

# PASSING THE TORCH

Interview with Canadian Picture Pioneers President Greg Mason

BY CHAD KENNERK

→ The longest-serving nonprofit within the Canadian movie industry, the Canadian Picture Pioneers (CPP), has supported exhibitors and industry professionals across Canada for over 80 years, serving as the community support network of the Canadian film industry. Since its foundation in 1940, the CPP has provided financial assistance and educational support to industry members across Canada. Each year, the CPP hosts a series of fundraising events—including an annual golf tournament and November’s Canadian Picture Pioneers Awards Dinner—raising money for the CPP Trust Fund and Student Assistance Awards program.

Appointed as the CPP’s new president in the summer of 2023, Greg Mason previously served on the CPP board of directors for 16 years, five of those as vice president. He brings a wealth of exhibition experience to the non-profit, having previously held the role of vice president of marketing for Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures Canada, as well as marketing and sales roles within Cineplex, Coca-Cola, and The Walt Disney Company. **BOXOFFICE PRO** spoke with Mason about the 2023 Canadian Picture Pioneers Awards Dinner, taking place November 16, and CPP’s mission to provide assistance, build industry relationships, and cultivate the next generation of pioneers within the Canadian motion picture industry.

## Can you share a little about the history of the CPP?

Canadian Picture Pioneers has been around for 80 years. When the Motion Picture Pioneers started in the U.S. [in 1939], there were a few Canadian members in attendance. [Today, that group

has evolved into the Will Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation.] A gentleman by the name of Oscar Hanson came back to Canada and said, “We absolutely need to do a Canadian equivalent of Motion Picture Pioneers.” The very first meeting happened on January 31, 1940 at the King Edward Hotel—which is still around today—and the association was formed. It’s amazing to me that the priorities [CPP began with] back in 1940 really haven’t changed much today. With all the change that’s happened [in the industry]... it still really boils down to supporting the community, building those relationships, and passing the torch to the next generation. Much has changed, but the essence of that historical mandate still holds tight.

## How does the CPP provide financial assistance, foster relationships, and cultivate the passing of the torch to the next generation of pioneers?

There are three ways that we look at things. One is [that] ... we are the industry’s community support network. In its 80 years of service to the Canadian industry, the CPP has provided over \$4 million in charitable assistance. That can [include financial assistance to] members that have fallen under hard times. Recently, we had a hurricane hit out on the East Coast, and some members needed help with homes that were swept away. We truly try to be there to support the industry in times of need.

Secondly, one of the things that I think is incredibly special is building and fostering relationships and the community of the Canadian industry. The industry has gotten smaller and smaller, with fewer studios and the consolidation of the exhibition landscape, but it remains so important that we know one another, that we

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have people to call upon for like-for-like problems or support. Building those great relationships that will help career paths for so many young people. I was always amazed by that when I first landed in this industry, that competitors get together and bond for the good of the industry and for charitable work. I thought, “What a lovely sentiment. What a great approach for keeping this industry tight and for looking after one another.”

The third is really about the future and the next generation of pioneers. I think, especially as some of us get older, we are always thinking about the next generation and what it’s going to look like. How do we continue this great organization, and how do we ensure that the industry remains vibrant and exciting, bringing in great talent across the landscape of Canada? We do that through our networking events, but we also do it through [our] Student Assistance Program, where we award 25 students annually a \$5,000 scholarship towards their studies. That has been incredibly successful. It’s judged blindly, and it’s amazing how beautifully it comes out, representing the entire country, [geographically and in its span of] ethnicities and preferences. It’s really special how that happens.

This year we launched the Canadian Picture Pioneers Internship Program. We partnered with Universal Studios and hired an intern for the summer who was placed [there]. The intern worked in multiple departments and got to learn aspects of the industry: distribution, marketing, publicity, and promotions. The intern was then brought in to help out with Canadian Picture Pioneers events in the summer. We also introduced [them] to our friends at the Toronto International Film Festival, so they’re going to be involved in TIFF. This



individual gets a really terrific taste of the industry, and people within the industry get to know them. We hope that will lead to employment, growth, and development. Ultimately, we love the way this program has played out. We'd like to broaden this in future years with other companies. We think there's much more to come.

**What are some of CPP's recent successes and achievements?**

One of the biggest things was getting through Covid. [Universal Studios executive] Jason Fulsom was our amazing president who successfully steered us through those times. There were a lot of industry members out of work, especially at the theater level. We were very quick to respond. We really wanted to not just wait for calls, but to reach out to those affected. Getting through that was certainly a big feather in the cap of Jason and the team at Canadian Picture Pioneers.

We also just came off of our annual golf tournament, [held September 20 in Québec]. That went very, very well. Our annual awards dinner is in November, and this year we have three award honorees. And then, finally, the other piece that has changed, is we have a new executive director, Melissa Pressacco. [She's] following in the footsteps of John Freeborn, our amazing past executive director, who has rightfully headed toward some retirement years and projects. She had previously been at Cineplex and has years of amazing experience, from a communications standpoint as well as in how to create events and bring people together. She's such a warm personality and really embodies what it means to be a Canadian Picture Pioneers member, so we're thrilled to have her on. She's about eight months in, and we love the new insights and the direction that she's bringing.

**Speaking of insights, you bring a wealth of exhibition experience to your role as president. How did you get started in the industry?**

I started in the industry with Disney back in 1994. I was with Disney on the cinema partnership side and looked after all the exhibitors. *The Lion King*, *Angels in the Outfield*, and *I Love Trouble* [came out in] my first summer. I was immediately very interested in the Canadian Picture Pioneers. I would go to all of the events. I remember going to my first golf



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tournament and to the awards dinner. I was thrilled with the fact that you could meet other people within the industry and that this industry came together for a greater good.

Within about five or six years, I went to Coca-Cola. I did traditional packaged goods marketing, as well as some sales, but I always had the entertainment accounts. I worked with AMC, Cineplex, and the Scotiabank Centre sports arena here in Toronto. The entertainment accounts were where I focused the most. In fact, if I remember correctly, that was when I became an official member of the Canadian Picture Pioneers, because at the time you had to have five years of experience before you could apply.

I had worked with Cineplex while at Coca-Cola, and I was tasked to lead their marketing as they came out of bankruptcy back in 2002. Then I went on my own for a year, and I set up my company, Mason Marketing Solutions. We pitched



Disney on improving their box office in Canada [by] hiring our little company. Unbeknownst to me, Disney was thinking of setting up a brand new team in Canada. In typical Disney fashion, they don't like to share you with anybody else, so they asked me if I would come aboard and set up a whole new team. It was just too good of an opportunity. I had a great first year on my own, but to lead Disney from a marketing perspective in Canada was too enticing.

I remained for 14 years and led the studio marketing team across three acquisitions: Fox, Lucasfilm, and Pixar. All the marketing integration and marketing campaigns across hundreds of titles. It was a terrific run, and I wrapped up in November of last year. I have a great relationship with Disney. I'm still very much in touch with them.

I restarted my company, and now, with Mason Marketing Solutions, we have multiple clients, half of which are in the entertainment industry. I joined the Executive Board of the Pioneers and became a vice president five years ago when Jason Fulsom stepped in to be president. I then got much more involved on the executive side. When Jason felt his term was up, I stepped into the president role. That still seems crazy to me, because I have such respect for the past presidents that I know so well—Jason Fulsom, Cathy Watson, Phil May—all of whom have done amazing things and who are all very good friends in the industry. So it's a real privilege to be in their seat.

**We talked a little bit about the foundational priorities of the CPP. What are some of your specific goals moving forward?**

[Supporting] the next generation is particularly important for a couple of reasons. One, it's always important for continuity. With all the consolidation in the industry, we need to keep pushing for new members to join, to get involved, and to realize that the CPP is here for them in times of need. It's getting people out that very first time and saying, "Come out to an event. Volunteer. What are your skill sets?" What I have to get better at is tapping people on the shoulder who have certain attributes. Somebody who's an expert in digital, maybe they want to help us with our website. Or someone who's really good on the event side, maybe they'll help us with our awards dinner this year. I think people



**Above:** Greg Mason (l) with Souheir Terrah, marketing manager for Cinémas Ciné Entreprise, and Raffaele Papalia, président, Cinémas Ciné Entreprise

are very willing to help once they realize they're being asked for a skill set that they already have.

**CPP has a number of fundraising efforts throughout the year, including the annual Pioneer of the Year Award Dinner. Who are this year's award winners?**

Jason Fulsom is our Canadian Picture Pioneer of the Year. He is our former president and the head of distribution for Universal Studios, Canada. He's a brilliant leader who has done so much for the Pioneers. We had so much support pushing for him to get the award, so we're really excited that he's up for that top honor this year. Our 2023 Silver Spotlight award winners are Kylie Bechberger and Carrie Wolfe. Kylie Bechberger is the head of theatrical distribution for VVS Films and is the co-director of Pioneering Women in Canada. That's an amazing group—all that they do to bring out their communities, support CPP events, as well as create their own [events] and encourage women to continue joining this industry and support one another has been incredible. Carrie Wolfe is a long-standing member of the industry. She worked at Alliance Atlantis and currently is a conference producer of the annual [trade show] ShowCanada, which is our version of CinemaCon. It's a great year for people that we think very, very highly of. They're all good friends and colleagues. ■

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