

# 'We have to be thankful for what he contributed,' city councillor says

BY ED VEILLEUX

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In a world of people moving to big towns to start their lives, Gabe Bélanger was proud to call Chelmsford home, according to one city councillor.

"He was quite proud of Chelmsford," said Claude Berthiaume, councillor for Ward 3, which includes Chelmsford. "He was born and raised here, and the community here was important to him."

Bélanger, a prominent businessman and philanthropist, died from cancer on Sunday.

The councillor said Bélanger helped enhance business in the outlying community.

"With his (Bélanger Ford) dealership, he put Chelmsford on the map. He used a lot of marketing for his business and brought a lot of people from everywhere to come to this area."

Bélanger also gave the city seven acres of land to build the St-Gabriel Villa. The not-for-profit long-term care facility is named after him and is under development.

"(Receiving the land) was the stimulus for us to attain the tender back then, back two years ago," Berthiaume said. "We were able to go and see the Ministry of Health, and when we applied for the tender, we were able to tell them there was some land given to us by Gabe Bélanger."

The councillor recalled going to talk with Bélanger to ask for the land.

"On the Monday, I went to his office. He

wasn't there, he was in Florida."

Berthiaume talked to Bélanger on the phone instead.

"When I asked for the land, he said, 'yes.' There was no doubt about it. He was willing to support this great project that we have here in Chelmsford."

If it wasn't for Bélanger's land donation, "I don't know if we would have gotten that tender," Berthiaume said.

"He was important to this community."

Berthiaume will remember Bélanger because he was a generous and friendly man.

In a world of corporations, Bélanger was one of the few "old style" businessmen left, he said.

"You don't see the old-style of businessman anymore. More and more, we're seeing corporate stores and that type of thing. It's the old guard that we're losing, former businessmen like (him) who work in the community, live in the community, they aid the community and they are active in the church and everything. They were participants.

"Now we're seeing more and more businesses coming from out of town. It's not the same anymore. I think we have to be thankful for what he contributed to our community here in Rayside-Balfour and Chelmsford."

St-Gabriel Villa is expected to create an estimated 160 jobs in the community of Chelmsford, according to his daughter, France Bélanger-Houle.

The land that Bélanger gave for the project is the land that he grew up on, his daughter added.

She also said her father had a "natural ability" to meet and befriend people.

"He would make new friends easily and go up and

"He was 'Ford tough,' we always teased him," said his daughter France Bélanger-Houle, playing on the brand of the dealership her father



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Gabe Bélanger and his wife Laura had four daughters, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

talk to just about anyone," she said. "He loved people. He genuinely loved dealing with people."

Bélanger was the type of father and grandfather who was proud of his family.

He was proud "of the daughters and the grandchildren and their academic and sports accomplishments," his daughter said.

He was also proud of the businesses he built, "from the ground up," she said.

Before quitting his job to become a car dealer, Gabe Bélanger worked at Inco for more than a decade.

"Back then, if you had four young daughters and a mortgage and a car payment like everybody else ... to quit a job at Inco, that was never seen," his daughter said. "You never quit a job at Inco. But he was a risk-taker and he was very ambitious."

When Bélanger started selling automobiles, he worked 12, 14 or 15 hours a day, his daughter said.

"He started out in a little trailer on a lot, while he gathered funds to build the dealership. He wanted better things for his family. That's why he started a new career, and eventually a dealership."

Bélanger-Houle said her father had been battling cancer for several years and was adamant that he would fight as long as he could.

"He was 'Ford tough,' we always teased him," she said, playing on the brand of the dealership her father owned.

expressed his thoughts on the loss in a letter. "The entire (city) is saddened by the loss of one its most prominent citizens," the mayor wrote.

"Gabe left his mark on Chelmsford and the City of Greater Sudbury in many ways. As an entrepreneur, he built one of northern Ontario's largest car dealerships on the strength of his personality and the warmth of his smile. As a developer, he brought indoor shopping to Rayside-Balfour and a large format grocery store."

His accomplishments go beyond the business world. He was also a community builder and friend, the mayor said.

"As a philanthropist, he contributed to many community causes. Gabe was a friend to everyone and his unique presence will be missed."

Although Sudbury Chamber of Commerce president and CEO **Debbi Nicholson** said she didn't know Bélanger well on a personal level, she knew him by reputation.

"I think he had a very stellar reputation in this community," she said. "He was certainly a well-known, very well-liked businessman and a very honourable man. He believed very much in his community and did an awful lot for the community in a very subtle and sort of behind-the-scenes way."

Nicholson said Bélanger will be missed in the community.

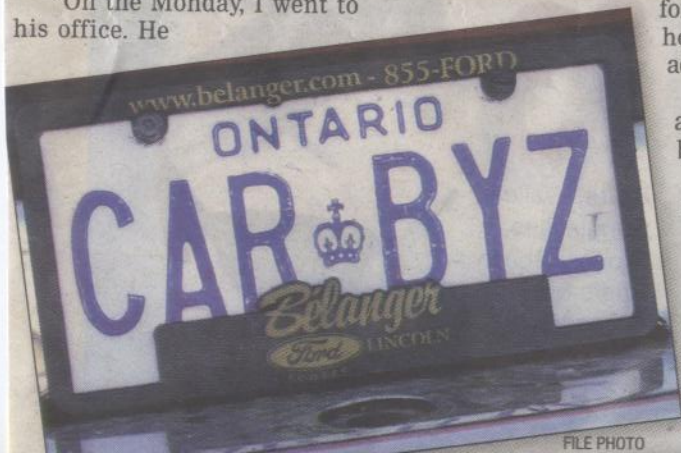
"We're deeply sorrowed by his passing. He will definitely be missed in this community, but he's left an indelible mark on it, so he'll be remembered very fondly."

Visitation for Bélanger will be at the Co-operative Funeral Home in Chelmsford on Friday, from 2 to 5 p.m. and 7 to 10 p.m. and the funeral will be Saturday at St. Joseph Church at 11 a.m. in Chelmsford.

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CLAUDE BERTHIAUME

Councillor, Ward 3



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