

COFFEE WITH: Man of many chapters

By Kevin Diakiw - February 03, 2008

Many know Ed Griffin as the creator of the Surrey Writers' Conference, but the transplanted American has numerous careers under his belt.

All his life, he's been on a mission to help those less-fortunate. While avenues to achieve that have differed, Ed Griffin has been unwavering in purpose. His professional journey began in 1962 as the priest of a small Roman Catholic church in Cleveland, Ohio. The diocese sensed trouble from the outset, when Griffin began to question some of the central tenets of the church, particularly the attitude towards those most in need.

Griffin was uncomfortable with the way blacks were being treated in the U.S., and joined a march with Dr. Martin Luther King. The local bishop was unimpressed, and Griffin was told he was "causing a disturbance in the suburbs." He had his parish taken away and was sent to a street ministry in the central city: a ghetto.

Griffin was saddened to see babies living in rat-infested homes, people without housing, and most without any health coverage. He implored the church for help. Time and again, the diocese declined.

Griffin discarded the cloth, and went to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he obtained a masters degree in social work. Then, in 1972, another sharp departure.

Griffin won a seat on Milwaukee city council, where he served a term of four years. Around the same time, he began teaching writing at a local prison, planting the seed for some of his later work. The experience of getting elected was an important turning point in his life, imparting a vital message about his personal value. The church told him he was not worthy, and needed to seek redemption. Being elected to civic office told him different.

But once again, disheartened by the lack of aid for the city's neediest, Griffin chose not to run for office again. For the next 15 years, he operated a greenhouse business, first in Milwaukee, then north of the border, in Cloverdale. The American-born Griffin and his wife enjoyed Canada so much, they decided to move here.

His business was peaceful and profitable, but Griffin wasn't happy.

"I was running a greenhouse and realizing I was becoming a vegetable."

In the early 1990s, he went to a writers' conference in Seattle and thought Surrey could easily support such an event. In 1993, he started the first Surrey International Writers Conference (SIWC), with about 100 people showing up to the first year's event. The numbers are now in the thousands.

In 2001, Griffin completed his first book, titled *Beyond the Vows*. The main protagonist, JP Lacey, is a priest conflicted by his calling and a world mired in injustice. That priest was based on Griffin's life.

For almost a decade prior to writing that book, he was going to Matsqui Prison to teach inmates the art of writing. He also convinced SIWC speaker and renowned author Dianna Gabaldon to do the same when she visits.

Griffin went on to write a popular hit *Prisoners of Williwaw*, about 300 prisoners released onto Adak Island, in the Aleutians off Alaska. Besides being a rich description with well-developed characters, Griffin manages to use it as a critique of our current prison system.

The guys in jail loved it, Griffin says.

His latest, titled *The Veto*, details the life of a U.N. bureaucrat who challenges the veto votes held by five countries. At first, it appears to be a complete departure from his previous work, a perception he quickly challenges. It's the little guy fighting for justice against the big guys. A theme for his life as well as his books.

