

Durham Catholic District School Board

## Archbishop Denis O'Connor Catholic High School

**Motto: Nil Sine Fide Et Labore**  
**("Nothing Is Accomplished without Faith and Work")**



### In the Beginning

Archbishop Denis O'Connor High School began as the dream of Father Leo J. Austin, pastor of St. John the Evangelist Parish, who was very aware of the value of having a Catholic high school in Whitby. The first step to realizing that dream was taken in 1962, when 22 Grade 9 students were housed in St. John Elementary School, with Sister Anna Clare, a Grey Sister of the Immaculate Conception, as principal and teacher. In 1963, the construction of Denis O'Connor High School began. During this year, the Grade 9 and 10 classes were located in St. John School and the St. John's church basement, with Sister Mary Diane joining Sister Anna Clare as staff.

The school's name was chosen as a fitting commemoration of Archbishop Denis O'Connor's association with both St. John's Parish, Whitby, and with the Archdiocese of Toronto. Denis O'Connor was a Basilian priest, educator, and the third Archbishop of Toronto. Our school name is a memorial to a humble, devout man of great ability who rose from Durham Region to one of the highest offices of the Roman Catholic Church in Canada. In fact, as Archbishop of Toronto, Denis O'Connor paid an important visit to Whitby on May 21, 1903, to dedicate the town's new Catholic church at Palace and John streets, where he blessed the altar stone of St. John's.

It was not long before the name of the school was abbreviated, becoming affectionately known as "DO'C." On February 28, 1964, staff and students moved into the new building, which was officially blessed and opened in October of that year by Monsignor Denis O'Connor, nephew of the school's namesake and pastor of St. John's Church, Toronto. In that same year, Sean Kelly became the first of many dedicated lay teachers who worked with the Grey Sisters at DO'C.

In 1965, the Denis O'Connor Private High School Board was formed, with J.K. Ledden as its chairman. Its first major venture was the construction of a five-room addition connected to the existing red brick building by a covered walkway (the "Breezeway"). By this time the staff had grown to five, with classes now including Grades 9 to 12, with Grade 13 projected for the following year. The addition was opened and blessed in May 1966 by Archbishop Pocock in time for the first Grade 13 students to use it.

### **The Whitby Years (1964–1984)**

"May your spiritual goodness light up the darkness for others who choose to surround themselves with only technological knowledge while forgetting to reach out to the infinite reality. Lift your gaze to the Creator of all existent material things... Above all, may all of you be serious minded students who will, now and in the years to come, be the living proof that Denis O'Connor High School deservedly ranks high with both God and man."

*—Father Leo J. Austin, from his Pastor's Message to the first graduating class, 1967*

Father Leo J. Austin – the founder and original chairman of Denis O'Connor High School – wrote a *Pastor's Message*, an open letter, to the students of DO'C that was published in the school's first yearbook in Canada's Centennial year, 1967. The letter contains a fascinating firsthand account of the creation and germination of this school. Father Austin invites us to look in on the

conference table of His Grace, Archbishop Philip F. Pocock, on a wintry evening in 1961:

Around the table were: the Chief shepherd of the Archdiocese; the pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church; and a small group of laymen of St. John's. A copy of the "Brief on Catholic Higher Education in Whitby" was placed before each one present.

Previously His Grace had had time to study this work. He requested my considered answer as to whether I still believed that our parish could conduct and maintain a high school. From all present he requested a response to three questions, namely: "Are there men of such calibre in this parish to staff a Board of Education and enough interested people to initiate and continue this proposed school?" "Is there available a qualified community of religious for its administration?" "Is there a sufficient number of students to enrol in this co-educational high school? Will these students be a type of modern youth seeking spiritual, intellectual and physical well-being?"

The original committee that was established to provide responses to the questions Archbishop Pocock had set down, and thus bring the school into existence, consisted of Frank Canzi, Jim Ledden, Clarence Hendricks, and Des Newman as Chairman.

Des Newman, who was Mayor of Whitby from 1966 to 1975, shares some reminiscences of events in that formative time in our school's history:

This Committee met regularly with Father Austin, and Sister Anna Clare at the original Convent on John St. The meetings are memorable for many long and stubborn discussions, but it is worthy of note that without the culinary expertise of Sister Theresa Burke (then called Sister John of the Cross), Denis O'Connor High School would probably never have existed. When the meetings got hot and heavy, Sister Anna Clare would disappear and Sister John would reappear with a tray full of the most delicious pies known to man. The *pièce de résistance* was clearly her apple pie, and it soothed many a bruised ego, and took the edge off many philosophical confrontations.

As chair, Des Newman wrote to Mother St. Helena, the Superior General of the Grey Sisters in Pembroke, to request help in staffing the school. She replied on March 15, 1963:

In order that your High School will fulfill the purpose for which it is intended, it will be necessary to have competent, qualified teachers. To support you in this noble enterprise, our contribution will be to supply some qualified teachers for your staff.

That letter was all the committee needed to complete its brief to Archbishop Pocock. When His Grace met with the High School Board, all present at the meeting were enthusiastic when the Archbishop let it be known that they had his permission to begin Denis O'Connor High School.

From these early pioneering days, Denis O'Connor grew by leaps and bounds. By the 1966–1967 school year, the building of the addition and covered walkway had been completed. There were now students in all five Ontario grade levels (9 to 13) calling DO'C home, filling it with the spirit that became unique to Denis O'Connor and only intensified through the school's various stages of development. The number of staff and students increased steadily.

In 1967, Sister Margaret Mary (Mildred Moyle) took over as principal. To her was confided the task of providing for the growth and development of what was then a school community of 141 students and eight staff members – four Grey Sisters and four lay people. Sister Margaret Mary recorded some wonderful memories of those early days, including this lovely anecdote:

Fr. Austin and a battered U-Haul played a key role in my first image of Denis O'Connor. In the summer of 1967 the Roman Catholic continuation school in Eganville closed its doors. Shortly after the closing was official, Fr. Austin arrived at the doorstep of the convent with a rented U-Haul to take the now unneeded books and equipment from the closed Eganville school to Whitby. I was also part of the baggage.

In 1970, the separate school board agreed to the request of parents of Ajax, Pickering and Bay Ridges for transportation to enable their children to attend a school that endorsed and inculcated Catholic principles. This rapid growth caused numerous space problems that often required great innovation, creativity and hard work to resolve. Having a single gym meant that half of the physical education program had to be held outside, usually on the church parking lot. Ball hockey, broomball and even hurdle jumping were contingent on traffic and funeral schedules. For years there was no cafeteria, only a Bunny's food truck that would set up outside DO'C's front doors for half an

hour between visits to construction sites. As the school grew, portables were added. Years later, Sister Margaret Mary remembered the very first one:

The first portable purchased by the private high school board came from Durham College. I will always remember that July 1<sup>st</sup> when I accompanied Fr. Austin to determine the feasibility of transporting it – Father insisted that I measure some of the intersections to see if the building had to be cut in two for moving.

When storage space for phys-ed equipment became a necessity, teacher Joe Modeste was dispatched to Whitby town office and the lumberyard for a building permit and materials. With the assistance of Board maintenance men, teachers and students built the shed during their spares. When the staff room became incapable of holding new additions to the payroll, teachers came in the evening to enlarge and remodel it. Sister Margaret Mary sums up her years as principal:

These type of activities became common and developed a real sense of ownership – this is our school, we built it, we maintain it, we are proud of it. Annually in those years deliberations were made to determine if the school could operate for another year. That it did is a tribute to the commitment and sacrifice of the school community.

In 1980, Sister Mary Goulet succeeded Sister Margaret Mary (Mildred Moyle) as principal. By 1980, 15 portable classrooms had sprung up around the two core buildings; there were 30 staff and around 530 students. Denis O'Connor High School had become ridiculously overcrowded, resembling an "army barracks," according to a 1982 *Oshawa Times* article, with "portables, complete with paved sidewalks, form[ing] a miniature village." As the *Times* put it, "Their 'track' is the streets, their 'field' is the parking lot. Their 'home' soccer pitch is downtown." Much to the amusement (or bewilderment) of visiting sports teams and coaches, DO'C was still making do with a single gymnasium, similar to what an old-style elementary school would have. Tom Fitzsimmons, vice-principal at the time, told the *Oshawa Times*: "If you stand on the floor, you're in the game. If a player crashes into the wall, he's out of bounds. The wall marks the bounds." DO'C's cheering section had to cram onto the stage – there were no crowds of kids cheering from side bleachers as there were at away games.

Denis O'Connor was still the only Catholic high school between Toronto and Oshawa. Operating costs of the school were still subsidized by many fundraising projects, including the annual DO'C-a-thon, a daylong walk by the entire school to raise money, and ticket sales (such as the hockey lottery). Unlike in the public system at the time, enrolment in separate schools was increasing, yet room for expansion of the current facility was non-existent. The inevitable became clear – a new Denis O'Connor High School would have to be built in the very near future.

### **The Ajax Years (1984–present)**

“We are the inheritors of a great tradition of Catholic Education in this province. The same principles that guided Archbishop Denis O’Connor in the past are guiding us now.”

*—His Eminence Gerald Emmett Cardinal Carter, Archbishop of Toronto, at the official opening of Denis O’Connor Catholic High School, Ajax, November 18, 1984*

At a press conference on April 15, 1982, Revenue Minister George Ashe, MPP for Durham West, announced that Education Minister Bette Stephenson had allocated \$3.23 million for a new Denis O’Connor High School. Ashe had gone to bat for Earl Lagroix and the Durham Separate School Board in an attempt to secure the funding after school board trustees and administrators made a replacement school for Denis O’Connor the top priority for 1982 in their capital grant forecast.

The decision to move the school from Whitby to Ajax was prompted by a special joint agreement negotiated between the Separate School Board and the Town of Ajax. Under the agreement, the Board agreed to let the town use school facilities when available. In return, the school is permitted to use Ajax sports facilities, including playing fields and parklands near the site, for various sports programs. The town also provided some land for construction. Many Whitby residents were upset that the Board would move DO'C from the town where it had been located for 20 years. In fact, about 250 angry Whitby residents, including town councillors, turned out for a Board meeting in November 1982 to protest, but the agreement between Ajax and the school board was too good to pass up.

In September 1984, the new Archbishop Denis O’Connor Catholic High School in Ajax opened its doors to students. On the first day of school, 770 students from the towns of Pickering, Uxbridge, Ajax, Brooklin and Whitby attended classes in the new 24-room, \$3.6 million, two-storey high school, up considerably from the 550 students who closed the old DO'C in Whitby. Staff

numbers had grown from 25 to 40 over the summer. There were already portable classrooms in use on the site. As Superintendent Joe Cooper told the *Oshawa Times* in March 1984, the Durham Separate School Board had "already outgrown" the new Catholic high school before it even opened. Cooper said that the new Arch. Denis O'Connor C.H.S. in Ajax was designed for about 600 students, explaining that the ministry's policy is to allow boards to build schools only for existing students, because projections in some areas of the province can be off the mark. He told the *Times* that the Board had submitted its projected figures to the Ministry of Education about two years before some of the new housing developments existed; he added that there was tremendous excitement and enthusiasm among Grade 8 students and their parents across the Region's feeder schools for the brand new facility. According to Sister Mary Goulet, out of a school population of 770, almost 500 were Grade 9 and 10 students.

On Sunday, November 18, 1984, about 300 invited guests, friends, dignitaries and government officials gathered in the gymnasium for the official opening of the new school. His Eminence Cardinal Carter, Archbishop of Toronto, was on hand to bless the school. In his remarks to the audience, Cardinal Carter said that the school's opening signified "a new era" of commitment and co-operation for Catholic education in Ontario. He praised "the statesmanship of Premier [William] Davis" and spoke of "the responsibility that goes with equal taxation for education rights." As well as the day's speakers, the event included a ribbon-cutting ceremony, a 30-voice choir directed by Mr. Arbour, and refreshments. Before the Cardinal left the site, he blessed several crucifixes that were to be placed throughout the school.

DO'C's official opening Mass in the gymnasium for all 770 students and 40 teachers coincided with the opening of the school's chapel in early November, and was concelebrated by Bishop Robert Clune and five priests from parishes with connections to the school. The Marguerite d'Youville Chapel – named for the foundress of the Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, since the Sisters had helped found the school – allows the school to have the "presence of the Blessed Sacrament," said principal Sister Mary Goulet. The crucifix in the chapel is made of ceramic and wood – created by Montreal artist Sister Louise Labonté – and was one of several items from across the province to be blessed by Pope John Paul II on his visit to Toronto in September 1984.

The incredible growth of Arch. Denis O'Connor C.H.S. began anew in a new facility. On January 1, 1986, Tom Fitzsimmons became principal of DO'C,

replacing Sister Mary Goulet, who left to serve on the Grey Sisters' executive. Fitzsimmons had been on staff at DO'C for 18 years, with 15 of them as vice-principal. By the fall of 1985, there were 950 students at DO'C, and 1200 were expected to start the 1986–1987 school year. Within a few years of opening, there were already more portables on the site than there had been at the old DO'C.

During the first year in the new building, DO'C students and staff attended the Papal Mass at Downsview, with Mr. Arbour and the choir performing. In 1986, within just two years of opening, the additions to the original building began. The Board approved an \$800,000 addition of eight classrooms to help accommodate all those who wanted to attend DO'C. In 1986, Vice-Principal John Vesters left to open the new St. Mary Catholic Secondary School in Pickering. The DO'C-a-thon was still going strong, with the 12th annual walk in 1986 raising \$45,000 for the school.

In 1987, a huge reunion was held at Denis O'Connor to celebrate 25 years since Father Leo J. Austin had housed those 22 Grade 9 students in St. John Catholic School and the idea of DO'C had been founded. Hundreds of graduates from both the old Whitby DO'C and the Ajax DO'C attended, as did parents, former teachers and support staff, along with many of the 16 Grey Sisters who had served at the school.

Mention must be made of Sister Mary Carmel, who left her duties at DO'C in 1988 to return to Pembroke – in her 80th year. She had dedicated her life's work to God through education, and upon her official retirement 17 years earlier, she volunteered her services in DO'C's Library Resource Centre. She completed a Library Technician's course and worked tirelessly from age 63 to 80 in the library at the Whitby location and then in the new library in Ajax. In honour of Sister's expertise, dedication and services to our school, a plaque names our school archives, and the room containing them, The Sister Mary Carmel Archives.

As DO'C entered the 1990s, we celebrated with countless others around the world the canonization of Marguerite d'Youville, the first Canadian-born saint. To honour this courageous advocate for the poor, this Mother of Universal Charity, Bishop Clune celebrated Mass with the school, and Sr. Sheila Raymond, who attended the canonization in Rome, spoke on behalf of the Grey Sisters. Principal Tom Fitzsimmons was also a guest at the canonization in Rome.

There was more construction to come, as yet another addition to the school was built and completed in 1990–1991. Principal Tom Fitzsimmons left to join Monsignor John Pereyma Catholic Secondary School's staff as principal in June 1991. His commitment to Denis O'Connor was intense and he had spent many long hours fighting to keep it alive before the days of full provincial government funding. Brian Hughes became the new principal at DO'C.

By 1995, enrolment was up over 1,300 students. In the mid-1990s, overcrowding became a serious problem, with hallways that were almost impassable at times, crowded lunch periods, and room and facility scheduling problems. Clearly, something drastic had to be done, since enrolment would soon be over 1,600. A new Catholic secondary school in north Ajax (Notre Dame) was still a few years away, staggered starts or "shifts" of teachers and students had already been implemented, and there was simply no room to place more portables on school property.

The solution came in the form of a small elementary public school that was no longer in use, south of the 401. In 1997–1998, this became DO'C's South Campus, used for many Ontario Academic Credit (OAC) and Grade 12 classes. Students would be moved back and forth between North and South Campus by shuttle buses at various times of the day, while teachers who taught at both campuses would hop in their cars to race to their next class at the other campus. South Campus had a life and a spirit all its own, similar in ways to the old private school DO'C of the 1960s on Giffard St., with its "pioneering" students in a small building with just a few classrooms. Yet, through the efforts and dedication of both staff and students it all worked, and the DO'C community, with typical ingenuity, moved ahead, with faith and hard work, to meet whatever challenges lay ahead.

In 1998, Brian Hughes moved to Father Leo J. Austin Catholic Secondary School. Andy Fedak succeeded him. During the 1990s, especially at the end of the decade and in the early 2000s, DO'C, like other schools in Ontario, was affected by the strained labour relations between teachers and their employers. There had been work-to-rule and an 18-day strike in 1989–1990, and three months of work-to-rule in the spring of 1992. Then, in 1997, came the province-wide political protest by teachers against Bill 160. Through the late 1990s and early 2000s, DO'C suffered through a loss of extra-curricular activities as a result of working conditions imposed on teachers.

In addition to beginning a new millennium, Denis O'Connor underwent a year of massive change in 2001. First, Lon Coghlan, who had started his teaching career at DO'C, returned as principal. The 2000–2001 school year marked

the peak of Denis O'Connor's growth. The school was spread over two campuses and required 31 portables to accommodate its enrolment. Yet another addition was made to the main building – an 11-room, two-storey wing along with a much improved, beautiful new chapel. Extra-curriculars began coming back out of the woodwork. This would be the year that DO'C would say farewell to the South Campus and to all those students who would be attending the new Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School in north Ajax at the start of the next school year.

In the 2001–2002 school year, after five long years, the two-campus school was finally reunited on one site. DO'C returned to one campus, one shift, and a great number of portables were removed. The new addition was officially opened and the new St. Marguerite d'Youville Chapel was blessed by Father Roy Roberts, pastor of St. Francis de Sales Parish, and Chaplain Denise Colterman-Fox. Due to the decrease in school enrolment, DO'C was back to two vice-principals. With the opening of both Notre Dame C.S.S. and All Saints C.S.S., many teachers left DO'C to pursue new opportunities. Some departments were completely unrecognizable from the year before.

During the summer of 2002, staff and other members of the Archbishop Denis O'Connor community donated their time to assist the pilgrims using the school as housing for the World Youth Day celebrations. A number of DO'C staff and students attended the arrival of Pope John Paul II in Downsview; the Youth Mass was a highlight of the summer.

Since Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School opened, DO'C has entered a period of relative stability in terms of growth and expansion. For much of the last 10 years, there have been only a couple of portables, no new wings or expansions to the main building required, and none of the huge increases in new staff and students seen every September for most of the first 40 years of DO'C's existence.

In 2009, after eight and a half years as principal, and over 20 years of service to the Archbishop Denis O'Connor community during his career, Lon Coghlan left DO'C to assume his duties as principal of Notre Dame. Mary Curran, who had been a vice-principal at DO'C for three years earlier in her career, returned to serve as principal for the 2009–2010 school year. When she retired in 2010, Donna Modeste became principal. She continues to lead our DO'C community.



*St. Marguerite d'Youville*

St. Marguerite d'Youville, foundress of the Grey Sisters, looks out from our library windows, welcoming all who enter Arch. Denis O'Connor C.H.S.. She tells us: "All the wealth of the world cannot be compared with the happiness of living together happily united." In 2014, Arch. Denis O'Connor C.H.S. will celebrate 50 years since its officially opening in Whitby in 1964. Marguerite d'Youville's words continue to inspire DO'C – for nearly half a century, we have created a joyful Christian community of caring and compassion for one another and the world. Under the leadership of principal Donna Modeste, we continue on through the events and activities that unite us and join us to the world: the simple gestures of friendship and caring; the numerous LOSSA championships; the Red Wagon Christmas Campaign to provide for families of low income; the Lenten Fundraiser for St. Gaspare Elementary School in Tanzania; the Day of Service; the regular volunteering at St. Vincent's Kitchen; the Development and Peace Thinkfast; the Dominican Republic Experience; food, clothing and toiletries drives for the Refuge Centre for street youth in Oshawa and for local food banks; Peer Ministry; and our retreats, liturgies, the Sacrament of Reconciliation and prayer times. It is a tribute to everyone involved in the DO'C community over almost 50 years that faith and academic excellence continue to blossom at Archbishop Denis O'Connor Catholic High School.

### **The Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (Pembroke) at Archbishop Denis O'Connor Catholic High School**

Over the years, a number of Grey Sisters have served at Denis O'Connor:

- Sister Anna Clare, Sister Margaret Mary (Mildred Moyle) and Sister Mary Goulet served as principals;

- Sisters Mary Diane, M. Julia (Catherine Shea), M. Judith (Margaret Foran), M. Mildred (Margaret Ferguson), M. Cornelia (Cornelia Goulet), Madeline Tokar, Mary Ruddy, Anne Taylor, Muriel Murphy, Alicia Martin, Yvonne Paquette and Marjorie Myles served as teachers; and
- Sisters Bernadette Ryan, Muriel Welsh and Mary Carmel served as librarians.

### **The O'Connor Family**

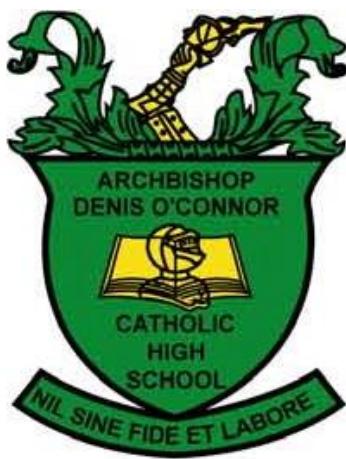
The O'Connor family have been great supporters and benefactors of this school since its inception – from the annual Arthur and Margaret O'Connor Family Award at graduation to the generous bequest provided in Marguerite O'Connor's will (2004). Among other items, the Marguerite O'Connor bequest provided for the stained glass window installed in the school library (visible above the school entrance). The window depicts Marguerite d'Youville, foundress of the Grey Sisters who helped found and first staffed the original Denis O'Connor High School in Whitby. At the official opening and blessing of the new Archbishop Denis O'Connor Catholic High School in Ajax on November 18, 1984, Bishop Clune recognized the 10 members of the O'Connor family who were present on that occasion.



*Window depicting St. Marguerite d'Youville, foundress of the Grey Sisters*

### **Our School Crest**

The proud old Irish name "O'Connor" means "High Will" and epitomizes the outstanding characteristics of those who bore it. The O'Connors have always been noted for their great resolve and singleness of purpose. The head of the man in armour is symbolic of the O'Connor faith, loyalty and patriotism. The open book is indicative of learning.



At the base of the crest is the school motto: NIL SINE FIDE ET LABORE ("Nothing is accomplished without faith and work").

### **Our Patron**



*Archbishop Denis T. O'Connor, C.S.B.*

"A brilliant theologian, of great executive ability, Archbishop O'Connor is one of the strongest men of the Canadian Church."

—*Catholic Register, "History of Catholic Church in Province of Ontario," February 16, 1905, p. 20*

Denis O'Connor was born on March 28, 1841, in Pickering Township, Upper Canada, the son of pioneer Irish immigrants Denis O'Connor, a farmer, and Mary O'Leary. At age 11, he entered St. Michael's College in Toronto. He was the eleventh pupil and the second boarder registered. He pursued classical and philosophical studies under the Basilian priests and entered St. Basil's Novitiate, Toronto, in 1859. While studying in Europe, he contracted tuberculosis and had to return to Toronto in September 1863. The *Catholic Register* (Oct. 24, 1942) recorded that "he was so afflicted with lung disease that his ordination was hastened so that he might have the graces of the priesthood before his expected early death." He was ordained priest on December 8 that same year by Bishop Lynch in St. Michael's Cathedral. His stepmother, Bridget Callaghan, nursed him back to health on the family farm.

On his return to St. Michael's, O'Connor quickly showed his genius for organization, economy, discipline and determination. After an academic career as professor at St. Michael's (1864–1870), he was appointed Superior (president) of Assumption College in Sandwich (now Windsor). His 20-year administration (1870–1890), the longest in the history of the college, was so successful that Pope Leo XIII conferred an honorary Doctor of Divinity upon him in 1888.

In 1890, Denis O'Connor was consecrated as Bishop of London. He served in this role until 1899, when he was elevated to Archbishop of Toronto.

In Toronto, Archbishop O'Connor presided over a series of diocesan reforms in clerical education, religious instruction and canonical marriage law. He made great efforts to promote an equal education for Catholic children. After nine years as archbishop, his health broke down and he began his retirement. He died three years later, on June 30, 1911, at age 71. He is buried in the Basilian plot at Mount Hope Cemetery.

## **Principals**

- Sister Anna Clare (1962–1967)
- Sister Margaret Mary (Mildred Moyle) (1967–1980)
- Sister Mary Goulet (1980–1985)
- Tom Fitzsimmons (1986–1991)
- Brian Hughes (1991–1998)
- Andy Fedak (1998–2001)
- Lon Coghlan (2001–2009)
- Mary Curran (2009–2010)
- Donna Modeste (2010–present)

*Contributor:*

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