Chapter Activist Profile
Mary McCandless, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Located at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, Manitoba’s capital city is steeped in a long tradition of radical politics – from the Red River Rebellion of the 1860s to the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. Mary McCandless is the chapter chair of the Winnipeg Chapter, one of the many activist groups keeping Winnipeg’s radical tradition alive in the 21st century.

How did the Winnipeg Chapter get started?
In 2008, community concern started to grow around the municipal government’s plans to create a city-owned corporate utility and a public-private partnership with Veolia [a private multinational water company] to manage the city’s water and wastewater services. The Winnipeg Chapter, which had been inactive for some time, was rejuvenated for the fight and joined with many other groups in the defence of our public wastewater services. The chapter brought an enthusiastic new perspective to Winnipeg activism.

The campaign to keep Winnipeg’s water system public was the chapter’s major focus for a number of years. What did you learn from that campaign?
Focusing on a single, close-to-home issue helped to rebuild a strong core membership over time. Through co-operation with partner groups, we achieved some significant victories in the campaign. As new details of the deal were released and important aspects changed, we needed to remain flexible and try to react in a timely manner. Sometimes we missed the mark, but we always stayed focused and regrouped for the next action.

What campaigns or initiatives is the chapter currently involved in?
We’ve been very active in supporting the campaigns to save the Canadian Wheat Board and the Experimental Lakes Area, and also stood with Occupy Winnipeg and now Idle No More. After focusing much of our efforts over the last two years on stopping the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) in Manitoba, we are now turning our attention to improved collaboration between local activist groups, water issues, and preparation for the 2014 municipal election.

The chapter has used creative actions to highlight issues. What are some of the creative things you’ve done, and why do you think it’s important in your activism?
During our CETA campaign, “CETA Clause” sent each MLA a Christmas letter accompanied by a gift-wrapped lump of coal to emphasize the potential effect of CETA on the local economy. For Valentine’s Day we delivered an enormous heart created from 300 of the 3,000 “Keep Manitoba out of CETA” postcards. Each MLA also received an individual heart with a message of love for Manitoba, and we made a video of the whole action. During Occupy Winnipeg, we set up a tent, pinned our banner to it, and held chapter meetings nearby as a way to publicly support Occupy and connect with a whole new group of dedicated activists. Each time we engage creatively, we reach observers in a direct and memorable way. The security guards tasked with escorting us around the Legislature slipped easily from laughing about our giant Valentine’s heart to a conversation about CETA.
Conservative-leaning friends and co-workers enjoyed the joke of our “down-town office” turning out to be an old tent at Occupy, and through that opening became more willing to learn more about the reasons for Occupy. It all leads to communication and co-operation between people who might not normally have had anything meaningful to say to each other.

Another area the Winnipeg Chapter has really excelled at is in using online and social media in its campaigns. What advice would you give to other chapters expanding their online activism? We keep connected to our growing network of collaborators through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and our website. We also have begun to dabble with newer social media like Diaspora and Tumblr. We use our Facebook group for open discussion amongst members, even to the point of almost never deleting posts. The Facebook page is for chapter announcements. Whenever we release a blog, or launch an action, we send a mass message to our ever-growing email list, then post to the Facebook page and share it with the group, and then “like” and share on our own walls, while doing the same in Twitter. It’s an effective way to reach a large audience using our own networks.

For more information about how to join a chapter in your area, visit our website at www.canadians.org or call us toll-free at 1-800-387-7177.