

Get to Know Our Amazing Member



Spotlight on Mary O'Neill

Mary has called Coquitlam home for more than forty-five years, raising her two children, and cherishing her deep roots in the community. Throughout a distinguished career in School District 43, she has served as a teacher, counsellor, vice-principal, principal and faculty associate, always guided by a passion for supporting young people and their families—especially those facing challenges.

Mary's work has been shaped by collaboration with dedicated colleagues and her involvement with the district's Critical Response Team, where she witnessed profound strength and dignity during difficult times. These experiences inspired her to contribute to restorative justice initiatives, advocating for healing, accountability and community well-being. Her commitment to believing in people and fostering positive change continues to make a lasting impact on Coquitlam and in other facets of the social justice network.

Last month Mary was honored as a Freedom of the City recipient for her distinguished service to the community. This civic honour recognized her lasting contributions to public service, education, social justice and community well-being.

Mary graciously provided me with her acceptance speech and after rereading it several times, I concluded that sharing this uplifting speech is the very best way for you to get to know Mary, who she is and what she stands for. In her own words -

“Mayor, Councillors, honoured guests, friends, and neighbours—thank you.

I am deeply moved to receive the Freedom of the City of Coquitlam.

This is an honour I never imagined receiving—and certainly not one I accept alone.

For more than forty-five years, Coquitlam has been my family's home.

It's where our children grew up.

Where friendships took root.

And where I was shaped—again and again—by the people I had the privilege to work alongside.

So tonight, my first feeling is gratitude.

Gratitude for a community that has given me far more than I have ever given it.

My career in School District 43 was a privilege from beginning to end. I worked with extraordinary teachers, counsellors, support workers, CUPE staff, and administrators—people who showed up every day with compassion and courage.

Whatever contributions I may have made—as a teacher, counsellor, vice-principal, or principal—were possible only because I was surrounded by colleagues who believed deeply in young people, especially those who were struggling.

I thank them for their partnership, their humour, and their unwavering commitment to students.

I am also grateful to the members of the district's Critical Response Team. Together, we walked with students, staff and families through some of their hardest days.

The strength and dignity I witnessed in those moments taught me more about community than any textbook ever could.

I share this recognition with every one of you who answered those calls—often quietly, and without fanfare.

That same belief—that people are more than their worst moment—led me beyond the school system and into restorative justice.

My interest in this field began with a small group of people, who believed that healing and accountability could coexist.

That early initiative grew into what is now CERA - Communities Embracing Restorative Action—.

I want to acknowledge the volunteers, (including Freedom of the City recipient, Sandy Burpee, who is here tonight) the facilitators, and community partners who built that program from the ground up.

You showed our city what it means to repair harm—with humanity.

And of course, my heart is **now** with the Talitha Koum Society.

Serving as Board President has been one of the great blessings of my life.

The women of Talitha Koum—women rebuilding their lives with courage, honesty, and hope—are the true heroes of this story.

I also want to honour past and present staff, volunteers, donors, and community partners including the City of Coquitlam, who make it possible for the women, mothers and children to heal together.

The phrase *Talitha Koum* means “little girl, rise up.”
And I have seen that rising—

in women reclaiming their dignity, in children finding safety, and in families discovering new beginnings.

This award belongs to them as much as to anyone.

You know “Looking back, over the years, I realize that my approach has always been quite simple:

Love and trust God

Be kind, and

Never be **indifferent** to the needs and pain of others.

Whether in a classroom, a crisis, or a community circle, the belief—that all people matter—has guided everything I’ve tried to do.”

I can’t really speak about any of this without speaking about family.

Recalling these memories makes me more than a little emotional, because it opens the door to growing up in a large, boisterous family of four girls and four boys—led with laughter and love by my mother and father. I wouldn’t be standing here tonight if it weren’t for their strong faith and limitless love. Here’s to the McKinnon clan. Thank you.

That same foundation has carried me forward with my O’Neill family, including my late parents-in-law and all my wonderful in-laws. My husband Terry and our sons have been my anchor from the very beginning. They have supported every late meeting, every late-night phone call, and every new project I said yes to. Their love has been the quiet, steady foundation beneath all this work. Today, that love has only multiplied with the addition of two daughters-in-law and four grandchildren. I love you all.

Finally, I want to thank the City of Coquitlam.

This honour reflects something I have seen time after time: that when people choose compassion over judgment, and community over isolation, remarkable things can happen.

So tonight, I accept this recognition with deep humility and profound gratitude. I accept it on behalf of the educators, counsellors, volunteers, and community members who have walked this journey with me.

And I accept it with hope—
hope that our city will always be a place where no one is invisible,
where every person is supported,
and where everyone is invited to rise.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.” Mary O’Neill