

Saying Goodbye To A Grassroots President

By Claudia Nosseir

The mood walking into the president's office seemed extra quiet.

As he walked out to meet me for his last *Reflections* interview, he must have sensed my nervous disposition, and without pause, he directed my attention to a book of memories he was working on. The nerves vanished as I was engrossed in all the proud moments he was sharing. It was impressive yet bittersweet watching the president show me his proudest work.

Don Lovisa Retiring

Durham College's president, Don Lovisa, was retiring after more than 16 years, and was leaving behind an impressive tenure and legacy for future decades to come. He had a grassroots persona, where he achieved success through understanding and applying students' and employees' needs.

As I sat down to talk to him, he shared what he felt was most important to him.

"By going into the hallways

and listening to students and

students and employees, it



(Unknown)
Don Lovisa, President, standing in the Pitt with Durham College students celebrating an open house event.

staff, and listening to the grassroots, some of the best ideas have come out of talking to people in the hallway," he says. "I've always felt that by getting out and talking to

grounds you in why you're doing the job."

He goes on to share that, "The pulse is not in this office here; it's in the hallways; it's in the classrooms; it's

at the events; it's the side conversations. I've always believed that, and it's served me well."

He also surrounded himself with talented and experienced leaders to help guide and lead the college from their various perspectives and opinions. He also believes that an open and honest dialogue with those who make decisions across the college is fundamental to his success.

Leading By Listening

He led without ego and listened to everyone, from students and faculty to employees across the two campuses.

"When you give employees the opportunity to take your title away and just have a conversation with you as a person who also has a job at Durham College, you open up a dialogue that otherwise wouldn't exist," he says.

"That's why I created the innovation disruptions group, held the think tank, and the town halls; this gave me great insights and it's satisfying to be where the pulse of the organization is."

That is the exact sentiment I received around the college as I conducted my research and interviews. “Both as a student and now as a full-time employee, Don always made me feel valued at DC,” says Kaitlyn Souch, social media strategist. “I remember when I was a work-study student, I was really nervous to meet him for the first time (and take his photo!). He was so down-to-earth and made me feel like I was with an old friend. I’ll miss running into him in the hallways and chatting with him at events.”

Don Lovisa’s Beginnings

His start at Durham College was quite the story. His first role was as vice-president academic, where he responded the first program quality audit. Within 10 months, the Board chair asked him to step in as acting president, and within a year he was appointed a permanent position as president, making him the shortest term as vice-president anywhere in the system.

He entered the position with serious challenges before him as Durham College was in serious financial instability.

He decided to lead with transparency and held his first town hall meeting for all employees, where he stood up and said, “We have a problem, and here are the books. Let’s have a discussion on how to solve the problem.”

That is how Lovisa began his legacy.

Leading By Comraderie

He believed in openness, transparency, and discussion. This strategy was indeed effective as he was able to balance the budget in the first two years and had multiple years of surplus budgets.

“..WE HAVE A PROBLEM.. ”

Durham College’s Revitalization

This allowed Durham College to not only stabilize, innovate and grow, but also significantly invest in the campus by creating the Durham College AI Hub, Centre for Craft Brewing Innovation, Centre for Cybersecurity Innovation, Mixed-Reality Capture Studio, and the Social Impact Hub.

“Don always looked to the future, worked to be ahead



(Unknown)

Lovisa celebrating with Durham College employees at an Employee Appreciation Day..

of the curve, and our Esports Center is just one example of that mindset,” says Michael Cameron, professor, Esports Academic.

Leading Innovation

In addition to improving the campuses’ infrastructure, there has been six baccalaureate degree offerings established under Lovisa’s leadership. Not to mention, DC’s Office of Research Services, Innovation and Entrepreneurship has generated millions of dollars in funding through five applied research centres to support local small- and medium-sized enterprises.

He valued and believed students were the core of the success of Durham College, and he acted accordingly. He worked tirelessly to support its exponential growth; the college has seen more than \$300 million invested in new buildings, improvements and renovations during his term as president.

His student-focused leadership has made DC thrive, increasing full and part-time students to over 30,000.

Not only is that significant for recruitment purposes, but also for Durham Region creating an economic impact of a staggering \$1 billion on our

and his strong relationships with students, employees and alumni are evident in everything he does." states Linda Flynn, associate vice president, Office of Development and Alumni Affairs. "He has made a tremendous impact on DC and on the college sector with his bold vision and our community is better for it."

Be Yourself

I went on to ask him what his advice to students would be.

“..be yourself..”

Look for an employer where you can be yourself. If you try to reinvent yourself for that big job, eventually your true personality and your true value will come out."

That piece of advice has since stayed with me, "Go to the job and employer where you can be yourself."

Lovisa's Next Steps

What will Lovisa do post-retirement? He is going to "live with purpose", a mantra he is no stranger to. His adventure will first begin with some travel and then a cross-country 13,000 km ride from Kelowna, B.C., to Charlottetown, P.E.I.



Don Lovisa celebrating the 2023 graduating class at convocation, with his signature green neon glasses on! (Vincent)

on a motorcycle that will span about five weeks. He will be kept busy enjoying his children, six grandchildren and not surprisingly, has already been invited to sit on several boards.

From his strategic initiatives that financially stabilized the college to creating surplus and launching the college into the forefront of college education to the challenges he navigated with grit and transparency, Lovisa's tenure has indeed

been an exciting journey of achievement and innovation.

Thank you, Don, for your incredible service. You showed us how together we could truly lead the way! 🇺🇸