise that the AAHC is poised to change the future of health of all Canadians. The current board has done a lot of work looking into where the most successful health delivery systems exist in the world and are working on various unique priorities, including the implementation of the first Canadian Blue Zone.

All of the above programs had dedicated leaders. In the current Airdrie and Area Health Cooperative, our leaders are Stan Grad and Mayor Brown who are dedicated to the future of health of local citizens. Our area is very fortunate to have a mayor who has demonstrated that he can be a leader who is not afraid to be innovative in improving the health of residents. This will give the community of Airdrie an opportunity to be leaders in the move toward better health of Canadians.

By Dr. Robert Church (2018)