

Untitled

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He shuffles up to the microphone during a Cote Saint-Luc council meeting with one hand in his pocket, the other holding a torn, scribbled-on piece of paper.

In an articulate voice that fluctuates little in tone, Avrom Shtern, 45, begins to explain how if the cottonwood trees bordering the Meadowbrook Golf Course were to be cut down, the golf course's soil would no longer stay hydrated and the whole mini-ecosystem would be thrown off, a danger to the city's flora and fauna.

He wants to know what exactly the Cote Saint-Luc mayor plans on doing about it.

While Shtern says he's usually an afraid, shy and reserved individual, it's hardly noticeable when watching him in action. Mike Cohen, a Cote Saint-Luc city councilor, said that despite Shtern's disheveled appearance, he comes across as a "very articulate and very serious man" who presents a solid case.

"I wish there were more citizens who felt it was a civic duty to come to public meetings, I think it's important that people like him are at every meeting, asking questions and keeping council sharp," said Cohen.

Shtern is a devoted environmentalist. His brother, Yona Shtern, calls him the "single most dedicated human" he has ever met and points out that, no matter what, Avrom always gives "100 per cent of himself."

Shtern maximizes his time researching and lobbying for the environment, but he also points out that each council meeting takes time, money and energy, and that every meeting takes a little bit more out of you.

As a part time English as Second Language teacher for adults in the community, he said he had to make many career oriented and financial sacrifices to be able to volunteer his time.

"There's a finite amount of energy a person has and even I have to recuperate mentally and spiritually. You have to psyche yourself up," said Shtern, "I mean it's not as hard for me now to do public speaking. The first few times my heart would pound and I'd have butterflies in my stomach ... but not so much anymore. I'm more relaxed and I think [to myself] these are just people, they're not going to kill me!"

Within his identity as environmental activist, as most of the city knows him by, Shtern finds time to recharge by listening to Shakira, pop music, 60's romance songs, and watching one of his favorite T.V. shows, *Battlestar Galactica*, which he calls his "gritty" sci-fi indulgence.

Shtern moved to Cote Saint-Luc in 1962 and was raised by his aunt and uncle in a house nestled next to the railways. While he was still a toddler, his aunt began to teach him the respect he now has for nature.

"My late aunt always said to me, 'what are you doing?' 'Don't tear out that blade of grass, it's also a living thing!' said Shtern.

Looking back into childhood, Shtern says his first project in grade school was about trees and that he had always grown up in nature. His brother, Yona Shtern, said they must of "[explored every] underdeveloped part of Cote Saint-Luc. [We would] go into the woods [and] check out the railroad tracks. I don't think there was a stone left unturned." Shtern said he's also always been aware of nature's beauty. "I used to look at a tree and wonder if it spoke or talked, because there's that beautiful whisper of the cottonwood and the aspens."

In 1984, a year after graduating with a B.A in Political Science, Shtern traveled to the Carmel Mountains near the Israeli coast, to spend time on a farming *kibbutz* with the goal of getting his hands dirty in nature and perhaps pursuing small-scale farming once back in Canada.

Shtern said he usually found himself working in the tube factory instead of at the farm, as he had wanted to and shortly after he returned to Montreal and began his graduate studies at McGill. In 1987, he graduated with a Master's in Library and Information Studies.

Back in Canada, Shtern became truly engrossed in the environment when a plan pushed by the community to cut down the cottonwood trees bordering the Meadowbrook golf course, one of Cote Saint-Luc's only green spaces cradling the old St-Pierre River, rankled people.

Shtern jumped on the nature-conscious bandwagon by protesting with an environmentalist group, the Friends of Meadowbrook, against its destruction.

Shtern had to leave environmental work in the late 1980s when his father fell sick. But, at a massive eco-event hosted by the Friends of Meadowbrook in 2004, which brought awareness to the continued fight over the protection of the 'green space' golf course, Shtern jumped in the fray and began to volunteer again.

Another eco-friendly group in Cote Saint-Luc, the Green Coalition, also asked him to join as board member and, ever since, Shtern has been sticking his nose into any eco-unfriendly legislation threatened by the mayor of Cote Saint-Luc, as well as collaborating with the council to implement new ideas, such as tree felling bylaws and the preservation of Meadowbrook's natural ecosystem.

For a self-proclaimed shy guy, Shtern still holds strong opinions about the community. With a rare chuckle, he says he's nicknamed Cote Saint-Luc's not so environmentally inclined citizens "N.I.M.B.Ys" or "not-in-my-backyard people," since they protest against high overnight parking pass fees, own garages full of SUV's and lobby to have cottonwood trees cut down because the fluff blocks their pools. At the same time, one of Shtern's favorite TV shows, the O.C., features individuals who are far from eco-friendly.

Shtern also has a passion for trains and trams. Like the Green Party, he is pushing for the revitalization of railways for eco-friendly and efficient passenger travel and the construction of an "electric-light railway," a cross between a tram and a metro, to border the old CN railways tracks near the Deux-Montagnes commuter line. Another one of his 'dream' projects is the implementation of an energy-efficient tramcar system in the city of Montreal, which would reduce car usage, decrease commuting-time, and promote collective public transport.

Shtern's philosophy of life is a taste of determination and self-confidence not readily apparent in his self-presentation, but definitely, something many people could learn from and apply to their own lives.

"It's not good enough to bitch about something and to cry about it. I really think you have to go out and change things. Now, is it going to change things immediately? Probably not, but if you do plant a seed, an idea, somewhere it'll catch on eventually," concluded Shtern.