

# Thoroughly Modest Millie

BY PRISCILLA HEWITT

“**M**odest” takes on new meaning

when you meet Millie Redmond. If you haven't already heard that she was made an Honorary Member of the North American Indian Club, was named a “Citizen of the Month” by the Save the Children Fund in 1975, received a “Woman of Distinction” award from the YWCA in 1981, and was appointed to the Order of Canada in 1983, you certainly won't hear about it from her.

What you will hear from Millie, a Pottawatami from Walpole Island, is her genuine concern for Natives. You will hear her say, “I enjoy people. Everyone has something you can find pleasure with.” To this end, Millie has been instrumental within the organized Indian movement for over thirty years now. In 1951, she was one of a small group that started the North American Indian Club at the Toronto YMCA. In 1963, she was involved in the establishment of the



Indian Centre of Toronto, now the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. She organized its Ladies' Auxiliary. Millie became increasingly involved in employment assistance, legal aid and other service functions for the expanding Native community of Toronto. She undertook the job of court worker and social worker for the Centre, and started special programs for the young and the elderly. Millie helped to found a non-profit housing corporation for Native people, and took over the management of a residence for Native girls. In 1978, she organized a non-denominational Christian welfare service for Native people called “The Council Fire Native Cultural Centre.” This operation is really doing front-line social work, such as getting alcoholics into detoxification centres and seeing that destitute Natives have warm clothes and a place to stay.

I have known Millie for a number of years now and I can honestly say that she has never mentioned any of these achievements in her

conversations. Rather, she has stories of individual situations and individual people. Some are sad, some are humorous, and some are powerful. They do, however, have a common denominator — respect.

She speaks reverently of her grandparents (Millie's father died when she was two and her mother died when she was four). She remembers how her grandmother enjoyed people. If her grandmother heard that anyone was in need, she would take the expandable bag that hung on a hook by the door, fill it with things and go to those people. She speaks with fondness of a missionary named Miss Lyons who worked at the orphanage where Millie spent a few years. Because of Miss Lyons'

way has been good, there have been bad times, too — especially the past two or three years. Her husband of approximately thirty years passed away around Christmas time two years ago. Council Fire was plagued with turmoil, some external and some internal. The Centre had to move twice in two years because the landlord in each case had sold the property and the new landlord inevitably had different plans. The most recent move has resulted in most of Council Fire's furniture and appliances going into storage. Nearly 150 people a day who relied on the Centre for food, shelter and counselling services had to be turned away temporarily. Not only that, Millie Redmond, "the sparkplug behind Council Fire," was one of two paid

house all of its activities in the same area of downtown Toronto where it has been located since its inception.

It seems that the hanging in there when the going got really rough is slowly starting to reap its dividends. Millie Redmond is now the President of the Board of Directors. In addition to working with anyone who would listen and try to keep Council Fire from going under, Millie has been visiting those in need and doing speaking engagements with various churches. Her only regret at this point is that she wishes she had the dollar value now for all those things she did for free in the past so that she could use it to help Council Fire get back on firm footing. A number of fundraising approaches are

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example, Millie developed a "yearning to help Native people." Another person that she holds in high regard is a Supreme Chief Ranger from the Independent Order of Foresters named Frankie Hand. Hand used to come to the orphanage to speak to the youngsters there. Millie has a distinct memory of the sound of Hand's voice as he said to them, "There is PLEASURE in serving others."

Millie says that she did not really map out what she would do; rather, her philosophy has been, "You do the things that come to you the best way you know how." She remembers her deceased husband offering support in so many ways for her work. If she ever had to stay late with someone, she would phone home and his reply would be, "I'll see you when you get here." He understood how important it is to her to be there when someone needs her. Sometimes in the morning, he would say, "What are you going to do today?" Her reply would be, "I'll do whatever comes my way."

While most of what has come Millie's

staff workers to lose their jobs until a new location would be found. The ripple effect of these moves on the staff, the clientele and a host of others has been detrimental to say the least. There was even an attack on Millie's credibility.

However, with a handful of those who honestly believed in what Millie Redmond and Council Fire stood for, things are looking up again. Council Fire was able to start up its weekly dinners at St. Stephen's Church. They feel the dinners are critical as so many single parents and children, the elderly and the homeless have come to count on the dinners for both a social outing and a free meal to help them stretch their almost nonexistent incomes. Volunteers, usually people Millie has helped in the past, assist with the cooking and the serving. Food donations come from the Good Shepherd, Second Harvest, the Anglican and United Churches, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the British Empire and private donations. Council Fire is presently negotiating for a space large enough to

underway, one of which is a 25 km. Walkathon.

What has sustained Millie when all of this was happening? Her reply was "My life has been pretty full. I've been lucky. I've had my health, my friends, my family and my work. Maybe I had to learn what others have gone through."

The supreme example of Millie's modesty is in how she feels about being appointed to the Order of Canada. The award itself was started in 1967 and is given to those who have done something outstanding in the way of achievement or service to the community. The motto for the Order of Canada is, "They desire a better country." Millie feels that so many Native people have worked for the benefit of others and it goes unnoticed. She says, "I accepted it for all those who have worked quietly for Native people and no one hears about it." No, Millie won't tell you about her achievements: you hear about it indirectly through the many people whose lives she's touched over the years. And there have been many.