Lizards at the library

A large group of children and accompanying adults listened and watched Sam Bylsma from Reptile Kingdom Canada describe a variety of reptiles, ranging from snakes, lizards, legless lizards, tortoises and crocodilians, at a presentation that kept everyone captivated at the library Tuesday morning. (David Gilchrist)

Expect slow-downs through Virgil for several months

Penny Coles
The Local

When Regional Councillor Andrea Kaiser updates councillors on regional issues at the last town council meeting this month, at the top of her list will be the roadwork through Virgil. She realizes it’s the issue most residents want to hear about — the work and hold-ups we’re seeing along Niagara Stone Road are not going to stop anytime soon.

Also considered part of Regional Road 55, it is being reconstructed to address road capacity, road conditions, infrastructure improvements, streetscaping and urban design improvements, as well as overhead utility conversions to underground. The work is being done in partnership with the town and NOTL Hydro.

Town operations director Rome D’Angelo says that while it’s a regional project, the town has been involved as a major stakeholder, mostly concerning streetscaping decisions, such as decorative lighting, landscaping features and any other enhancements.

“The region is doing all the work,” he says. “The town just has a say in the look of the improvements.”

The road improvements and streetscape enhancements will stretch along Niagara Stone Road.

Continued on page 2

Mahabharata breaks new ground for Shaw

Mike Balsom
The Local

With two distinct parts and running almost five hours, plus an optional 70-minute Khana community meal in between, Shaw Festival’s presentation of Mahabharata admittedly takes some commitment.

But this ground-breaking production is worth every second. It’s like nothing that has come before it in the festival’s previous 60 years.

The adaptation of the 4,000-year-old Sanskrit epic poem is a production of Toronto’s Why Not Theatre, in association with Barbican, London, and commissioned and presented by the Shaw Festival. It realizes a dream that Shaw artistic director Tim Carroll has had since taking over the reins of the local company in 2017.

Avid Shaw theatregoers most likely won’t recognize many faces on stage, as all but one of the actors are newcomers and not part of the usual Shaw ensemble. And fittingly, for a production that uses as source material one of the foundational epics of India, the cast and creative team are all from the South Asian diaspora and hail from around the world.

Mahabharata is visually and aurally stunning. It’s a feast of storytelling, song and dance, presented in two distinct parts: Karma — The Life We Inherit and Dharma — The Life We Choose.

The curtain rises for Karma revealing a sparsely decorated stage, a circle of red sand its lone adornment, and a curtain of thick ropes hanging from the catwalk. Six musicians are arranged around the back of the circle, poised to launch the evening.

Continued on page 4

Ellora Patnaik as Kunti and Goldy Notay as Gandhari in Why Not Theatre’s Mahabharata. (David Cooper)
Expect delays as traffic’s down to one lane

from Four Mile Creek Road to East and West Line, D’Angelo confirmed. The first phase of the work, within the urban area, is scheduled to take place in the spring of 2023. “The project was cancelled in the spring of 2022 because the bids received exceeded the budget,” he explained.

“Regional staff decided to redefine the scope of work and retender. Upon closing the revised tender, a report to regional council was subsequently received and approved in September 2022 to proceed with the works in 2023.”

The town’s contribution when the project was first discussed was set at $1,177,000, but has increased to a total of $1.4 million.

NOTL Hydro is converting their overhead transmission lines to underground between Four Mile Creek Road and Penner Street, in conjunction with the road works taking place. It would be typical to have NOTL Hydro at the table, D’Angelo added. “When the region begins a project like this, the major stakeholders work together, as a coordinated effort.”

The region promises one lane will stay open as work continues through the summer. (Photos by David Gilchrist)

Although the region and the town have acknowledged having construction on Niagara Stone Road through Virgil during the tourism season is not ideal, the region says businesses will stay open during construction, and “every effort will be made to minimize the potential impact to local businesses.”

The region has said they will minimize “construction activities during July and August,” and that Niagara Stone Road will remain open with one lane.

There was some effort to have construction halted during July and August, but any contractor willing to do that would have charged more, and make the work too expensive.

There will be an alternate route posted for the construction period when lane restrictions are in place, with signs stating that the road is open, but drivers should expect delays, the regional report says.

Some of what residents can expect of the reconstruction includes new concrete curbs, a centre left-turn lane, new traffic signals at Four Mile Creek Road and Niagara Stone Road; at Line 1 and Niagara Stone Road; and at East and West Line and Niagara Stone Road.

The report says the project will “implement active transportation from Four Mile Creek Road to the Virgil Urban Boundary.”

Streetscaping includes crosswalks, decorative lighting, parkettes with landscaping, benches, landscaping, new roadway lighting and new concrete sidewalks, all meant to “represent the identity of the village of Virgil.”

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Residents speak out at Tawny Ridge public meeting

Zahraa Hmood
The Local

St. Davids was well-represented during the town’s contentious housing project being planned for Tannock Road. A couple dozen residents turned out to hear about the proposed Tawny Ridge Estates, which would add 86 new living spaces to a block of land in the west end of the village community. Residents spoke to council, the size of the residential subdivision will mean serious traffic safety and infrastructure overload issues for the surrounding area. Plans to build a four-storey apartment complex at Warner Road, additionally, will drive people away from the neighbourhood.

“This is a retirement community, and that’s why we moved here,” said Glenn Todd, a resident who said he’s been living in St. Davids for a year with his spouse on Tulip Tree Road, next to Tawny Ridge’s proposed site.

“We are not opposed to Tawny Ridge,” Todd said, “but if there was an apartment here, we would not have been interested in this community.”

The planning team representing the developer, Riverview Homes Niagara, however, say they’ve reviewed all concerns residents have brought forth since unveiling plans at an open house in early February, and gave assurances for each planning decision made.

“There’s been significant concerns provided,” said Craig Rohe, senior planner for Upper Canada Consultants, speaking of the requested zoning amendment to allow for taller buildings and for greater lot coverage.

The developer also wants an Official Plan amendment to increase the housing density and allow the apartment building. Altogether, Tawny Ridge Estates’ current plans take up 3.7 hectares of land, one apartment building, 20 single-detached homes and six blocks of townhouses.

“The zoning by-law amendment is very similar to that of Courtland Valley,” Rohe said, referencing the residential community which would be next-door to Tawny Ridge.

All 96 Courtland Valley residents signed a petition filed to the town in February asking for changes to the developer’s plans, according to petitions organizer and resident Bruno LaBonte. This was one of two petitions filed this winter.

“I was the Courtland Valley developer, I would’ve set it as a Residential R2 Zone,” Rohe said, “Riverview Homes’ request a zoning amendment (Courtland Valley is zoned as Residential R1). ‘As our communities are growing, we need to find ways to use land efficiently.’

Rohe spoke to public comments shared during the open house and in the petitions about potential issues with traffic congestion after adding 86 living units to the neighbourhood, as well as 121 or so vehicles according to the second petition’s organizer Gienek Kaszukwicz. Participants said they would like to solidify this (role).

The accesses, as proposed, are sufficient,” he said.

Tawny Ridge comes as Niagara-on-the-Lake faces a regionally-set target to increase local residential development by 25 per cent, part of the province’s mission to boost housing options across Ontario.

In residents’ view, however, with the price of homes and condominiums in the fast-growing market, the proposed development will not fulfill the province-wide need for affordable housing.

Town staff and the urban design committee will review Tawny Ridge Estates’ plans and share its feedback with the developer, who will be able to respond or make revisions.

Then, planning staff will be working on a report with recommendations to council, advising them on their consideration of the requested Official Plan amendment and zoning by-law amendments, which will put the future of Tawny Ridge Estates to a vote.
The battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas takes place in Part Two, resulting in destruction, devastation and loss. During the battle, the dance of Draupadi takes place as Shiva, with brightly painted face and flowing dreadlocks sweeping across his body, poetically emphasizes the violence.

The Pandavas emerge from the battle victorious, yet the question remains, what have they actually won? Or, perhaps, as Yudhishthira, sebagai actor, one might find out when he ascends into heaven, maybe they haven't really won anything at all.

This skillful production of Mahabharata hits like a hammer on some of the most important questions of life itself. Within the two separate performances are lessons about humanity and much of the character and psychodynamics of Hindu culture.

One audience member of South Asian descent remarked, ‘It was beautiful to see her as she was a master of the audience and culture before the Pandava clan, portrayed by Anaka Mahapatra Sandhu. Part Two also includes an original Sanskrit operatic adaptation of The Bhagavata Gita, the most renowned, influential and significant passage of The Mahabharata. London, Ontario, soprano Mehdi Pavri, 2005. Miss India Canada, takes the spotlight with her powerful voice in a show-stopping performance.'
Valerie Pringle to host new season of PBS series

Mike Balsom
The Local

Canadian broadcasting legend Valerie Pringle is excited to announce a PBS television series for the first time since 2009.

Pringle takes the helm as co-host of the 30-minute interview show Canada Files this weekend. Her debut episode explores the program’s fourth season, which sees her speaking with 13 famous and accomplished Canadians, airs March 19 on the U.S. public broadcaster’s Buffalo outlet, WNED.

“This year marks the 50th anniversary of Pringle’s start in broadcasting at Toronto radio station CFRB while still a university student. In 1984, she left radio to be one of the original hosts of CBC Television’s Midday. Eight years later she jumped to CTV as co-host of Canada AM.

Pringle became one of the most celebrated and revered broadcasters in Canada, hosting many of CTV’s special events programming, including the network’s coverage of the 1993 election and 1995’s Quebec referendum, as well as the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway.

Pringle remained with Canada AM until 2001, then went on to host a travel show called Valerie Pringle Left the Building. She also produced documentary specials for History Channel Canada, and hosted the Canadian edition of Antiques Roadshow on CBC.

Since her last project, a documentary on the Great Lakes, fell through in 2009, the former Order of Canada in 2006 had shifted gears to the nonprofit sector. She was instrumental in the completion of the Trans Canada Trail as one of the country’s major Canada 150 projects. Local supporters of the Laura Secord Trail will remember Pringle’s involvement in that leg of the bigger route.

Her other passion became advocating for mental health through her position on the board of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Pringle is currently the chair of that board.

“It felt lucky to be working on two things I felt really passionate about,” says Pringle from her home of the Laura Secord House, on the lake she has shared with her husband, Andy, for 15 years. “I didn’t make this decision lightly. I felt like I was doing something that was really needed and I was able to make a difference.”

Last March, her friend, veteran Toronto broadcaster Jim Deeks, contacted her. He had created Canada Files and had been hosting it for three years. Deeks wanted to retire and asked Valerie to take his place. At first she was hesitant. But Andy encouraged her to give it a go, and she came around after speaking with a long-time friend and colleague who was a member of the same book club.

“I talked to Jennifer Scott, who worked with me in TV every week, says Pringle. “I needed a producer who was super organized. She agreed to come onboard, and that helped me make up my mind.”

Pringle sees Canada Files as a throwback to old-school broadcasting.

“And a half hour interview with fabulous people,” marvelling Pringle in her office of this. “This just doesn’t exist anymore. It’s my kind of thing. I don’t like reality TV, or chat TV where everyone is talking over one another.”

She was given complete control of the show. Pringle picks the interviews she wants, chooses her own questions and supervises the editing process.

Her list of guests for the coming weeks is fascinating. It includes musicians and authors, an architect and an actor, a former Governor General, an astronaut, a United Nations chief prosecutor, the former governor of the Bank of Canada and more.

“I just started making lists,” says Pringle about how she chose her subjects. “There were some like Malcolm Gladwell and Martin Short that I really wanted, and the chair it was such a win. I couldn’t do it. Sarah Polley was another one, but once we got to Christmas I thought it would be best to wait until after Oscar season. Maybe next year.

“Most of the episodes were shot in WNED’s condo in Toronto, where the Pringles live. Others were shot on location in Ottawa, Los Angeles and New York.

Sunday’s first episode features Toronto-born author Louise Penny, who bares her soul to Pringle.

“She talks about her alcoholism, and how she really wanted to end her own life in her early 30s,” Pringle says. “What turned her life around was getting sober and finding the love of her life, who supported her and got her going in her amazing career as a writer.”

Olympic medalist Clara Hughes is just as open and honest in a later episode speaking about her dysfunctional family and her tough childhood.

Pringle was amazed at how historian and Oxford professor Margaret MacMillan was so clear and precise with her answers during their meeting.

“She is so smart, such a great teacher,” Pringle says. “You can tell she’s been teaching for years, she’s so clear in what she says. And (architect) Moshe Safdie was fabulous talking about his frustration with America and the way things are built here, and the success he’s had in Singapore.”

Next is Carney National, which is in episode nine how his new role as UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance was a challenge for him. “He had his previous jobs as governor of the Bank of Canada and then the Bank of England.”

In episode seven Pringle reunites with former Governor General Michaelle Jean, who was getting sober and finding her love of her life, who supported her and got her going in her amazing career as a writer.

“We are shooting a lot of episodes that are shot in Canada Files,” says Pringle. “This is a low-key place, and we love being in Niagara-on-the-Lake. It’s heavenly.”

PBS will be posting her Canada Files segments on their website and YouTube channel, but Pringle can’t wait to see it broadcast on her television Sunday night.

“I know for many people the only way they’ll see these is to look online,” she admits. “And the fact that they can live on and be accessible is wonderful to me. But there’s nothing like sitting there watching it for the first time.”

The mother of three and grandmother of five is thoroughly enjoying her return to television and is looking forward to working on her wishlist for season five, she has no desire to look for other on-air opportunities.

“Canada Files is perfect,” she says. “It’s long interviews with really terrific people, and a chance to really explore these things and get to know them. This kind of thing doesn’t happen on television anymore. The long-form interview on television has gone the way of the dodo. This is exactly what I love to do.”

The first episode of season four of Canada Files airs on PBS Sunday night at 6 p.m.
The region has been saying since 2019 it would be closing Upper Canada Lodge, originally slated for 2022, but now it really is nearing the time to do that. What’s the plan for those who call the much-loved local long-term care residence home?

Regional Coun. Andrea Kaiser says she’s been assured that when it closes, “everyone living in Upper Canada Lodge will be accommodated. Nobody will be left without a home, when long-term care is required, they might have options to choose from, but seniors and their families sometimes have to go with what’s available at the time.

When the decision was made to close UCL, two other regional homes were chosen for expansion, and have been under construction to accommodate more residents — Gilmore Lodge in Fort Erie and Linhaven Long-Term Care in St. Catharines.

While the thinking of families at the time the closure was announced seemed to be that the smaller the home, the better the care would be, a theory that certainly seemed true at UCL, redevelopment to bring it up to a provincial standard was not considered feasible. At the same time the goal at the region was for newer, larger homes that were considered not only to be more economical and efficient, but more desirable, able to offer more amenities and programs in a community hub setting.

So here we are. The region is saying Upper Canada Lodge will be open and accepting applications for admission until shortly before the home closes, which is anticipated in early 2024. Will Gilmore Lodge or Linhaven be ready for them? Gilmore Lodge is anticipated to be completed and available for residents to move in to its expansion early in 2024, and Linhaven’s construction completion is anticipated for the fall of 2024.

The region is assuring residents at UCL and their families that in collaboration with Home and Community Care, support will be provided related to transition plans. They will be confirming residents pre-ferral relocation options, the region says, and working with UCL staff “to update resident assessments as necessary.”

Any residents who live at Upper Canada Lodge or who are planning to move in before its closure will be given the opportunity to identify which long-term care home they would like to move to when UCL closes, the region says.

While the well being of residents is the top priority, once they have been moved, what happens to the building? It’s operated as a lease, on property owned by Parks Canada — an unusual situation.

The region will only say at this point that it is working with Parks Canada to discuss options for the future of the building, and “once they have fully explored the best way to move forward,” more information will be available. It will have to be an open and transparent process, says Kaiser, and will need to meet the particular uses permitted on that property, including that it be a non-profit.

Since it isn’t likely to be used for senior living, what’s the next best solution? There is talk in the community that the Shaw Festival is interested, and since it is a neighbour to UCL, and is always looking for more space for its operations and for employee housing, it seems like a good solution. Added to that, the Shaw already has a partnership with Parks Canada for the very land the Festival Theatre, the Studio Theatre and administration offices occupy.

Top of the list of course has to be about making sure UCL residents and their families are looked after, but also important seeing that property is used wisely. We look forward to hearing the region and Parks Canada’s plans for moving forward.

On another note, we have heard rumblings that Pleasant Manor in Virgil is not moving forward with its expansion with an announcement that it is going “full steam ahead” now. It’s at the stage of going through pre-consultation with the town and region, says Siemens, hoping for final approval in August, and construction to begin in September for an expansion that should see a facility for 160 new beds finished and ready to be occupied by those who require long-term care.

When the region made the decision in 2019 to close UCL, it was made less painfully by the knowledge then that Pleasant Manor had provincial approval for their new facility.

At that time, the opening date was anticipated to be in 2022, aligning with the completion of the two regional facilities and the closure of Upper Canada Lodge.

But when it comes to construction and government layer- ers of approval, nothing is that simple. Through a series of changes in plans and required approvals, an opening of the new Pleasant Manor facility is now looking like 2025, a ways off, but the good news is there will eventually be long-term care rooms available close to home, right here in Virgil, for local residents who need them. Penny Coles The Local
On Tuesday March 7, a public meeting was held regarding the Tawny Ridge Estates proposed subdivision, phases 1 and 2. I live in St. Davids and spoke on behalf of 100 per cent of all neighbouring Courtland Valley residents who signed a petition. We can all agree that 100 per cent speaks for itself.

There are 1,030 pag-es of documents that are available on the town’s website. All the information provided can be quite overwhelming and confusing, so let me summarize what is actually being requested.

For the 32 proposed lots designated for single-detached dwellings, an amendment is being requested to rezone these 32 lots to a residential R2 zone, with excessive site-specific amendments. The proposed 32 lots are basically the same size as the lots in Courtland Valley for single-detached dwellings. In Courtland Valley, all lots for the 36 single-detached dwellings are designated low density residential R1 and were granted 7.2 units per acre, remaining low density.

At the open house meeting, the consultant was asked to provide the rationale behind the request to rezone from R1 to R2 for the 32 lots designated for single-detached dwellings. So many reasons were given for this request, it seems like they would allow for bigger homes to be built on these lots. Big plans! However, I believe that it is absolutely nothing to do with Bill 23. Instead, the developer should consider amending the size, style, geometry and design of the single-detached dwellings to meet the requirements under R1 zoning with minimal site-specific changes, as was done for Courtland Valley.

Another concern is to extend Street A to Tanbark Road, as illustrated in the 2006 staff reports for Courtland Valley Estates and the staff report for St. Davids Estates. We understand the street network that was proposed as a concept of the previous staff reports. However, we must consider the fact that St. Davids Estates and Courtland Valley are two separate developments, each with their own conceptual street network designed around the street layout. Why deviate from that approach when it comes to Tawny Valley?

The consultant claims that Street A would be too close to Hickory Avenue. The distance between Street A and Hickory to the south would be about 128 metres (420 feet), and the distance between Street A and Warner Road to the north would be approximately 144 metres (475 feet), which is quite a fair distance between two streets. To put things in perspective, the distance between Hickory Avenue and Apricot Glenn to the south is about 130 metres (425 feet), which is about the same distance between Street A and Hickory. And on the east side of Tanbark, the distance between PINECROFT Drive and Sawmill Lane is about 45 metres (147 feet). Considering what is at stake, the extension of Street A to Tanbark should be embraced and not even be up for discussion. So bottom line, logic, common sense, practicality and above all, safety must prevail.

As far as the proposed lots for single-detached dwellings are concerned, Ford’s Bill 23 has absolutely nothing to do with it. Unfortunately, too many developers are using this as an excuse or justification to bully their way into small villages, communities and neighbourhoods, which they completely destroy. All Courtland Valley residents are asking the newly-elected town councilors and officials that Street A be extended to Tanbark Road, and that the distance between single-detached dwellings be designated as low density. We strongly believe that our requests are very reasonable and a fair compromise.

No one is against growth and developments, but it has to be done right. Development projects such as this one have to be handled properly and carefully in order to protect the interests of all residents, owners and taxpayers, and also to protect and maintain the integrity of the charm, the attractive and the historic value of the St. Davids community as a whole. Otherwise, we can end up with a project similar to the one at the corner of Four Mile Creek and York Road (behind the Avondale) which is an absolute disaster, as it basically destroyed the core of St. Davids village.
Host a hive, preserve Niagara’s beauty, biodiversity

Sandra Ozkur
Special to The Local

Niagara-on-the-Lake prides itself on being one of the prettiest towns in Canada, but what would it be without the flowers and trees?

Residents landscape their yards with fruit trees, shrubs, vegetables and flowers, taking for granted that they will produce, but do we ever consider how the magic happens? Plants require good soil, sun and rain, but more importantly pollinators to produce flowers, fruits, vegetables and seeds.

The pollinating is done mostly by insects and bees that show up at different times, but what if they don’t show up anymore? Bees are responsible for pollinating more than one-third of all food-producing plants and trees, but are decreasing at an alarming rate, so without bees to pollinate, Niagara could soon look very different.

Unfortunately, native bee and honey bee populations throughout Canada are dying at an unprecedented rate. The cause is not conclusive, but beekeepers and scientists point to environmental toxins, para site infestations, climate change and loss of habitat as contributing factors.

This has taken its toll on beekeepers and commercial pollinators who cannot afford to buy replacement bees this spring. Many local beekeepers are calling it quits because they’ve lost 75 to 90 per cent of their bees in just the last two years. As apriaries shut down, there will be a loss of thousands of hives from the Niagara region. This absence of honeybees will affect local crops, gardens, orchards, flowers, trees and nurseries who benefit from the presence of the bee farms nearby. The pollination job will be left to the wild bee population which does not have the capacity to do the work that hundreds of thousands of honeybees have been performing.

The European honeybee is not native to North America but has been living here for more than 200 years as a naturalized species. Beekeeping was brought to North America by European settlers, and beekeeping services of the bees ever since. Traditionally, beekeeping skills are passed down from generation to generation. Beekeeping courses are offered at Niagara College, where the basics can be learned, but years of experience are required to be successful. So, when generational beekeepers leave the profession, the knowledge and wisdom with them.

Is there an answer to keeping this ancient skill alive to pass on to future generations?

Niagara Beeway has come up with a new solution from an old idea — a revival of backyard beekeeping. As a multi-generation beekeeper, George Scott and his team at Niagara Beeway have launched a grassroots initiative to help preserve beekeeping skills and sustain the bee population in Niagara. Their novel program is designed to reduce the environmental threats to honeybees by placing small groups of hives in safe zones. This initiative aims to create a network of evenly distributed bee colonies throughout the region.

The idea is to reduce the possibility of mass exposure to toxins by placing the hives in hundreds of locations. The bee colonies will provide pollination services for the area and protect bee populations from complete destruction. Alongside this Host A Hive initiative, Niagara Beeway promotes bee education and pollinator habitat restoration projects within the region.

Host A Hive aims to place beehives on unpolluted properties where the bees can forage on pesticide-free plants and clean water. Traditional apriaries congregate their hives all together for ease of management, but this means that thousands of hives can be wiped out at once. Niagara Beeway wants to reverse the beekeeping practices of the past when families often kept bees in their backyard. Host A Hive is looking for individual land owners, clubs or organizations that have one acre or more of pesticide-free land who would like to host some hives. When you sponsor hives on your property, Niagara Beeway will provide the equipment, bees and beekeeping service for the first year. The sponsor can then take over the ownership and beekeeping responsibilities in the second year or renew their sponsorship, and the beekeeper will continue to look after everything.

Hosting a beehive is good for food-producing plants and trees. (Photos supplied)

George Scott of Niagara Beeway will help those who want to host a hive and contribute to a healthy ecosystem.

Take the tourism strategy survey

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake recognizes the importance of a comprehensive Tourism Strategy that will provide a foundational framework for a sustainable tourism economy.

With this, the Town, along with the CBRE Tourism Consulting team, are soliciting feedback from all residents and visitors via two separate surveys. The intent of the surveys is to help guide the Tourism Strategy process with input from those who live in and visit the Town.

The surveys will be open from Wednesday, March 15, to Wednesday, April 5.

Residents and visitors of Niagara-on-the-Lake can participate. Registration for both surveys is required. Participate for a chance to win $50!

Take the survey at jointheconversationnotl.org/tourism-strategy.
Red Roof looking for raffle prizes and auction items

Sharon Burns
The Local

After three years of the cancellation of a favourite event, Ashlee Dagenais was so determined to get tickets for this year's Red Roof Retreat pasta dinner that she set an alarm on her phone.

“I have been going to the pasta dinner since I moved here,” said Dagenais, a client who has been attending recreational programming and respite at Red Roof Retreat for the past several years.

The annual pasta dinner, a major fundraiser for Red Roof Retreat, has been cancelled for the past few years due to COVID.

Executive director and founder Steffanie Bjorgan said that Red Roof Retreat “is a Niagara-on-the-Lake non-profit that has been operating since 2000. We provide respite and recreational services for children and young adults with special needs. Our most important program is respite, which offers weekend overnight stays to give caregivers a break.”

Scott Botbyl has been using their services for more than 10 years for son Devon. “Respite is an important thing for us. It gives people like Devon another opportunity to get out and be with other kids and it gives our family an opportunity to spend more time together.”

“Having an avenue like this just really helps keep other relationships with your family, your spouse and your children important as well,” he said.

While tickets for the dinner, held at John Michael’s Banquet Centre April 30, sold out in two weeks, there is still a need for financial support. “Times have changed, and Red Roof will incur more costs than usual,” said Bjorgan. “Many businesses, especially respite, are really helping to support us in the past and in social media. Sponsorships for the event are needed for the live auction. We use funds from this event to keep all of our programs, especially respite, affordable to families,” said Bjorgan. “It’s a third-generation attending now.”

Dagenais is looking forward to keep all of our programs, especially respite, affordable to families. “I have been going to the dinner that she set an alarm on for the pasta dinner past few years due to COVID. Red Roof’s respite program is important to Devon and the family. (Photos supplied)

Bjorgan is looking for new donors to support the children’s raffle table and silent auction with prizes. Larger prizes are needed for the live auction. Sponsorships for the event are also welcome, with donor logos prominently displayed at the event and in social media.

“We use funds from this event to keep all of our programs, especially respite, affordable to families,” said Bjorgan. “We do a pasta dinner for raffle tickets the beginning of September in hopes that the pasta dinner would come this year.”

Botbyl notes that “there is not a lot out there for children with special needs, and we are so fortunate to have this in our community. Our community is special!”

For more information about Red Roof Retreat, visit redroofretreat.com. To donate or sponsor the pasta dinner, which raised $90,000 in 2019, contact claire@redroofretreat.com.

Red Roof clients Ashlee Dagenais and Garrett Bjorgan — Ashlee loves the pasta dinner, especially the raffle prizes.
Local author Diane Martin hosting children’s book event

First-time children’s author Diane Martin believes it’s important to find something magical in each and every day. In her new book, When Time Stands Still, the first entry in what she is calling the Medallion Mysteries, her young protagonists do exactly that.

Inspired somewhat by Mary Pope Osborne’s popular Magic Tree House books, Martin’s debut entry in her own series follows siblings Megan, Nicholas and Brooke on a magical journey through a watery portal to a land filled with glowing orbs, fairies, magic footprints and a giant yet timid monster. Their youngest sibling, Tanner, stays behind fishing with his father and stumbles onto clues to their whereabouts.

Martin started writing When Time Stands Still 16 years ago when she was pregnant with her fourth child, also named Tanner. The Eden Secondary School student appears as his younger self in the book, as do Martin’s older children, Megan, 27, Nick, 25, and Brooke, 19. “I was up late one night,” Martin recalls, “and an idea came into my head, so I just started writing. When I was done, I was proud of myself, and I sent it out to all of these publishing houses and was rejected. So I just put it away.”

It was Ridley College grad Brooke, now attending the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, on a hockey scholarship, who urged her mother to put the book out there for the world to read last year. She didn’t want to knock on the publishing house doors all over again, though. Having read about other authors going the self-publishing route, Martin looked into some options and settled on Vancouver, B.C.’s Tellwell Talent.

“They helped me go through the whole process,” says Martin. “I had someone there edit the book, and I’m working with their marketing person right now. They also offered an illustration package but I wasn’t happy with it, so I decided to get it done on my own.”

Geared primarily toward ages 8 to 12, When Time Stands Still features illustrations at the start of each of its 10 chapters. Martin’s son Nick is studying fine arts at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, where Diane and her husband Fab own a construction company. She asked Nick to do the illustrations, but he wasn’t comfortable drawing cartoon-like images. So he connected Diane with his friend Emma McLay, who was happy to come up with likenesses of her pal and his siblings.

The likenesses don’t end with the drawings. In fact, Martin insists that she captured the personalities of the younger versions of her children in her writing. “This is how they spoke,” she laughs. “It may be a little bit exaggerated for content purposes. But they’ll tell me I never said that or I didn’t do that, but yeah, they did. They like it. Tanner thinks it’s funny, and Nick’s a go-with-the-flow kind of kid.”

When pressed for specifics, Martin says the younger Brooke really did confuse words such as “definitely” with “defiantly” and “debrief” for “debris,” as does her character in the book, and the younger Tanner really did point at people when he spoke to them. As well, Megan, who is now in her final semester studying psychology at university, is captured at that awkward tween stage when her three younger siblings annoyed her just by being present. “They still get along together, they have so much fun together, but they do have their moments,” Martin adds. “Some kids who have read the book have told me that it’s just like their family.

The plot centres on Brooke discovering an object that triggers a series of events. The book ends with an invitation for kids to write to Martin about the book and their own adventures.

When Time Stands Still is available for $10 at local bookstores, online or by contacting the author via her website, notlocal.com.
Once the chaos of packing is worked through, the family leaves for their trip. After setting up camp, intrigued by the story of their great-uncle Jack, the three oldest children pack some snacks and a first aid kit and set off to explore. They discover a shoe that seems to have belonged to Jack, and it leads them to a waterfall, which turns out to be a portal to another world.

There they meet all kinds of strange creatures and experience adventures scary at times and magical at others. Through it all the three kids grow closer together. It’s a well-written tale that will appeal to young and old alike.

Martin is giving local readers, both kids and adults, a chance to explore live and in person next Wednesday, March 22, at the Simpson Room in the community centre. She’s holding a book launch event from 7 to 9 p.m., and it will not be your usual author reading. “I have face painters coming, and I have a big cardboard cutout of the monster,” says Martin. “I got a backdrop of the castle made, too. I also made a fairy diorama, and Brooke helped me make a sheet of clues for a scavenger hunt. I just want it to be fun for the kids.”

McLay also helped Martin create activity books, chock full of crosswords, mazes, word searches and pages to colour. Those who purchase a new copy of When Time Stands Still for $15 that night, or bring in the book purchased previously through Amazon, Chapters or Barnes and Noble, will receive a raffle ticket for an age-appropriate gift basket.

Martin proudly tells The Local that shortly after her book debuted in December it topped Amazon’s Hot New Releases list for more than a week. It also spent a few weeks as the number one mystery/detective story on their website.

The reviews she is getting from family and friends, especially from the kids, were encouraging enough to convince her to release book two in the Medalion Mysteries series, which will happen some time in 2023. She finished writing it during the first COVID lockdown and promised to work the names of some of her local young fans into the new adventure.

And Martin has already begun filling her coil-bound notebooks with material for book three, which may take the four siblings away from the campground of the first two books and into other enchanted lands.

Next Wednesday’s event at the NOTL Community Centre is free to attend.
The Niagara Predators hand out awards, bid goodbye to those not returning

Mike Balsom
The Local

The Niagara Predators recognized their team leaders with their annual awards this week.

Leading the pack as Most Valuable Player is Niagara Falls native Anthony Tropea, the Preds' regular season leader in both goals (27) and points (48).

"He came out early in the season as one of the better players on the team," says head coach Kevin Taylor, "and he was consistent throughout the year with that. It wasn't just his points, but also his work ethic and his desire to win. He has a competitive nature that rubs off on other people as well."

Logan Baillie was named the Most Sportsmanlike Player. The 18-year-old from Niagara Falls was one of only four returning players on the team this year, completing his second straight season on the blueline without being assessed a single penalty.

"He's a quiet player on the ice," Taylor says, "but in the room, he's very different. With the boys, he was a guy who didn't play like a rookie. He put up some great numbers. He has a lot of talent, and hopefully he will stick around with us."

Nineteen-year-old Guy Manco edged Thomas McGrath for Most Improved Player.

"We saw him as a fifth or sixth defenceman at first," Taylor says of Manco. "We're now building our defensive core around him and Nick Savore. He made some little adjustments in one-on-ones in practice and I don't think he ever got beaten after that."

Savore earned recognition as the best defenceman on the team. Taylor points out how the guys felt confident with him and Nick Savore. He made some little adjustments in one-on-ones in practice and I don't think he ever got beaten after that.

Declan Fogarty, Niagara's third highest scorer, received the Best Offensive Forward award.

"He was the guy we counted on for penalty kills," Taylor explains. "He brought offensive scoring to the front end as well. He came out as one of the most important forwards on our team because he was so versatile."

The final honour of the season, the Cayden Edwards Award, goes to goaltender Ryan Santini. Named for a former trainer of the team in honour of his late mother, the award goes to a graduating player who is held in high regard by his fellow players.

As the Predators' number one goalie, Santini played in 19 games this season, winning six and losing 11, though many of those losses came against the top three teams in the league's South Division. His goals-against average of 4.05 and 93.6% save percentage were in-flated due to those challenges. He also missed six weeks of the season with a shoulder injury.

"Stats don't always tell the whole story," Santini says. "I think my season went well even though there were some losses, they were fun games. I'm thankful that the coaches trusted me enough to be in net in those types of games, and that the guys felt confident with me in those situations."

He's thankful for the friendships he made with his fellow Predators and hopes to keep in touch with many of them as he moves on. By press time, the 21-year-old will be on his way back home to Montreal.

Santini says it was a year for hockey but more importantly a year for growth. It was a challenging task to convince his parents to let him come to play in Niagara. It was a chance for him to be on his own for the first time and to find out exactly where he wants to go with his life.

Santini will be helping at a Montreal hockey camp with one of his former goalie coach-es this summer, and hoping to catch on with a university or college team.

"As much as I love the sport, I’m not ready to play pro yet," he says. "At this point, I'd rather go to school, get a good degree and start working. I hope I can play hockey somewhere, but school comes first."

"Other players graduating from this year’s roster include Tropea, Ethan Boyd, Askar Aimanbetov and Alexander Andrews. But there should be a good core of players sticking around to take the team to the next level."

The Predators finished the regular season with a record of 20-18-4, finishing fourth in the South. They beat St. George 2-1 in the first round of the playoffs, then lost to the first place Niagara Falls Roadrunners in three straight in the semi-finals.

"I was happy with the season," Taylor says, "but not happy with how it ended. We accomplished some team goals, our plus-minus dramatically improved and we have lots to build on for next year."

Taylor will spend some of his time in the coming months scouting some new players to replace those who have aged out of the league.

"The difference this year is I know now what I have, and I know what I’m looking for," he says. "I was new last year, but this year I’ll be more involved in selecting players, more picky. I’m looking to build a good, balanced team."

He expects to hold the first open skates for players interested in earning a spot on the Predators some time in late April or early May, with more open skates scheduled throughout the summer.

Meanwhile, the Bradford Bulls knocked out the Durham Roadrunners in three straight to win the other GMHL South Division semi-final series. They begin the best-of-seven division final Wednesday, March 15 at home against North York.
Two NOTL minor hockey teams win tournament trophies

Mike Balsom
The Local

Ten Niagara-on-the-Lake minor hockey teams were among the 43 that competed in the annual March Break Tournament that took over both rinks at Virgil’s Meridan Credit Union Arena from Friday through Monday.

The annual, four-day event is one of the NOTL Wolves’ most important fundraisers each season.

“For NOTL Hockey, we don’t have a lot of sources of revenue,” tournament convener Gino Patterson told The Local. “Our tournaments are basically our only chance at revenue. Without successful tournaments, we don’t have a successful club.”

The March Break Tournament is one of two hosted by the club each year. The December Harvest Classic is a rep, or travel team, competition, while the spring tournament is primarily for house league teams.

House league teams from all over Ontario gathered in town to play in U9, U11, U13, U15 and U18 divisions.

“We also sprinkle in the U9 Selects, because they don’t have an opportunity to play full ice until January,” Patterson explained. “We have a great turnout for that every year. We actually had to turn away a bunch of teams for that division. For a lot of those teams this is their first tournament.”

When The Local arrived Friday morning, two Wolves teams in the U18 age group were facing off against each other, presenting a situation where one NOTL team had to lose that game.

“We also have three NOTL teams in the U11 category and two in the U15 group,” Patterson added.

The likelihood of both NOTL minor hockey tournaments is the volunteer participation, Patterson pointed out that there were 256 slots for parents and supporters to enter their names to help out over the four days.

“We have a lot of high school kids signing up to help too,” Patterson said. “It’s their March break, and they have the time, and it’s a great way for them to earn community hours. And who doesn’t love hanging around the arena?”

Tasks included helping Jo Zambito on the popular barbecue, where board member Carrie Plaskett estimated they sold 640 burgers and 360 hot dogs. Volunteers were also needed for running the score clocks, playing music and helping distribute medals and trophies to the winning teams.

“Plus there’s all the preparation work that nobody really sees,” Patterson added. “Filling in the rosters, printing the schedules and inputting the game sheet. Thank God my son Jaden can help me with that, he’s such a computer whiz.”

He also credited the support of sponsors such as Niagara Trailers, who donated the Most Valuable Player trophies for each team, and Phil’s Four Independent Grocers for putting together the team welcome packages with snacks.

Friday’s snow storm caused a little bit of consternation for Patterson and members of the Wolves board, but it didn’t seem to keep teams or spectators away from the packed arenas. And the games were starting exactly on time throughout the entire weekend.

“I always try to keep the local teams scheduled to play at the beginning of the day,” Patterson explained. “That way it gives teams from further away a little extra travel time. Last night, I was worried that some teams might not make it. Missing a game sets everything back. But so far so good, everyone has shown up on time.”

In the end, three NOTL teams clawed their way into championship games in their divisions.

Matt Unruh’s U13 team had to beat another NOTL team coached by Mike Cvetniewski in the semi-final, going into overtime, to earn their way into the championship game.

The championship game ended with Unruh’s Wolves in another tie with Clearview. The game went to triple overtime, then to a shootout that ended up being just as close. Silas Unruh buried what turned out to be the winning penalty shot after goalie Zander Rigas made a clutch save on Clearview’s final attempt, sealing the 5-4 shootout win and the championship for the Wolves.

Steve Lisdatone’s U15 Wolves dominated the Essa Eagles, beating them 6-1 to take the trophy for their age group. And Rob Carrolls U18 squad met a very tough Dejardins team from Northern Ontario and ended up taking home silver medals.

The U15 Wolves raise their trophy in celebration of a 6-1 win against the Essa Eagles.

The U11#1 Wolves watch their teammates. (Photos by Mike Balsom)

NOLT’s U13 Silas Unruh scores the winning goal for the championship in a shootout, after triple overtime.

The U11G (in orange) played the Heartland Dragons Saturday.
Four athletes from Niagara-on-the-Lake travelled to Ottawa last week for the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations (OFSAA) wrestling championships. Two returned home with medals, one with a fifth place ribbon, and another with a driving desire to take the podium next year. Grade 12 Eden High School student Zubin Gatta capped off his high school wrestling career with his second OFSAA gold. Wrestling in the 57.5 kilogram class, Gatta went undefeated in his three qualifying bouts, and took down Robbie Dunbar of Simcoe County’s St. Peter’s Catholic Secondary School for the title. It was really nice,” Gatta says of winning the gold. “The pressure had been building up the whole year since winning the Canada Games qualifier and being on Team Ontario last summer. I finally relieved that pressure by winning the gold.”

In Gatta’s first match Tuesday, he faced an unfamiliar opponent in Leo Kitambala of London. “He was a lot stronger than I thought,” Zubin told The Local. “He grabbed hold of me and he startedrag-dolling me. So I had to change my strategy a little bit. I ended up pinning him.” His second opponent that same day, Josh John of Newtontembrock Secondary School in Toronto, was another unfamiliar, surprisingly strong opponent. Gatta drew upon his experience from his first bout, but a nagging soreness in his knee forced him to tweak his moves a bit. He ended up winning that match 10-0 on technical superiority. The two wins qualified Gatta for the semi-final Wednesday against Carson Patel of Barrie. “Again, he was very strong.” Gatta says. “I was wrestling up a weight class (he usually competes at 51 kg). He pushed me out twice and I was down 2-0. But I took him down, and I turned him eight times. I won 12-2.” In the final, he finally faced a very familiar opponent in Dunbar. “I know his style, so I just wrestled smart,” Gatta explains. “I didn’t try any fancy moves. I shut down his moves and capitalized whenever he made little mistakes.”

Gatta won the match 11-0. His gold medal at 57.5 kilograms will find a place next to another title at 38 kilograms four years ago while in Grade 9. There was no OFSAA event in 2021 or 2022. Gatta’s teammate Charlotte Bowslaugh was very impressive in her first OFSAA competition. The Grade 10 Eden student rolled into the final match in the 64 kilogram category by pinning all three of her opponents to that point. In the final, however, she was pinned by Mayfield Secondary School’s Tarleen Sany, and had to settle for the silver medal.

Bowslaugh’s best friend and fellow Eden student Jorda Lepp also qualified for OFSAA. She went 1-2, pinning Rebellion’s Hartman of Oshawa’s Maxwell Heights Secondary School for her sole win in her second match. She finished out of the medals, but it was an experience she won’t forget.

“It was a really fun experience,” Lepp says. “I think I wrestled well, even though I didn’t win. I think some of the other girls were made more determined to train even harder for next year.”

Ezekiel Ivri, a Grade 10 student at A.N. Myer Secondary School, took a longer route than Gatta or Bowslaugh to the podium, finishing in fifth place in the 51 kilogram division. Ivri pinned both of his opponents Tuesday, but lost to Yasser Saleh of Brampton’s Turner Fenton Secondary School 12-2 Wednesday. “After my first take down, I should have kept shooting,” Ivri wrote in an email to The Local. “I didn’t maintain the same focus I had on day one. This one match cost me my shot at gold and I also affected my next match, which cost me the bronze.”

He went on to defeat Rossham’s Declan Mansingra 10-0 later that day, and then pinned Jacob Abbott of Lindsay to take fifth place.

“I regained my composed-sure and came in with a can’t lose mentality,” Ivri said of his final match. “If I had stayed focused like this, my match against Yasser would have been very different.”

The four wrestlers all train as part of the Brock Junior Badgers Wrestling Team.

Gatta, also a Junior Badger, was slated to compete against wrestlers as old as second-year university students. His season, unfortunately, is over.

Most likely, though, Zubin will fly out with Bowslaugh and Ivri and other members of his team to provide moral support. And I’ll be wrestling for Brock University as a member of their varsity team come September, having recently accepted an offer to study business there.
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