

by Lindsay McGee

# ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION LADIES' AUXILIARY

## *Continuing a long-standing tradition*

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Every year on Remembrance Day, Canadians across our great country remember those who have fought and died for Canada. They also pause to pay their respects to veterans who are still living, and soldiers who are actively serving in the Canadian Armed Forces.

For some, this day may also be extremely personal, involving the remembrance of a family member or friend who falls into one of these categories. This is the case for Isabelle Young, 86, a member of the Royal Canadian Legion Ladies' Auxiliary Branch 180 in Wingham.

Each Remembrance Day, Isabelle's thoughts go to her two brothers-in-law, who both fought in the Second World War. Both men were fortunate enough to return home after serving.

Once home, one of those brothers-in-law, Harry Montgomery, became active in the Wingham Legion as a way to honor those who died during battle and to support veterans and their families. It was he who inspired Isabelle to join the Ladies' Auxiliary in 1973.

Isabelle is a past Branch president, and is still an active member today, keeping alive this important tradition, which began during the First World War (1914-18). As wounded Canadian soldiers returned home to Canada, women were asked to help with their recovery. This included visiting injured soldiers in the hospital and sending parcels to hospitalized soldiers or to soldiers' families who were in need.

This historic and dedicated group of women formed what is today known as the Royal Canadian Legion Ladies' Auxiliary. Today, there are 243 auxiliaries across Ontario alone, consisting of almost 9,000 members.

The Ladies' Auxiliary is a well-established non-profit group. While they operate separately from the Royal Canadian Legion, the two groups have a strong partnership. The role of the Ladies' Auxiliary is to contribute to its local Legion Branch, and to provide financial and volunteer support to Legion programs and events.

The main focus of the Legion continues to be remembering those who gave their lives for freedom, and looking after the needs of veterans, their dependents, and those still serving in the Canadian Armed Forces.

In addition to supporting soldiers, veterans and their dependents, the Ladies' Auxiliary members, with their Legion partners, also are strong supporters of their communities. Together they sponsor sports, youth and seniors programs, and other key community organizations like hospitals and medical centres. In many communities, the Legion Hall is considered the primary meeting place for community and social events. Many people will also know the Legion and their Ladies' Auxiliary counterparts from their most visible role in the annual Poppy Campaign.

Legion Remembrance programs commemorate the men and women who died in military service to Canada during both war and peace. Many believe that maintaining the tradition of Remembrance is a sacred trust, and the Legion's most important role. Ontario Command and its districts, zones and branches, commit thousands of volunteer hours each year to carry out Remembrance activities.

The poppy has been widely recognized as a symbol of Remembrance since the The Great War Veteran's Association in Canada (the predecessor to the Royal Canadian Legion) first adopted it as its Flower of Remembrance on July 5, 1921. By wearing the poppy, we demonstrate our gratitude to those who gave their lives for the freedom we enjoy.

Each year, for two weeks before Remembrance Day, Royal Canadian Legions throughout Ontario carry out the Poppy Campaign, with the help of volunteers from the Ladies' Auxiliary. The campaign also raises awareness of the poppy as a symbol of Remembrance.

### The struggle to stay strong

In Ontario, many Ladies' Auxiliary branches are struggling to maintain membership levels high enough to continue to support these important activities. This was recently the case for Ladies' Auxiliary Branch 180 in Wingham. Membership reached an all-time low in 2017, with around 25 members.

Given the large number of events the Ladies' Auxiliary is asked to support, and the hundreds of volunteer hours the Auxiliary provides each year, it was only through the commitment and dedication of long-time members like Isabelle that the Wingham branch was able to continue.

Historically, Branch 180 has aimed to maintain a healthy 80 members. But like many other Auxiliary branches across the province, Branch 180 knew it needed to recruit new members soon, or it would have no choice but to fold. In what turned out to be a very successful recruitment campaign, 20 new members joined the Ladies' Auxiliary in 2018, and new recruits continue to be added.

In recognition of their efforts, the members of the Branch 180 Ladies' Auxiliary Executive were even presented with the provincial award for Most New Members in 2018 at the 59th Biennial Convention of the Ladies' Auxiliary Ontario Provincial Command of the Royal Canadian Legion. The branch, consisting of many long-time members, can now breathe a bit easier knowing it has the numbers to continue its activities.

In addition to this, local members are working to secure the future of the branch, so they can one day pass the torch to the next generation and keep this important Canadian tradition going.

Along with this, all of the members would agree that among the greatest rewards of being a member are the new friendships gained, the camaraderie that is shared, the fun this multi-generational group has together, and what they learn from each other. The ages of members range from 19 to 86, and consist of a number of mother-daughter duos. This year, new recruit Chasity Irvine-Caesar, 19, proudly carried the flag in the Zone Spring Convention, a task once carried out by her great-grandmother Muriel Irvine.

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**Top: Chasity Irvine-Caesar, left, and her grandmother Gayle Irvine pose as flag bearers in the Legion Hall in Wingham. Chasity's great-grandmother, Muriel Irvine, was also a member of the Ladies' Auxiliary. Bottom left: Harry Montgomery, a Second World War veteran and brother-in-law of Isabelle Young, a member of the Legion Ladies' Auxiliary. Bottom right: Isabelle Young, left, and current Ladies' Auxiliary President Carol MacKay.**

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When Isabelle Young was asked how she has felt watching new members who will serve as the next generation of the Ladies' Auxiliary begin to join, she had but one word to describe it: "Wonderful." She added she feels great gratitude toward the new members, then chuckled and noted we could still use a few more.

When current Ladies' Auxiliary Branch 180 President Carol MacKay reflected on why she joined 15 years ago, she said she wanted to be a part of a community group. She knew the Ladies' Auxiliary as an organization that both helps youth in the area and local charities and organizations such as the hospital. Most of all, she felt a sense of pride to support and belong to a group so deeply rooted in Canada's history, which still provides aid and support to veterans and their families, as well as those currently serving our country.

For these reasons, she said she would encourage anyone interested in joining a community group to consider joining their local Ladies' Auxiliary. If you are interested

in more information about the Ladies' Auxiliary, visit [www.on.legion.ca/find-branch](http://www.on.legion.ca/find-branch) and use the information on the website to contact your local Legion branch.

Membership is open to any female Canadian citizen or Commonwealth subject of federal voting age who supports the purposes and objects of the Legion and undertakes to support the activities of the Legion, especially the annual Poppy Campaign. ■

*Lindsay McGee is a Huron County resident and a busy medical professional, raising twin boys with her husband on a farm outside of Wingham. She was one of the 20 Auxiliary members recruited in 2018 and, along with the other recruits, has enjoyed her time volunteering and values her experiences with the Ladies' Auxiliary. She encourages others to consider joining their local Legion Ladies' Auxiliary.*

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