

Cambridge Probus club marks 25 years as first in North America

CAMBRIDGE — Dr. Bert Grapes may have been a surgeon, but 25 years ago he helped with the birth of the first Probus Club in North America.

The world-wide organization for retired businesspeople was expanding. A pitch was made at the February 1987 Cambridge Rotary Club meeting, where Grapes was a long-time member.

“Ninety-nine per cent of people in Canada didn’t know anything about it,” Grapes said. But he did, after a recent visit to New Zealand — where a family friend was a Probus member.

Grapes sent out about 40 invitation letters to men he knew in Cambridge who might be interested in a Probus club. The response was an immediate yes. Retired accountant Bert Klinkhammer was elected the first president.

“Those original people quickly became 140 or 150 people within a month or two,” Grapes said.

The Cambridge Probus Club received its charter within two months, holding an inaugural meeting March 27, 1987.

Probus — short for

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-iness — started in 1966 in England. It was created by retired businesspeople wanting to maintain friendships built up over decades at work, without the work of a hands-on service club like Rotary, Grapes said. The clubs spread to New Zealand and Australia through the 1970s and early 1980s.

The Cambridge club was the first in North America. Now there are some 4,000 worldwide — 217 of them in Canada.

Probus Cambridge is one of a dozen clubs today across Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo, for men only, women only, or mixed membership.

Grapes, 86, retired from Rotary in 1996, after 50 years as a member. He didn’t immediately join Probus. He wanted a break from meetings. Within two years, however, he was a member of the Probus club that he helped create.

The appeal is simple, Grapes said. “Companionship, conviviality, entertainment. I think that covers it.”

March 28, he’s scheduled to present an oral history of the Cambridge Probus, at its 25th anniversary meeting.

Cambridge has 125 members. Meetings start at 9:30 a.m. on the last Wednesday of the month. The newest member is always expected to talk for about 45 minutes about himself, his family and history. After coffee break, a guest speaker takes the microphone.

The meeting is done by noon, but often members informally head out for lunch at a restaurant to continue the conversation, Grapes said.

Social outings are also arranged through the year, like taking in a play at Stratford.

Current president George Barrie didn’t take long to join after leaving the family farm south of Cambridge. He’s been president for three years now.

“I looked around for things to do; it’s a very sociable group ... it’s great organization to meet a lot of people I’ve heard of,” Barrie said.

Retired Salvation Army officer Ivan Robinson treasures his time at Probus. He’s the club archivist, collecting documents and items from over the years and preparing historical displays.

“The top thing would be the fellowship of all the guys. It’s great to be among this bunch of 120 fellas who are full of stories and stuff.”

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Club archivist Ivan Robinson, with a Probus sign, at his Cambridge home. The club marks its 25th anniversary this month.