

Alex Martin



He was a busy manager at a local tire factory, but on a wintry day in 1922 Alex Martin helped start a movement that would transform the lives of thousands of children with disabilities in Waterloo Region.

The local Rotary Club wanted to do something and it was Martin who suggested that children with physical handicaps needed the group's support. Martin had recently become a founding member of the Ontario Society for Crippled Children and reported to local Rotarians that important service work with children was being done in other communities.

On December 18, 1922, on what has been called a "Red Letter Day" in local Rotary history, it was decided that children with physical handicaps would be a top priority.

In those early days, Martin and other Rotarians drove disabled children to Toronto for their medical appointments, surgery and therapy. These long and frequent trips meant volunteers and children developed close relationships. Money raised by the Rotarians also went to braces, wheelchairs and orthopedic equipment.

The club's mission has evolved and now, 85 years after that first meeting with Martin, the KidsAbility Centre for Child Development in Waterloo serves more than 3,000 children annually. Celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2007, KidsAbility is today a government-funded centre; however local Rotary Club volunteers still provide countless hours of support and fundraising dollars.

Alex Martin was born in Norwich, Ontario in Oxford County in 1880 to Reverend and Mrs. William Martin. He graduated from the University of Toronto in 1902 and later joined the Dominion Rubber Company and became manager of the tire division in 1917 and vice-president of the company in 1929.

During the Second World War, Martin served as the Rubber Controller to the federal government, attending high-level meetings in Canada and Europe. At the time, corporate executives like Martin who donated their expertise during wartime were known as "\$1-a-year men." Martin was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his wartime service.

Despite his busy life as a local industrialist, Martin gave generously of his time as the president of the K-W Rotary Club, Federated Charities and the Red Cross Society. He was also director of the Canadian Cancer Society and served as chairman of the board, elder and superintendent of the Sunday School at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Kitchener.

He married Jessie Wilson in 1912 and together they raised three sons, Wilson, Jamie and John, in a house on Allen Street in Waterloo. Their son, Lieut. Jamie Martin, was killed in action in 1944.

Martin, who died in 1959 at the age of 79, appeared to have had an optimistic nature that may well have been the driving force behind his good works and career success. It was during the early part of the 1930s, a time when many families were struggling and businesses failing, that Martin had this to say to fellow Rotarians:

“These are great days. Their significance will be appreciated only in the years ahead. Everyone feels his responsibility in trying to find the road to recovery. Rotary is a unique instrument for mobilizing world-wide goodwill but subject to intelligent direction. It can be a great force for good and deserves our best efforts.”

Photo courtesy of KidsAbility Centre for Child Development