

A special year to focus on being Canadian

Londoner Peter Jaffe reflects on what it has meant to be named an Officer of the Order of Canada

By Sean Meyer
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RIDEAU HALL

Peter Jaffe is used to giving a lot of thought to just what it means to be Canadian.

After all, as the son of immigrants who escaped Nazis Germany in 1938, Mr. Jaffe still remembers the words of his father who often told him how much a debt he owed to Canada for taking the family in.

After being named an Officer of the Order of Canada last year, and finally picking up his medal from Governor General Michaëlle Jean, on Friday, June 18, Mr. Jaffe says his thoughts will be focused not only on his country or the work he has done to support victims of violence, but also on an unspoken debt to his parents.

"Every Canada Day, as the son of an immigrant, is special. It reminds you what is so special about the country. I think this Canada Day will bring with it an even greater level of reflection. My dad was very patriotic and raised my two sisters and I with a sense that we owed the country a debt of gratitude and that we could never do enough in terms of public service," Mr. Jaffe says. "So (receiving the award) meant a lot to me. Both my parents have passed away. So to me, to be symbolically recognized by my country, it was like I could say to my parents in the Heavens above that I had repaid my debt. Not that I was going to stop working of course. So it meant a lot."

The Order of Canada was created in 1967, during Canada's centennial year, to recognize a lifetime of outstanding achievement, dedication to the community and service to the nation. Since its creation, more than 5,000 people from all sectors of society have been invested into the Order.

Mr. Jaffe, who has worked for decades to improve the ways in which cases of family violence and the abuse of women and children are dealt with in Canada's legal, educational and social service systems, had never really thought about being honoured for doing the work he cares so much about.

However, that didn't stop others from making sure those honours were finally sent his way.

"I ran into a friend one day in the grocery store, that was four years ago, I had known her for many years, she said she was always reading about me in the newspaper, all the work I do and she said I should get the Order of Canada. I said no, I enjoy everything I do; I don't need awards," Mr. Jaffe says. "Then I didn't hear anything from her until one day she said she emailed me to say she was pursuing this. So then, about a year ago, the phone at my desk rings, it was the Governor General's office, to tell me I had been made an Officer of the Order of Canada."

It was a moment that Mr. Jaffe says made him think back to not only his parents, but also the issue he has fought against for nearly 40 years.

"It was quite an overwhelming feeling. Two things raced through my mind. One was about being an immigrant kid. The other was that the issues I deal with aren't very popular. When you are dealing with violence and abuse, people don't often want to talk to you at a party," Mr. Jaffe says. "So to me it recognizes the issues. I am recognized as an individual, but it also recognizes the many women – and some men – who have been doing this work without much recognition or support until recently. It legitimizes an area of study."

It wasn't until early last month that Mr. Jaffe, the academic director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario, received his invitation from the Governor General's office to pick up his medal. Mr. Jaffe was among the 45 honourees who received their Order of Canada medals during a ceremony at Rideau Hall (which has been the official residence and workplace of every governor general since 1867), in Ottawa, Friday, June 18.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Jaffe says the trip to Rideau Hall – indeed the entire ceremony – was an overwhelming experience.

"Being inside a building that is so historic, filled with Canadian art, portraits of famous Canadians. And the ceremony itself is very formal. You get called to the front of the room where the Governor General and her husband are sitting. You bow and she signals for you to come forward. They read the reasons why you are being given the award. And then she beckons you back and puts the medal around your neck," Mr. Jaffe says. "That moment made it all very real. There were 45 people recognized that day. There are different levels to it, which I didn't appreciate. There is becoming a member. Then there is an officer, of which there were 10 of us. And there is one companion. So you are sitting there the whole time, waiting your turn, and you realize the vastness of this country."

Mr. Jaffe says the medal ceremony also gave him the opportunity to reflect on the contributions of his fellow nominees, as well as, his own place among them.

"They recognized one of the first aboriginal women to teach non-aboriginal students, the first aboriginal woman to lead a province or territory, there were engineers who invented a kind of cable bridge. So you appreciate the vastness of the country, but then you also appreciate the number of people who contribute to the country in a variety of ways, through philanthropy, through engineering," Mr. Jaffe says. "There was a geneticist recognized for a discovery he made. There was the country singer, Carroll Baker, who has 10 number one hits and has done a lot of fundraising efforts for various foundations. So you really appreciate the fabric of society in terms of all the people who contribute; who are pioneers in the work they do."

And even though he was sitting there among all these remarkable people – as a fellow honoureee nonetheless – that Mr. Jaffe says he still felt somewhat out of place.

"I never feel like I belong. Even though I am 61 now I still feel like a 25-year-old maverick. I feel like I am a troublemaker. I feel like I have always been the boy who said the emperor has no clothes. I have always challenged authority. I still feel like that person who is challenging people to see the world in a different way," Mr. Jaffe says. "So I looked around the room, I looked at other people, and they all seemed so well established. Even though I am probably older or as old than some of them, they all felt older than me, more well established than me."

Although Mr. Jaffe says he struggled somewhat with his place among his fellow honours, he much more easily shifted his thoughts to all the people who have been working on the same issues, on the same streets, to far less fanfare than he was receiving.

"An event like this makes you reflect on your life. It makes you reflect on what you have done, what you have been a part of. I also couldn't help but reflect on other people I work with, who often don't get recognized in the same way. I do feel a certain level of humility," Mr. Jaffe says. "I have been at this since '73. My first exposure to this issue was working with the London police in 1973. So we are talking 37 years ago. I started work with the family consulting service, responding to domestic violence calls. I can certainly see there has been a change. But I can also recall back then when nobody was talking about these issues and you in fact paid a price for speaking out."

When his time came to be called before the Governor General, Mr. Jaffe says it was remarkable how quickly she was able to put him at ease.

"By the time my turn came, I was awestruck, I felt frozen in time. It was a very intimate moment. The Governor General is a very unique individual. She lives in the moment, is very genuine and caring. When she was congratulating me she talked about the award and what it meant," Mr. Jaffe says. "It was very personal; she said how important the work was. And she said to me that we need more men like you involved in this work. Then she puts the medal around your neck, you turn around, and there is a bank of cameras and television cameras. It didn't go by quickly. She is very unique in the sense she makes you live in the moment. I have spent a lot of time with people in political offices, CEOs. Many of them have short attention spans, seem less than genuine. But the depth of character and caring she has is very special."

Following the ceremony and a later reception on the lawn at Rideau Hall, the medal recipients and their invited guests were invited back for a dinner in their honour. It was at this time Mr. Jaffe found there were more unforgettable memories about to happen.

"I was very blessed to be sitting at the table with the Governor General. You show up and you don't know where you are going to be sitting. They split up the recipients and their special guests. So I ended up at the table with the Governor General, with John Manley (the former deputy prime minister under Jean Chretien) and a number of award recipients who had all done amazing things. So that was very special," Mr. Jaffe says. "Once you sit down with the Governor General, even though you are in the presence of royalty, she is very down to Earth. She talks about her job, about the dilemmas of the war in Afghanistan. Those aren't conversations you get to be a part of everyday."

Perhaps the final highlight of the evening involved another conversation with the Governor General, but it was one Mr. Jaffe says he could have had with just about anybody else.

"So some time around 10 p.m. I had savored enough of the evening and thought it was time to say goodnight. So I found the Governor General and was able to talk with her for a few minutes, to thank her for a most incredible day. At that point we were talking about everyday things. It was no different than talking to one of my neighbours about trying to organize piano lessons for their children," Mr. Jaffe says. "We had gone from talking about the war in Afghanistan to talking about how important music is to children. It was just like talking to my next-door neighbour. She was so down to Earth. It was one of the highlights of my day."