Outbreak at NOTL long-term care home not COVID-19

Penny Coles
The Local

As of Saturday afternoon, there were no outbreaks of COVID-19 in Niagara-on-the-Lake long-term care facilities.

Last Tuesday, the Niagara Region website reported an outbreak of an unspecified respiratory illness at Niagara Long Term Care, formerly Chartwell. It hadn’t been identified as COVID-19 — the organism causing the outbreak was unknown when the outbreak was declared.

The nature of the outbreak was declared Saturday to be a parainfluenza virus, also a respiratory illness, with similar symptoms to COVID-19.

During the pandemic, Lord Mayor Betty Disero said she and town staff are in regular contact with the three local facilities, to ask if they need anything at all, and to find out what’s happening in their facilities.

“So far they have the PPE (personal protective equipment) they need, and they’re all doing quite well under the circumstances we’re in,” she said.

Disero and Fire Chief Nick Ruller released a video Thursday talking about the three NOTL homes, and the process followed when there is an outbreak of any illness. Their intention was to alleviate any concern in the community about the outbreak at Niagara Long Term Care.

“If this minute, to this date,” said Disero Thursday, “all is well in these facilities,” but should the outbreak be upgraded to COVID-19, there would be a message to the public to let them know:

“We are blessed in Niagara-on-the-Lake to have three excellent long-term care facilities,” said Disero, which she described as self-contained communities that are also a large part of the wider community.

She thanked the staff in the homes, who are “the faces the patients and residents see every day,” while they are isolated from their family and the rest of the community.

The staff are also the voices of those patients and residents to the community, she added, and are risking their lives daily to help those who are most vulnerable.

Disero and Ruller outlined the process of declaring outbreaks at long-term care facilities, saying the regional reporting is ongoing, and not limited to this time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Although these outbreaks are concerning to the public, they could happen six to 12 times a year, said Ruller.

Notification is important to first responders, so they can adjust their level of PPE if they enter one of the facilities with an outbreak, he explained.

As of Tuesday afternoon, the regional website showed cases of COVID-19 in the St. Catharines Hospital site, and in six long-term care homes in St. Catharines, Lincoln, Welland and Niagara Falls.

There were 885 reported cases in the region as of Tuesday, with 33 deaths.

Flowers for seniors

Laurie Gunton (left) and Karen Horbach load flowers to be delivered to local seniors, grateful to be putting a smile on some faces. Gunton has been finding ways to volunteer in the community, and her recent mission has been delivering donated flowers from local growers to long-term care residences. Gunton’s recent adventure was picking up flowers from Horbach’s Farm and Greenhouse, and from Rick Juras at Niagara Flower Growers, to drop-off at Niagara Long Term Care (formerly Chartwell). There are many generous people in NOTL looking for ways to help, she says.

Red Roof’s heroes: its exceptional volunteers

Penny Coles
The Local

This is the 20th anniversary for Red Roof Retreat, which, like many other organizations, depends on volunteers to help run its events, programs, and fundraisers.

But all of those have been cancelled for the next while, and that includes an opportunity to celebrate the anniversary milestone with a volunteer tea.

The event was planned for this week, which is National Volunteer Week, set aside to recognize the commitment, dedication and selflessness of volunteers across Canada.

Before the pandemic cancelled or postponed events and gatherings, Red Roof staff were seeking out the many volunteers who have helped out during the last two decades, hoping for a reunion celebration, and an opportunity to thank them all for their contributions that have helped Red Roof grow to what it is today.

Although that couldn’t happen, Steffanie Bjorgan, founder and executive director of Red Roof, has five awards to present to her heroes — virtually, for now — all exceptional volunteers she wants to recognize for their commitment to helping the local organization that provides quality respite and recreational programs to children, youth and young adults with special needs and their families in the Niagara Region.

The first is for a local family, well-known for its volunteering for many different organizations. “A family that volunteers together, grows together,” Bjorgan says, noting that four generations of van der Zalm “have always, in some way, been contributing to Red Roof Retreat, since the very beginning. How do you teach philanthropy and volunteerism? You do it by leading by example, by being a role model. Others learn from you by what you do, not what you say.”

Whether it is through donations, giving their time and skills, attending events or advocating on behalf of Red Roof, “there’s no end to what you can do!” Bjorgan says, “There are many wonderful people in the Niagara Region.”

Continued on page 4

Moe Bjorgan, pictured with their son Garrett, is a “volunteer extraordinaire,” says his wife Steffanie. (Photo supplied)
Out-of-town visitors continue to be a challenge

Penny Coles
The Local

In their updates to council Monday, both Mayor Mary-Or Betty Duerr and interim CAO Sheldon Randall spoke of the large number of visitors still coming to Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Chief of their concerns is the lack of public washrooms.

No lay-offs yet of full-time staff

Penny Coles
The Local

The Town has not yet laid off any full-time staff, councillors heard Monday.

Interim CAO Sheldon Randall said all full-time staff are needed, and the complement now is the same as before COVID-19.

“We need to have them available to provide essential services,” he said, adding, “if we have an abundance of staff we don’t need, we will look at the need for lay-offs.”

However, the full-time contract staff numbers have changed, with about 10 laid off, and an additional 26 that would normally have been taken on at this time, whose hiring has been postponed. There are an additional 22 contract staff they are considering to put on notice that they won’t be called back, he said, although they’re waiting to make that decision.

The full-time staff are also covering the work the contract staff would be doing, he said.

Coun. Stuart McCormack told councillors the NOTL Public Library has laid off staff, and NOTL Hydro, owned by the town, has also laid off half of its staff.

Since one of the difficulties the Town is facing is the arrival of tourists, McCormack said, he doesn’t think “making the town look pretty” is sending the right messages. “Do you thing it’s appropriate to consider planting on the main street an essential service?” he asked.

Randall said the Town is cleaning out the flower beds, will be putting down mulch, and is weeding and cutting grass, but as far as planting, that decision hasn’t been made yet.

In answer to a question from McCormack, Randall said with the passing of emergency legislation, council’s approach on hiring or laying off staff isn’t required. “We make those decisions ourselves, to maintain important essential municipal services we need to provide,” in answer to a question from Coun. Clare Cameron about issues that require a more “fulsome discussion” than phone-in meetings allow, councillors heard from Lord Mayor Betty Duerr that she hopes to get council back “to some kind of normal routine,” possibly by May 1, the next meeting after the scheduled special council meeting of April 27.

She would be discussing that with the emergency committee, she said, “to try to get us back to normal sooner rather than later.”

Bylaw officers to start fining

Penny Coles
The Local

There was good news for councillors this week: issues with migrant workers and concerns they’re not self-isolating are being resolved.

Community and development services director Craig Larmour says the public health department has been working to resolve a “good number” of complaints about migrant workers not maintaining physical distancing on farm properties.

A separate issue, of migrant workers in town, “seems to be resolved,” primarily by farmers providing more information to their workers, he said.

He told councillors that the first visit to a farm is to provide education, and on a second visit, fines will be issued.

With respect to public gatherings, the bylaw officers are continuing to see a “trend of increasing violations,” he said.

Two bylaw officers have stopped 58 times to move people along in the last week, on streets and in parks that have restricted access, he said.

While signage and video, as discussed earlier in the meeting, might help, Larmour suggested a more effective way to get word out would be to issue tickets to visitors.

Staff are currently enforcing banning parking, outright near parks, especially along the waterfront, where gatherings are the main issue.

Although bylaw officers are not seizing public urination, they are hearing about it, said Larmour, suggesting the best way to deal with it is to keep people out of parks and off local trails.

The department has hired two more bylaw officers to enforce emergency COVID-19 orders, he told councillors, and is focusing on Thursday to Sunday, with more enhancement on any near-size weather.

In answer to a question from Coun. Stuart McCormack about the possibility of road closures to discourage visitors coming to town, Larmour said staff have discussed that possibility.

He told councillors this week that the main roads coming into town are under the jurisdiction of either the regional government or the Niagara Parks Commission. “If we close one road, we might be loading up another minor road,” he said.

If the digital signs the Town has ordered are large enough, it would be appropriate to post information about fines on any infractions of local regulations, Larmour said.

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The optimism is especially welcome given the focus of all levels of government on protective measures during COVID-19, says Simkus. The reason behind the predictions are twofold — unlike last year, the Ontario River "is totally under control," and not looking like a threat for this year, and a "really benign April" as far as rainfall has been helpful, allowing the high water levels to be absorbed.

The one parameter that isn't changing is that it will finish the year at a high level, says Simkus. "We're not back to normal yet, and who knows what 2021 will bring," he says. Brett Ruck, the Town’s environmental supervisor, is hoping the predictions are correct, but he’s not counting on them. There is still a lot of snow to melt further north, and that plus the possibility of a heavy rain could make a big difference. "There is a little bit of a comfort level," he says, "but I'm still geared up to be prepared."

He is ready with all the measures that took place last year — sand bags, pumps, check valves in the sewers are at the ready if needed. "I'm pretty comfortable that we can do what we need to do."

As for the work in the park that was planned for this year, it may or may not get done. "It will depend on what's happening here with the water elevations," says Ruck. "With the town in a state of emergency, "we're not talking about it at this point." With the expenses of the municipality increased due to COVID-19, it may be a matter of funding the "absolutely essential. We have some money set aside for shoreline and erosion and floodening, but if it doesn't happen, it may be these funds will be used elsewhere."

Let’s make some noise, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Penny Coles
The Local

There is good news on the waterfront. Dock Area resident Ron Simkus, a mining engineer who compiles data on the lake level and email blasts more than 100 people with updates, says although Lake Ontario is high, the forecast of what is to come is better than last year.

“The probability of a catastrophic situation is fading away quickly,” he says, based on recent predictions from the International Joint Commission, which also tracks water levels, and Environment Canada.

By last Wednesday, the lake level had jumped two and one-half inches over the week before, and was 10 inches higher than the same date in April, 2019, with water levels, and Environment Canada.

Water will be high, but not ‘catastrophic’

Water will be high, but not ‘catastrophic’

Lord Mayor Betty Disero

How much noise can Niagara-on-the-Lake residents make?

Lord Mayor Betty Disero hopes to find out this Saturday, at 6:30 p.m., when residents are being encouraged to go outside, stand on their front verandahs, shout from their windows, and make as much noise as they can.

“We wanted to do something to get the whole town involved in saying thank you to our front-line workers,” she says, as well as essential workers, services and stores staying open for the community. ‘And to do all that while stressing the message of staying at home.’

Use horns, noisemakers, yell, sing or clap, she says. At each of the fire stations in town, members of the fire department will be making noise all well.

Free delivery service

Cassey McNab, president of Community Transport Group, which provides the town’s public transit service, is offering free pick-up and delivery during COVID-19. The bus service has been halted for now, so McNab is offering a Monday to Saturday delivery service instead.

Casey McNab, president of Community Transport Group, which provides the town’s public transit service, is offering free pick-up and delivery during COVID-19. The bus service has been halted for now, so McNab is offering a Monday to Saturday delivery service instead. For more information call 905-468-4132. (Photo supplied)

“The probability of a catastrophic situation is fading away quickly,” he says, based on recent predictions from the International Joint Commission, which also tracks water levels, and Environment Canada.

The Town has erected barriers to keep visitors and vehicles out of the Dock Area parkette. (Ron Simkus)
Volunteers lead by example

Continued from page 1
always a van der Zalm somewhere involved in what we do.

Each generation teaches the next the value of giving back to their community, she says. “Having watched some of the kids in the early years, helping around the property or coming to events, and now seeing them having families of their own, and teaching their kids to do the same, is proof that people lead by example,” says Bjorgan.

“On behalf of Red Roof Retreat, she says, “and all the other organizations that Team V/DZ supports, thank you all. It takes a village, but in this case it takes a family.”

This year Bjorgan has a special award to be handed out for the first time. She explains that several years ago, a young woman walked onto the property asking if she could spend some time helping with the horses. “She had spent her younger years riding and showing horses, but after a fall and significant injuries, she was hesitant to come back and reconnect with her passion.”

She began working with the horses at Red Roof, and soon started riding and volunteering on a regular basis. “Her dedication and determination were admirable. It was an honour to witness the healing power of the horses and the property at Red Roof Retreat. This young lady was Laura Robertson.”

Tragically, her beautiful soul left us in 2018,” says Bjorgan. Robertson shared her love of Red Roof Retreat with Karley McKeigan, bringing her to the farm, where Karley caught the same passion of wanting to be there on a regular basis. “She has continued on to this day, helping when she can, as well as following in Laura’s footsteps to become a volunteer firefighter,” says Bjorgan. Karley and Laura shared a friendship, and a commitment to something bigger than themselves, “something we wish everyone could experience at least once in their lifetime.”

Karley continues to exemplify a true “horse spirit,” says Bjorgan, and is being recognized this year with the first Laura Robertson Memorial Award.

The NOTL Kinsmen represent the meaning of community, and show many hands make light work,” says Bjorgan. Club members have become true heroes for Red Roof, helping since the beginning.

“When a warm June night, 20 years ago, and literally the night before the first day Red Roof Retreat opened, a group of NOTL Kinsmen were helping to put the finishing touches on a chicken coop in anticipation of our first special needs class visit,” says Bjorgan.

“Working in the dark, under a flood light, it got done. This is symbolic of the Kinsmen Club. They are the ‘doers’ in the community. Over the years, Red Roof has reached out to the club for support in a variety of ways, and the answer has always been yes.”

This solid group of community volunteers stays humbly and kind, she says, and epitomizes what it means to give selflessly. “Always with a smile and good fun in mind, they go about quietly doing their good deeds for the benefit of others. Red Roof Retreat is honoured by their long-standing support and proud to be recognizing them during our 20th anniversary. Here’s to 20 more.”

Niagara Serve is a Christian-based organization that gives high school students from Canada volunteer opportunities that can benefit charitable organizations.

Since 2005, leaders from Niagara Serve have voluntarily organized build projects at Red Roof Retreat. “They recruit community volunteers who have the building skills, tools and resources, and they oversee and teach young volunteers everything from building, painting, gardening, fence-building, or working in our summer camp with our special needs clients. They are never afraid of hard work, no matter the weather, and ask for nothing in return,” she says.

“Without leaders such as Ron, Annette and Uncle Henk, the volunteer experience would never exist, and the building of Red Roof Retreat would never have come this far”

And for the last award, says Bjorgan, “Remember that saying, ‘behind every good man is a good woman?’ Some people might take offence to that, but in my case, I’ll like to reverse that saying.”

“The award is her opportunity to publicly thank her husband, Moe Bjorgan, for being beside her on their journey of the last 20 years.”

“I have been the face of Red Roof Retreat, and humbly accepted recognition and accolades on the charity’s behalf. It has been my vision, but I would never have been able to make it a reality without a good man behind me,” she says.

“Raising a child with special needs is no easy task. Trust me, I could write a book about all the things I never expected to be doing. But that story is for another time. For now, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation for the man who always, and I mean always, supported me to bring this vision to life, while at the same time being the best friend, husband and father I could ask for.”

“It’s not easy having your wife as a boss (I can hear everyone chuckling), but from doing emergency repairs, to capital improvement projects, and of course his infamous golf tournament, which has been raising money for charity for over 20 years, he has volunteered willingly and with love. When Red Roof needs my undivided attention, he is there on the home front. He has supported Red Roof Retreat and our special family in every aspect, in every way he could. Moe has been there from the beginning, and I know he will be there for all time,” she says.

“How lucky is Red Roof Retreat? How lucky am I? And it is because of this, that Moe is being recognized for the first and only Volunteer Extraordinaire Award for his dedication, and for following the motto of ‘Be a man who did a good act, not for himself, but for the cause of good’.”

Thanks to local heroes, our volunteers!

The NOTL Kinsmen have helped Red Roof Retreat with everything from building projects to fundraising, Ward Simpson, Stefanie Bjorgan and Ken Slingerland help Red Roof at an annual fundraiser. (Photo supplied)
Canvassing cancelled for 50-year volunteer

Penny Coles
The Local

Back in March, before the world changed, a group of people from various Niagara-on-the-Lake arts and culture organizations planned a meeting to discuss celebrating their volunteers. This week, April 19 to 25, is National Volunteer Week, and, Cheryl Morris, member of the Shaw Guild and Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre, had planned the meeting to collaborate on how best to recognize the volunteer workers who are a driving force behind hundreds of arts and cultural events that happen in the community each year.

Many of the organizations host annual events for their volunteers, and one of the topics for discussion could have been about a collaborative celebration, but of course that meeting about a collaborative celebration could have been post-poned until 2021. It’s difficult for volunteers who want to go out and help and doing what they enjoy doing, says Morris, but they’ve continued to collaborate, send a collective thank you. "Chers to the Guild’s town of 300 volunteers! Your donation of over 13,500 hours last year and your fundraising efforts to support the production of a Christmas Carol contributed to a terrific 2019 season at the Shaw Festival." Then Morris in a recent news release for Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre, Patti Krak, volunteer relations, "Volunteers are the heart and soul of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum. They are hardworking, passionate, smart, and just as important, they are fun. Their commitment provides an invaluable support to the staff, and without them the ongoing success of the Museum would not be possible." "The Board and Staff of the Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre would like to send our heartfelt thanks to our volunteers for their contribution not only to the success of all of our special events from artists’ exhibits, to the Fashion Show, Art At The Pumphouse, Moonlight Picnic and Artful Treasures, but also to the volunteers who tirelessly worked on the renovation. We can’t wait for our doors to open again!"

At a volunteer tea in February, Both Dandridge, community co-ordinator for Cancer Society, presented volunteer Sheila Tierney with a certificate for her years of volunteering. (Penny Coles)

Thanks to our local heroes, our volunteers!

Penny Coles
The Local

This is the first year since 1970 that Sheila Tierney will not be canvassing for the Canadian Cancer Society. She and her husband Ed began volunteering with the cancer society after their son, at the age of two, was diagnosed with cancer, and recovered after 18 months of chemotherapy. Last year Niagara-on-the-Lake’s rich heritage community was able to celebrate her 90th birthday in Atlantic with a large group of family members. But there was no need — the campaign has been cancelled, as it was before, of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her sister, who was battling leukemia, died just days before her birthday, in isolation, without seeing any of her family. They do best — illuminate lives and enrich the world through their dedicated support," says Morris in a recent news release to honour volunteers. "Besides the valuable volunteers bring to each organization, their contribution to the worldwide renown of Niagara-on-the Lake as a premier tourist destination is unmatched." Despite the cancellation of so many events, says Morris, it’s important to recognize and thank volunteers. "To each and every volunteer, the following organizations send a collective thank you. “Chers to the Guild’s town of 300 volunteers! Your donation of over 13,500 hours last year and your fundraising efforts to support the production of a Christian Carol contributed to a terrific 2019 season at the Shaw Festival.” Then Morris in a recent news release for Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre, Patti Krak, volunteer relations, "Volunteers are the heart and soul of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum. They are hardworking, passionate, smart, and just as important, they are fun. Their commitment provides an invaluable support to the staff, and without them the ongoing success of the Museum would not be possible." "The Board and Staff of the Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre would like to send our heartfelt thanks to our volunteers for their contribution not only to the success of all of our special events from artists’ exhibits, to the Fashion Show, Art At The Pumphouse, Moonlight Picnic and Artful Treasures, but also to the volunteers who tirelessly worked on the renovation. We can’t wait for our doors to open again!"

At a volunteer tea in February, Both Dandridge, community co-ordinator for Cancer Society, presented volunteer Sheila Tierney with a certificate for her years of volunteering. (Penny Coles)

You cannot begin a note thanking our local heroes without acknowledging our truly heroic frontline healthcare workers. Every day, they risk their lives, and endure painful time away from their children in the relentless pursuit of keeping our community safe. When this crisis passes — and I pray it will — these heroes will come to epitomize our response.

As volunteers, energy and dedication to their work is unmatched. “The Board and Staff of the Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre would like to send our heartfelt thanks to our volunteers for their contribution not only to the success of all of our special events from artists’ exhibits, to the Fashion Show, Art At The Pumphouse, Moonlight Picnic and Artful Treasures, but also to the volunteers who tirelessly worked on the renovation. We can’t wait for our doors to open again!" 

At a volunteer tea in February, Both Dandridge, community co-ordinator for Cancer Society, presented volunteer Sheila Tierney with a certificate for her years of volunteering. (Penny Coles)
Thank you, volunteers, through good times and bad

When tragedy occurs, people in small, close-knit communities come together. We’ve seen that happen many times in our own community, where friends and neighbours circle those who are suffering to offer solace and comfort.

But how do you do that in a community that is experiencing such anguish, such agony over a senseless act of violence, one we are all mourning, all over a senseless act of violence, in every segment of society, the arts and cultural organizations, the schools and churches, the sports associations and service clubs, volunteers help every step of the way, for the benefit of their friends, family, for all of us.

Letters! We want letters!
If you have a letter to the editor you’d like to see published, please send it to penny@notllocal.com. Please try to keep it to about 350 words. Sorry, but we won’t publish anonymous letters. The deadline is Monday at noon.

From one small community to another, we send our love

Auchterlonie on Astrology

This is National Volunteer Week, a time to celebrate the dedication and selflessness of volunteers, across the country, and in our communities.

The irony is the theme chosen for this year: “It’s time to applaud this country’s volunteers.” Very appropriate, to applaud this country’s volunteers. “It’s time to make this amazing community an even better place to live, work and play.”

Volunteers help every step of the way, for the benefit of their friends, family, for all of us. When tragedy occurs, people in small, close-knit communities come together. We’ve seen that happen many times in our own community, where friends and neighbours circle those who are suffering to offer solace and comfort.

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Lifestyle changes can decrease risk of all disease

Not only should we prevent and treat these conditions properly, responding to these conditions will decrease the risk of developing other conditions, such as COVID-19, which is a long-term kidney disease, heart disease, stroke, long-term kidney disease, and smoking, are at higher risk for severe disease or death from COVID-19.

The implications of this are significant. As these are conditions which predomi- nantly impact people who grow older, we need to ensure we respond to each of these conditions properly, because if we prevent high blood pressure, for example, the risks of developing COVID-19 decrease, and the same can be true for conditions like irregular pulse (atrial fibrillation) and many others.

One not only should we prevent and treat these conditions properly, responding to these conditions will decrease the risk of developing other conditions, because the modern environment greatly contributes to many health risks, also known as a few simple lifestyle changes can decrease the risk for all of them. The evidence about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle is very strong and universally accepted.

Three general areas need to be kept healthy are:
1) Physical Health - get more active, reduce the impact of stress, have good sleep habits, and be wary of over medication.
2) Blood Supply - do not smoke, keep your blood pressure, your weight down and decrease the sugar and cholesterol in your diet.
3) Brain Capacity - get active and involved in the community (through virtual methods at the moment), increase intellectual activity and check your hearing and vision. COVID-19 helps to shed light on some important aspects of health and aging. Aging alone is not a cause of major problems until the later 90s - look at Christopher Plummer, who received Academy Award nominations at ages 88 and 90.

Nevertheless, residents of Niagara-on-the-Lake should support each other through collective physical distancing and proper hygiene practices, to protect those who are at higher risk for severe case of COVID-19. Additionally, it is important to take time to check on friends and family, as the recent social changes also can have emotional impact on our loved ones. Finally, the outbreak is a reminder for us to continue practices that increase our physical and brain fitness, which are protective against a wide range of illnesses.

Larry W. Chambers has authored articles and books on disease prevention, improvements in long-term care homes, and innovative approaches for continuing professional development. He is research director of the Niagara Regional Campus, School of Medicine, McMaster University. Eva Liu and Hanna Levy are medical students at the Niagara Regional Campus of the McMaster University School of Medicine.

A note of thanks to Shaw volunteers

A big thank you goes out to all of the production/wardroom crew and seamsters at the Shaw Festival for putting together re usable isolation gowns for our team. The Niagara North Family Health Team has seven locations - five in St. Catharines and two in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and we have been struggling with maintaining enough personal protective equipment (PPE) for use during patient visits, particularly the disposable isolation gowns. While patterns are easily available, materials and sewers were not. Tim Jennings, Executive Director and Don Franklin, Production Director were quick to lend their support to the project. The wardrobe crew has put together over 80 gowns to date and continue to leverage their resources to get fabric and supplies.

The Niagara North Family Health Team is grateful for all of their work which will allow us to continue our work while protecting our staff and patients. Their work is truly a reflection of the community spirit that can shine through during a crisis. A big thank you once again to all of the team at the Shaw.
Many homes in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and across the country, are proud to fly their nation's flag on Canada Day. Rene Bertschi believes our flags could be a symbol of a country united against a disease, and in showing appreciation to all those who are putting their lives at risk to keep others safe.

"This is like World War III" he says, not unlike when soldiers put their lives in danger to protect the freedom and future of their countries. "We have to do whatever we can do to thank all the front-line workers for their sacrifices," says Bertschi. "When you look at the number of people devastated by the disease, the people who have died from this disease, the numbers are horrendous. This is not only a thank you, it’s a sign of respect, to those who have shown an understanding that we need to beat this virus, through distancing, to protect ourselves and our essential workers. Flying the flag means we’re all in this together."

Bertschi says, as Canadians, “we seem to be so quiet over the achievements of our country. What better way to say thank you to front-line workers. Our nurses, doctors, and other workers in the hospitals, the police, paramedics and firefighters, they’re all out there every day.”

Bertschi lives on Shaw’s Lane in the Old Town, and several of his neighbours have brought out their flags, usually reserved for Canada Day, to join him in saying thank you.

Some locals have flag poles that are used once a year, and others are finding respectful ways to display their flag, he says.

To his neighbours, Bertschi says, “Let’s do it.” And if you have a spare flag, “put one out for your neighbour. And pass the message on to as many people as possible.”

He’s hoping for an “avalanche” of flags, not just in NOTL, but the region, the province, and across the country. “It’s a way of connecting our country.”

But it doesn’t have to end there.

Bertschi has spoken to his sister in Switzerland, a friend in South Africa, and another in Germany, about flying their country’s flags. “They all thought it was a great idea,” he said “I hope everyone will be doing it. Let’s leave politics out of it, and let the citizens say thank you.”
DYCK, MARTIN—Martin was born on August 15, 1958 to Henry and Elisabeth Dyck in the Niagara-on-the-Lake Hospital. He completed the family of five children. He enjoyed his youth in Virgil and, upon completing high school and college, entered the workforce at Stelco in the Quality Control Department. From there his interest in technology led him to employment at Philips. There he excelled in skills and knowledge and quickly moved into management positions. His specialty became amalgamation of offices and practices, and streamlining procedures to improve performance and profits. After several years, Philips was merged with Fujitsu where Martin again assumed leadership and management positions.

Soon thereafter, he followed his dreams and ventured out on his own and founded Port Whitby Marine Supplies. His love for boating and marine interests led him to start several other companies, one of which is Skippers Products. He participated at Boat Shows in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, and Florida. He excelled in satisfying his customers. His motto was, “Exceed your customers’ expectations.” After 30 years, Martin sold Port Whitby Marine Supplies due to his failing health, but remained very active in helping the new owner. His positive attitude and hard work ethic has left a mark in Whitby. His involvement in the community was apparent in that he taught a Power Squadron course at Durham College for many years, also helping at the soup kitchen, and others less fortunate.

After struggling with his health issues for several years, he received unwelcome news just before Christmas 2019. Martin never complained but often stated: “I will do my best and God will do the rest.” God saw fit to take him into his arms on April 12, 2020.

Predeceased by his parents, Henry and Elisabeth Dyck, he leaves to mourn his siblings, Elizabeth (Denis) Wiebe, Henry (Nettie) Dyck, John (Kathy) Dyck, Neta (Ron) Willms, and many nephews and nieces.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, there will be a private family interment. A Celebration of Life will be held at a future date.

Donations can be made to the Canadian Cancer Society. Online condolences at www.tallmanfuneralhomes.ca.
Health issues, business closures tough on local family

Penny Coles
The Local

Niki Claus has so many reasons to be grateful, and she is. She and her family have had a rough time in the past, and her struggle now is dealing with the present, and looking forward to a brighter future. Her story is proof positive that good health is precious, and without it, how quickly life can be turned upside down.

In September, 2018, Claus was successfully operating a spa in Niagara-on-the-Lake, but was balancing a heavy work load with caring for her kids. But then, she began having seizures, and other symptoms, but of what, she didn’t know. She was hospitalized several times, and was finally, about six months later, diagnosed with functional neurological disorder. It can cause a range of symptoms, including non-epileptic seizures, weakness, chronic pain and fatigue, all of which she suffered, sometimes to a degree that she couldn’t get out of bed.

It’s a condition of the nervous system, creating problems with how the brain receives signals, Claus explains. She got to the point where she was having several seizures a day, sometimes lasting for several hours. “Some days, it was constant,” she says. “I couldn’t walk, couldn’t talk, I was bedridden, and up so much medication I really couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t work, there was no money coming in. I couldn’t care for my kids, and John had to stay home to look after them. I was terrified.”

Claus has always considered herself the caregiver in the family, looking after aging parents, and helping out her sister, who is raising a disabled son on her own. But at that time, John had just lost his father, her parents’ health was failing, and needed her more than ever.

Claus has known she has so much for which to be grateful. She first met John when she was 19. Decades later, in 2010, when Claus, a certified aesthetician, was so sick she was unable to operate her Touch Day Spa, she was devastated by the loss of most of her NOTL clientele. Once her health improved, she began the slow process of rebuilding, and John was able to get back into the music community and begin performing again. In addition, last September, hoping to supplement the family income, she and John, a guitarist who performs around the region with his band, Klawz, decided to start a delivery service. They would pick up groceries and other supplies, mostly for seniors who were no longer driving.

With the arrival of COVID-19 in Canada, Claus, who didn’t want to be taking advantage of people during such a difficult time, was re-

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Staying positive, waiting for time to rebuild

Continued from page 10

She did, however, have some regular customers for whom she continued to order online groceries, which she and John would pick up and deliver. It helped that they could take their kids with them. She also did some shopping for those who weren’t comfortable ordering online.

But as this corner of the world learned more about the virus, she shut down her day spa, although she continued to offer products for sale, leaving them on her porch or delivering them.

Then came yet another setback. She and her kids were showing cold symptoms, and she realized the last spa client she had seen, had recently returned from Italy, where the disease had really taken hold. After calling a public health assessment centre for information, she was told she and her family must self-isolate for 14 days.

Because of her additional health issues, she was eventually called and given an appointment to be tested.

“That was scary, but when I got to the Niagara Falls clinic, it was Dr. Bertì (from NOTL) who was doing the testing. It was all very well set up, and it felt safe, one person at a time.”

Eight days later, she was finally told the test was negative for COVID-19, and she could stop her quarantine, which had been stretched out 10 days past the 14 days, while she waited for her test result.

Now, her spa is closed, musicians are no longer performing, and the family's last source of income, the delivery service, remains shut down, at least temporarily.

The stress of recent weeks has caused her some relapses, and she is concentrating on her family, with her focus on staying healthy so she can look after them and her father, who is unable to leave his home and relies on her for company and supplies.

“My dad needs me, and I don’t want to put my kids at risk. As much as I want to help, I have to think of my family first.”

She does what she can to avoid stress, trying to keep her kids occupied, making the most of her time with family, and hoping her health improves.

“And I try to stay positive, and trust that everything will be okay,” she says. “I take things day by day, rest when I need to rest, and try to stay calm. Some days I feel fine, other days I’m kind of groggy, and I know I need to take it easy.”

She hopes to be able to rebuild both businesses eventually, she says. “I have this inner faith, not a religious thing, but a trust in the universe, that this is happening for a reason, and that when we come out of it, we can begin again to create our new normal.”

John and Nikki Claus, with Jaden and Trinity, look forward to better times. (Photo submitted)
Mike Balsom
Special to The Local

The digital art created by Niagara-on-the-Lake resident Emma Perretta is being en-
joyed by video game enthusi-
asts around the world.

Perretta, who turns 25 in June, is part of a team of Niagara College students who cre-
ated The Fallen, a new fantasy melee combat game that is now available on Steam, one of the world’s biggest and most well-
known video game platforms.

It’s a feather in the cap for the St. Michael Catholic Ele-
mentary and Holy Cross Sec-
ondary School graduate, who just completed her studies in the Game Development program at the college. She plans to pursue a career in the gaming industry, either on a freelance basis or as part of a development team working for a studio.

“From starting to make characters around 2013,” she says, “I knew I wanted to go further into making games, and being part of the game industry.”

Perretta was the only woman on the team of nine, now known professionally as Six Pillars Studios.

The Fallen is the result of the students working together on their third-year Capstone project, which challenges them to take a game from concept to completion. Though their project was finished in April, 2019, Perretta and the others worked through the summer to make changes and additions. Their aim was to have it ready for a School of Media Studies showcase last October.

According to Perretta, it was after that showcase when professors decided to encourage the group to move forward under an incubator project, giving them more time, and some grant money, to prepare it for the March 4 launch on Steam.

Modelling somewhat af-
fer a popular franchise called Dark Souls, The Fallen requires the player to assume the role of a disgraced knight, who has awakened within the Land of the Fallen, a desolate realm of purgatory. The user must defeat the Fallen Guardians in order to reclaim their or her honour, and to find long-awaited rest.

One of six artists who worked on the project, Perretta worked primarily on environments for the visual elements of the game. Though her interests usually lean toward character design, her role on The Fallen forced her to draw on some new skills in 3D modelling to create props and artifacts.

“I created what are known as assets,” she explains. “I made some skulls, and some stat-
es that are in the crypt, that helped me practise getting into more character design.”

Perretta credits the Game Development program, and the Capstone project in partic-
ular, for building her collabora-
tion skills.

“The program teaches you step-by-step how to be a pro-
fessional game developer,” she says. “I learned how to work together with a team. It started with some brainstorming, and we tried to communicate a lot, and there was a lot of negotia-
tion involved.”

The overall goal, she adds, was to make a game that would be a memorable experience for the player.

In a press release from Niagara College, professor Conor MacNeill noted that, “putting the final touches on a game can be daunting, (so) the fact that the students took their project all the way to distribution, and a launch on Steam, is an amaz-
ing accomplishment.”

“In the gaming world, all it takes is for one influential streamer to play the game and you could see a massive spike in interest from their follow-
ers,” he added.

Another artist on the proj-
et, Andres Coimbra Castedo, originally from Bolivia, says, “we’ve been hitting social media, spreading the word ourselves on Facebook, Twitter and You-
tube. We’ve actually had a few streamers and YouTubers make videos, who have discovered the game on their own.”

He adds that, as a team, they continue to collaborate and to look for new ideas that perhaps Six Pillars can pursue in the future. COVID-19, of course, means they can’t collab-
orate in person, but in the game designing world, that’s not a huge roadblock to progress.

The current situation, how-
ever, did mean that an official launch of The Fallen, scheduled originally for late March, had to be cancelled.

Though she didn’t reap the attention amid the pomp and circumstance that would have accompanied the in-per-
son launch, Perretta is happy to know the game she helped create is available on a popular worldwide platform.

“When we started the proj-
et, I never expected we would see the game on Steam.” she says. “With the success of The Fallen, she can now make a di-
rect link between her long-time love of drawing to a future ca-
reer in game development.

Reviews for the game on the Steam online platform are unanimously positive thus far, which bodes well for the Six Pillars name.

The other members of the development team behind Six Pillars Studios includes programmers Andrew Chiarelli (Dunnville), Philip Ellis (Niagara Falls), and Duncan Brudio (Oakville), as well as artists Kristopher McArthur (St. Catharines), Doug McKay (Dunnville), and Andrew Chiarelli, Philip Ellis, Andres Coimbra Castedo, Emma Perretta, helped create The Fallen. (Photo supplied by Niagara College)

The Fallen, is an amaz-

Thank you to all volunteers, from the bottom of our hearts!

Our community is fortunate to have so many dedicated volunteers giving generously of their time, ensuring our local organizations, events and programs are successful in making our community the very best place to live, work and visit.

We’d like to take this opportunity, during National Volunteer Week, to say thank you to all who volunteer — the impact your efforts have on our community is immeasurable.

You are our heroes — we couldn’t do it without you!