

"The Greatest Canadian" honoured with statue in Weyburn



Weyburn This Week

The sun peeked through the clouds momentarily after the unveiling of the bronze Tommy Douglas statue on September 10, as famous Hollywood actor and grandson to the late Premier, Kiefer Sutherland proclaimed, "I have waited a long time to hold my grandpa's hand again."

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BY JENNIFER LACHARITE

The clouds parted briefly to shine light on the newly unveiled statue of former Premier and "father of Medicare" T.C. Douglas in Weyburn, thanks to the generosity of an internationally renowned artist and the town that supported "the Greatest Canadian" at the beginning of his political career.

Many dignitaries were in Weyburn on September 10 to view the unveiling of the life-size statue including Douglas' grandson and famous Hollywood actor Kiefer Sutherland, federal NDP leader Jack Layton, Saskatchewan NDP leader Dwain Lingenfelter, Souris-Moose Mountain MP Ed Komarnicki, Mayor Debra Button and the artist that made it all possible, Lea Vivot.



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Sculptor Lea Vivot (right) placed a bronze maple leaf at the foot of T.C. Douglas after the statue was unveiled while Douglas' grandson Kiefer Sutherland walked to the front of the statue to get a better look.

The large crowd gathered at the Riverfront Boardwalk to witness the historic moment broke into applause after Sutherland, Button and Vivot removed the tarp that was covering the statue.

"I've waited a long time to hold my grandpa's hand again," remarked Sutherland after stepping onto the statue's base and grabbing its outstretched hand.

Due to the damp and windy weather, the crowd and honoured guests moved the ceremony to the Royal Canadian Legion where speeches by all the dignitaries took place. Much of the crowd gathered around Sutherland as he made his way to the Legion to get autographs from the movie/television star, which he graciously took time for. He thanked the crowd for coming along his way.

At the Legion, Sutherland regaled the audience with stories about his grandfather Tommy and his mother Shirley Douglas, Tommy's daughter.

"All the time I spent with my grandfather, whether he was in Ottawa, Wakefield, Toronto – all the stories were about Weyburn," Sutherland told the large crowd. "I always wanted to come to this place because everything I identify with my family came from this place."

He admitted to being jealous of his twin sister Rachel when she accompanied their grandmother Irma to Weyburn in 1985 to donate a grand piano to Tommy's old ministry, the Calvary Baptist Church, which later became the Tommy Douglas Centre.

Sutherland said he was grateful to finally see the town from his grandfather's stories, including Tommy's former house on Coteau Avenue and his former church and its memorabilia at the Tommy Douglas Centre. He said that he hoped to bring his two daughters and grandson to see all the sites, some day.

Sutherland told the captivated audience one of his favourite family stories, as told to him by his grandfather, beginning with the information that Tommy had been an amateur feather-weight boxing champion in Saskatchewan.

"My mother, she was coming home from school one day – she was probably eight or nine – and she was crying," began Sutherland. "My grandfather...said that she wasn't really crying because normally when people cry the tears go straight down their face. She was crying so hard the tears were shooting straight out!"

"My mother had a bicycle that she cherished and she said one of the boys at school had stolen her bike. My grandfather looked at her, puzzled, and said 'well, go get it back.' And she said 'I can't because he's bigger than I am.' Within five minutes he took her by the hand...and gave my mother her first boxing lesson."

Sutherland said that two days later, according to the story, she had her bicycle back and told the crowd that he had seen a picture of his mother and that bike at the Tommy Douglas Centre earlier in the day.

Sutherland said he wanted the people of Weyburn to know about the impact they had on his grandfather. "He made a real conscious decision to stay here in Weyburn. You see, the people in Weyburn took a chance on Tommy."

In 1934, Douglas ran unsuccessfully in the provincial election. He ran in the federal riding of Weyburn the next year and was narrowly elected. Douglas became Premier of Saskatchewan in 1944 and held the position until 1961.

Sutherland explained that the struggle of Medicare, creating infrastructure, schools and balancing the budget and everything that was occurring at the time was no light task and it took a community like Weyburn that he could come home to that supported him.

Sutherland said he once asked Douglas to describe the people of Weyburn. "He simply said, 'they're the strongest people I know'...and he was right."

He then thanked the community on behalf of his family, "You have a place in our hearts forever and this is what we will always consider home."

This memorable day in Weyburn began five years ago when Vivot decided she must commemorate Canada's "Father of Medicare" and contacted the city of Weyburn where Douglas began his political career and ministered at the Calvary Baptist Church for several years. After Ross McMurtry and Isabelle Butters spear-headed a campaign to raise \$30,000 to cover the cost of materials, Vivot waived her professional fee and got to work. The bronze statue was in the works for over two years by Czech-born artist Vivot, who said her work was "a labour of love."