

CITIZEN OF THE WORLD

John Peters Humphrey

Nearly 50 years have passed since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations. The Declaration was one of the first major achievements of the United Nations, and remains a powerful instrument that continues to exert an enormous effect on people's lives all over the world. Hailed by Eleanor Roosevelt as the Magna Carta of mankind, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted by Canadian John Peters Humphrey.

"Mr. Humphrey was a great Canadian who worked tirelessly to promote and protect freedoms, which many of us take for granted," said John Crompton, Director and CEO of the National Arts Centre (NAC), in Ottawa, during the opening of a 1998 Festival Canada exhibition marking the life and times of this extraordinary Canadian. "He was a man whose ideas and writings changed the world."

Born in Hampton, New Brunswick, in 1905, John Humphrey faced personal tragedy early, losing his arm in an accident at age six, and both his parents by age 11. He overcame these obstacles and achieved success first as a student and then as a professor of law at McGill University in Montreal. His values were further shaped by the critical events of his generation — the Great Depression and World War II.

In 1946, Mr. Humphrey was appointed Director of the United Nations Division of Human Rights. In 1947, he wrote the first draft of the Declaration, a 400-page document that served as the basic working paper for an eight-member drafting committee. It was the first time that human rights and fundamental freedoms had been set forth in such detail. On December 10, 1948, after much debate, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights —

"a vision of how the world should be" — was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly.

Mr. Humphrey, academic, humanitarian and international public servant, considered himself both a Canadian nationalist and a citizen of the world, and felt that these two beliefs were not incompatible. He celebrated the human spirit and worked throughout his life to share the message of human rights.

John Humphrey and Eleanor Roosevelt.



photo: Estate of John P. Humphrey

He believed that "there is a fundamental connection between human rights and peace. We will have peace on earth when everyone's rights are respected."

After his retirement from the United Nations, John Humphrey became:

- a founding member and the first president of the National Section of Amnesty International in Canada, in 1973;
- one of the founders of the Canadian Human Rights Foundation;
- Vice-President of the International Commission of Jurists;
- a member of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, in 1970;
- a member of the Board of Directors of the International League of the Rights of Man;
- President of the World Conference on Religion and Peace/Canada;
- a member of the Conseil d'administration, Société québécoise de droit international; and
- an Honorary Member of the War Amputees of Canada.

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JOHN PETERS HUMPHREY

died in 1995.

His legacy to the world, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, still continues to inspire individuals and nations.

photo: Eliza Massey

Courtesy of Dr. Margaret Kunstler Humphrey