Jamaican injured in NOTL desperately needs financial help

Penny Coles
The Local

Two Niagara-on-the-Lake families are seeking a permanent solution for a Jamaican farmworker who was seriously injured in a 2008 workplace accident here.

The story of Jeleel Stewart, known to his friends in Jamaica and in NOTL as Bushman, is not unique, they say, but he and his family have captured the hearts of Jane Andres and Jodie Godwin. They are becoming increasingly frustrated at a system which has forgotten this man who came to Niagara as a 33-year-old father and husband, through the Seasonal Agriculture Work Program, hoping to make a better life for his family back home.

In his first and only year here, working in a local nursery, he was injured, making it impossible to return to work, and for the last 12 years, he has struggled to provide even the basic needs for his wife and five children.

He was working on a forklift when it slipped, crushing his left hand, causing severe nerve damage and paralyzing it, despite three hours of surgery.

He received some therapy in Niagara, and was sent home to Jamaica, expecting to receive compensation from WSIB that would cover the medication, therapy and other required care for his recovery, and enough money to support his family.

That lasted for just two years. In 2010, it was terminated.

He was deemed fit for work as a gas station attendant, and told he should seek

Historic Steward house site of archeological dig

Mike Balsom
Special to The Local

Little pieces of Niagara-on-the-Lake history were being unearthed this weekend at the corner of John and Butler Streets, though it may take a few weeks to determine whether anything of significance was discovered.

A crew from North Bay-based Horizon Archaeology was at the site of the William and Susannah Steward House to conduct a stage 3 archeological assessment of the heritage home. The house, which was restored by the Niagara Foundation before being sold to a private owner, is a significant piece of the region’s Black history.

Victoria Brooks-Elder, head archaeologist at Horizon, was leading the dig, which began Friday afternoon. According to Brooks-Elder, another company completed the stage 1 and 2 portions of the assessment in 2013. That consisted of historical background research and a test-pit survey. Some of the items found seven years ago warranted this weekend’s stage 3 survey, known as the initial test.

“It’s been a fairly mixed bag,” says Brooks-Elder, about what they found over the three days. “Not a lot of ceramic, quite a bit of animal bone, some of which had been burnt, your chickens and cows you’ve been eating, quite a bit of brick, a lot of nails. A lot of milk tags and bread tags. Nothing all that crazy.”

The lot behind the Steward House measures about 40-by-40 yards. Brooks-Elder said that according to 19th century mapping, there was never a house on that part of the site. “My next step,” she tells The Local, “is to contact the museum, and hopefully they have some fire insurance maps of the area that will show me if there were any structures there.”

Brooks-Elder, her colleagues and a few volunteers had mapped out a 10-metre grid, and were busy digging, scraping and screening for artifacts at four different 1-by-1 metre locations within the grid. As items revealed themselves on the sifting screens in the shaker boxes, they were quickly assessed and bagged.

So many reasons to feel grateful

Dorothy Wiens (left), a member of the NOTL Lions Club, called on a few friends to help with a fundraising project to support minor sports in NOTL. The result was 160 homemade fruit pies, to sell from the Cornerstone Church parking lot on Niagara Stone Road this Thursday and Friday. Rolling out the pastry are Wiens, Luanne Kulchar, Kathy Dyck, Isolde Kroeker and Doris Wiens. For story see page 11. (Penny Coles)

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Residents fear ‘slicing and dicing’ on Johnson Street

**Penny Coles**
The Local

Neighbours of a property on the north side of Johnson Street made it clear during Monday’s public planning committee that they strongly oppose a second dwelling on a single lot, an unusual configuration which they feel will set a precedent in the Old Town’s heritage district.

The property has an 1890 heritage house on it which is currently used as a cottage rent- al, and the owner, David Jones, is applying for rezoning to allow the garage to become a second dwelling.

He told councillors his plan is to eventually sell the property, which abuts the garden of 124 On Queen Hotel and Spa, which he owns and rents, he said. He also owns a house on Gate Street, which he says he has no plans for at this time.

When asked by Councillor Allan Baback whether he had any plans to bring 129 Johnson into the hotel complex and rent them through the hotel, Jones said he plans to rent them by the month, not as part of the hotel, but that he anticipates selling the property.

However, residents pointed out his plans have frequently changed from his original intentions for the hotel complex.

Johnson Street resident Andrew Taylor reminded councillors that when neighbours supported the hotel project, they were told that would be a lovely park, but over time it has been degraded, with no provision for trees, a commercial property has been moved into the park with two hotel rooms, and a wedding venue is planned.

“How do we trust you, Mr. Jones?” he asked, when promis- es that were made in the past are not materializing.

“Brooks-Elder told councillors that the rezoning application before the Monday, called the application, if approved, the beginning of the ‘slicing and dicing’ of one of the best heritage areas in the neighbourhood through the heritage district. Johnson Street resident Andrew Taylor reminded councillors that when neighbours supported the hotel project, they were told they would only affect land use, and there would be no negative impact to the heritage district.

But residents living nearby disagreed, saying adding another dwelling on the property, and similar proposals is to sure that encourage in the future, one resident warned.

Town staff have said provincial policies encourage growth and referrals, with a mix of housing options, including additional secondary uses.

One of the points made in support of the application by heritage planner Denise Horne is that because the exterior of the garage building wouldn’t be altered, the zoning change would only affect land use, and should the application be approved, and the lack of amenity space, which they are assuming would roll over onto the hotel property.

They also question the small drive- way, which abuts the garden of 124 On Queen Hotel and Spa, which he owns and rents, he said. He also owns a house on Gate Street, which he says he has no plans for at this time.

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“How do we trust you, Mr. Jones?” he asked, when promises that were made in the past are not materializing.

“Brooks-Elder told councillors they were elected to be stewards of the heritage district, to provide leadership in heritage preservation. "We’re looking to you for that now.”

If the application is approved, he said, “this will open up a can of worms that other developers and residents will feast on.”

Monday’s virtual public meeting was an opportunity for residents to have their say about the rezoning application before a decision is made. Information from the meeting is intended to inform a staff report and recom- mendation to council.

Result of dig will lead to next stage or sign-off on property

Richard Beckley, an archaeologist working on the Steward home, confirmed that assessment. "Archaeology is probably the most blue-collar white-collar job you can get. Obviously, I’m sure geologists would disagree with me. A lot of us have hips and knee replacements.”

It’s clear the current owner of the house has some plans to build something on the lot, though nothing could be confirmed at press time. "I never get told what’s going on in terms of the development, or why the property needs it," says Brooks-Elder. "I just get told to get out there and do it. I’m guessing it’s prob- ably a condition of whatever he wants to do it. As an archaeologist, I care about what’s in the dirt, not what you’re going to do to it.”

"Niagara has an amazing heritage program," she con- tinues. “They probably red- flagged this because of the historical value attached to the Steward home.”

The historical plaque at the site explains that William Steward was an African American farmer. He and his wife, Susannah Steward, lived in Niagara from 1834 to 1847. The Steward home was part of what was known then as the “coloured village,” a community of former Ca- nadian slaves, black Loyalists and African American refu- gees. In 1837, William Stew- ard was one of 17 local Blacks who signed a petition asking Lieutenant Governor Sir Francis Bond Head to refuse to extradite Kentucky fugitive Solomon Moseby, who was rescued from the Niagara jail by Brooks-Elder and more than 200 African Ca- nadians. The Stewards eventu- ally moved to Galt, now known as Cambridge.

The house at 507 Butler Street is an excellent example of local vernacular architec- ture. It serves as a memorial to these hardworking people who contributed to the building of Niagara-on-the-Lake and to protecting African American refugees in the region.

Elizabeth Pilzrcker currently rents the one-bedroom, two-bathroom open concept house. She was thrilled with the activity in her backyard this weekend. “It’s been lovely,” she says Pilzrcker. She says she chose to live in the house because of its historical value. During the dig on Sun- day, she could see been looking over the shoulders of the ar- chaeologists and asking ques- tions about their findings as they were excavating the site.

Following the weekend activity, the artifacts will be trucked back to Horizon’s offices in North Bay, where they will be cleaned and analyzed by Brooks-Elder and more than 200 African Ca- nadians. The Stewards eventu- ally moved to Galt, now known as Cambridge.

The house at 507 Butler Street is an excellent example of local vernacular architec- ture. It serves as a memorial to these hardworking people who contributed to the building of Niagara-on-the-Lake and to protecting African American refugees in the region.

Richard Beckley, an archaeologist working on the Steward property dig, explains what he is doing to Liz Pilzrcker, who is living in the restored house on the property, while volunteers work in the background. (Photos by Mike Balsom)

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**THE NOTL LOCAL**

October 8, 2020

[Image 34x302 to 775x315]
[Image 35x198 to 775x284]
[Image 35x368 to 277x517]
work in a Niagara gas bar — but he doesn’t live in Niagara, says Godwin, and there were no gas bars near his rural home in Jamaica where he could work.

Godwin and Andres have been financially supporting the Stewart family ever since, working payments into their family budgets to make that possible, says Godwin. “It was only ever to fill the gap that should have been funded by WSIB from the beginning. It was never meant to be in perpetuity.”

In 2017, public attention, including a documentary produced about the plight of migrant workers, and which also told Stewart’s story, pressured WSIB to restate its coverage, which lasted for about two years. “As the public eye turned away, it was terminated again,” says Godwin.

While WSIB was making payments, they were often delayed, and difficult to access, she says, but it has been “some time since he has received anything at all.” It’s a complicated and frustrating situation, which requires a permanent solution, says Godwin. With only one arm of any use to him, Stewart will never be able to find a job in Jamaica that would pay enough to support his family. “People don’t realize how expensive everything is in Jamaica. It’s not cheap to live there,” she says. Food and other basics are always costly, but even more so during COVID. Stewart, she adds, will need financial support for the rest of his life.

She and Andres have visited him in Jamaica, where he is highly respected for his faith and his strong work ethic.

The Stewarts live in a very basic house, have no hydro, little food, and for long peri- ods of time exist on only rice and potatoes. Jeleel now has diabetes, and with no mon- ey for medication, he lives in pain, and suffers from lack of sleep and poor nutrition. “He was once a big, strong man. He has aged so much,” God- win says, concerned about his severe depression, that has come as a result of constant pain, and his inability to sup- port his family.

She talks to him by phone, and knows he needs money, but is too proud to ask for it. When he does, she sens- es desperation. Three of his children were unable to finish their education, but he is try- ing to keep the youngest two in school, especially a daugh- ter who is extremely bright. Education is expensive, and his family makes sacrifices so she can attend a good school.

When Godwin first vis- ited him and his family in Spanish Town in Jamaica, she says, “he was living in one of the poorest homes I’ve ever been in a square, one-storey nei- ghbourhood, but one of the most joyous homes I’ve ever been in. This is a family who draws others to them. “They moved for a time out to a more rural area, but returned to Spanish Town recently to be closer to his daughter’s school. “He is a good man who was injured while he was working here, in Canada. He hasn’t got what he is due,” she says.

In the meantime, God- win’s daughter Leah, who re- members Stewart from when he would come to their house in Niagara and has visited his family in Jamaica, has start- ed a GoFundMe page, with a goal of $15,000, hoping to support his family through the coming months, hoping that those lobbying to have his WSIB payments again re- instated will be successful.

And she and brother, Sam Parker, have grown up witnessing their parents help the Stew- art family over the years, and have contributed themselves.

While they are hoping for a successful fundraiser, it is only a stop-gap measure, says Leah.

One of her earliest mem- ories of Stewart is when she was just six years old, and he arrived at Parliament Oak school one day with his mother to pick her up. “It was soon after he was injured, and I saw him across the parking lot. I ran to give him the biggest hug a six-year- old could give this big man.”

Leah, now 19, has been to Jamaica three times with her mother, the first two visits, when she was 11, and then again at 16, visiting the Stew- art family.

On their trip earlier this year, they didn’t have enough time to drive through the ru- ral areas, and weren’t able to see them. Her first visit had a huge impact on her, she says, see- ing the small home of a fam- ily of five, with rough planks for walls and a dirt floor. “As poor as they were, they had taken in two neighbour- hood children whose parents were unable to look after them, yet there was lots of singing and dancing, and a generous share of what little they had when others stopped by.

Since then, she says, “I’ve been proud of my par- ents and our community of friends who continue to help them. I hoped then that their life would get better for them, and to know it hasn’t is heart-breaking. They deserve to be able to eat, and to live with dignity. Their kids have such talent, but they have to work to help support their parents, and not at the types of jobs they deserve.”

“WSIB should be doing what they’re supposed to do. Everyone here who is helping them can’t continue to do that forever. What we do, it’s not enough. And they don’t like feeling in debt to others.” Others are working on compensation for Stewart, says Jane Andres, who also has been supporting the family for the last decade. It’s difficult to get information from WSIB, with a number of changes in contacts over the last 12 years. There is also an appeal through the Industrial Acci- dent Victims Group of On- tario, although his caseworker has retired, so that too feels like starting all over again.

Leah says from an early age she has felt very privi- leged, “living here, and having the family I do. It showed me the unfairness in the world, that I have so much, and taught me that I should be us- ing my voice to help others.”

The GoFundMe page she set up is to help the Stewart family through to Christmas, she says. It will also hopeful- ly make others aware of the injustice of the family’s situa- tion, and want to help them.

To read about Jeleel or to donate, visit https://ca.gofundme.com/l/justice-for-jeleel

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Help for African grandmothers more important than ever

Penny Coles
The Local

Although fundraising opportunities are limited, Nyanyas of Niagara members are committed to continuing their support to some of the world’s most vulnerable people.

While we are all learning how to live in a pandemic, grandmothers in Africa, trying to raise orphaned grandchildren in communities devastated by HIV and AIDS, are dealing with two pandemics, says Terry Mactaggart, one of the founding members of the local chapter of the Stephen Lewis Foundation’s Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign.

The foundation focuses on community-based, grass-roots support, and the Nyanyas (Swahili for grandmother) became one of about 240 grandmothers and grand-others groups across Canada when it was formed in 2007.

Since then, the local group has raised almost $120,000 to help African grandmothers raise their grandchildren.

Now, with lockdowns in place in Africa, borders closed, and fundraising challenges, the Nyanyas, which have raised almost $120,000 to help African grandmothers, has made it impossible for the Nyanyas to host their traditional fundraisers, including annual African bead bracelets, dinners, and spring lunches.

However, a small group of members making up the steering committee are leading their chapter of about 150 members in finding ways to continue their support.

One opportunity offered to them was a vendor stall at the Saturday morning Village Farmers’ Market, where the women sold a variety of items, including a humorous self-help book for first-time grandmothers, I Love You, Granny; a children’s book, Mosquito Don’t Count; books, aprons, mugs, and handmade dog scarves.

But the highlight at their market stall has been the beautiful African bead bracelets some of the Nyanyas have made, and although the market has closed for the season, the bracelets, as well as other items, are still for sale.

The history of the African bead bracelets originates with a Canadian woman who, when visiting Uganda as part of a medical team, showed some women how to make beads with scraps of colourful paper discarded by a print shop, and varnish to finish them, says Mactaggart.

The Ugandan women began making beads at home to support their families, and were able to feed, clothe and send their children to school with the money they earned.

Recently, a local woman donated “hundreds and hundreds” of African beads to the Nyanyas, and “it was a no-brainer for us to make some bracelets,” says Mactaggart. A group of Nyanyas spent a day in Newark Park putting the bracelets together, and the fundraiser fell into place two weeks ago when they were offered a table at the market.

The African women making the beads are not necessary grandmothers — some have small children — so the beads are helping three generations, she says.

The other initiative they are depending on to raise funds, one they have resurrected from the past few days of the chapter, is the blessing jar, adapted to the current pandemic situation, says Mactaggart.

It’s a simple concept, involving a Mason jar — or any kind of jar — with a slot in the lid, and the original fundraiser suggested each time you had something good in life to feel grateful for, you put money in the jar.

During the pandemic, Mactaggart is suggesting you write an IOU slip for a dollar amount, with a description of the positive experience that sends you to your blessing jar, despite all the challenging aspects of living with the pandemic.

By writing them down, she says, during a time when there is so much that is negative around us, the Nyanyas hope to evoke the positive emotions that continue to occur, especially in this generous and caring community.

The funds can be collected at a later date, when it is safe to do so, and the blessings in the jar will remind us of all the good we have experienced during the pandemic.

When Mactaggart began calling her friends recently to tell them about the blessing jar initiative, “there were 28 women falling over themselves to participate,” grateful for the suggestion they remember the good that is occurring around them, she says.

Mactaggart says that with five granddaughters, she and her husband Terry have much for which to be grateful. One of the grandkids, now 14, was born in Beirut, and began calling them Teta and Jiddo, Arabic for grandmother and grandfather.

That name has stuck, with all the granddaughters, now aged 20 to nine, using it, so Teta and Jiddo have started a blessing jar together — actually a wine bottle, a reason to be grateful for being in Niagara during a pandemic — and also recognizing that those in the Middle East, and elsewhere, are dealing with challenging times and huge loss.

Being a grandmother, she says, is a great time of life, “and also makes us empathize with grandmothers in Africa and how they must feel.”

This is such an appropriate time, with Thanksgiving coming up, to use blessing jars, she adds, not only to raise some money, but to bring awareness to what is going on elsewhere in the world.

We need to keep money flowing to Africa. I understand the support may be less during COVID than it has been in past years, but it’s so important. The need doesn’t go away.

During the last two Saturdays at the market, selling bracelets and other items, and by selling some bracelets to family and friends apart from the market, the Nyanyas have raised $3,275, says Mactaggart.

Anyone interested in donating, or purchasing any of the Nyanyas merchandise, can email nyanyas2018@gmail.com.

Cindy Grant, Marlene Bridgman, Wendy Connelly, Linda Carleton, Peggy Hooke, Sandra Hardy and Sue Henry gathered in place in Africa, borders closed, access to food and medicine limited, people cut off from support groups, and under-re-sourced healthcare systems under strain, groups such as the Nyanyas and the aid they can provide become even more important to these vulnerable communities.

Just surviving on a daily basis is difficult for them, never mind in this pandemic,” says Mactaggart. “They are up against a brick wall in their lives. But one of the positives to come out of this is we are finding new ways to fundraise.”

The pandemic has made it impossible for the Nyanyas to host their traditional fundraisers, including annual African bead bracelets, dinners, and spring lunches. However, a small group of members making up the steering committee are leading their chapter of about 150 members in finding ways to continue their support.

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This evening made me realize how much I have missed live theater,” said Fonthill resident Wendy Brown after Thursday evening’s performance of Shaw Festival’s Vineyard Concert Series at The Hare Wine Co.

This event was the second performance in a series of three live music concerts organized by the Shaw Festival and funded by the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario. The first concert took place last Tuesday, and featured the music of songwriter Dorothy Fields who wrote more than 400 songs for Broadway musicals and films. She is famous for tunes such as “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” and the Way You Look Tonight.

Accompanied by a trio of a keyboard, percussion and double bass, Thursday’s performance naturally flowed from classic American composer and songwriter Cole Porter and featured much of his music. You’re the Top, I’ve Got You Under My Skin, the concert closer, Anything Goes. This last tune featured a little tap and shuffle routine which delighted the 50-member audience seated in the expanse of the back patio area behind The Hare Wine Co. courtyard.

The performance was staged on a backdrop of the escarpment and The Hare Wine Co’s vineyards. Although the evening was chilly, the music kept memories of the escarpment and Niagara Falls to the mind. The music was uplifting, and they ‘didn’t even feel the cold’.

Kim Wade
Special to The Local

Performing at one of three concerts at The Hare, this one the Dorothy Fields Revue, were Kyle Blair, Andrew Broderick, James Daly (trumpet), with Krisi Frank (trotel), Alexis Gordon, and Olivia Sinclair-Brisbane. Not pictured but also performing that day was Jonathan Tan. The revue is directed and choreographed by associate artistic director Kimberley Rampersad with music direction by music director Paul Sportelli. (Katie MacCabe)

“I think many people just want to get outdoors and enjoy live music, especially with current regulations for indoor performances. We have had a wonderful response to our two Shaw concerts to date. Both were sold out. It is not surprising as the Shaw performers have amazing talent and wonderful energy when they perform.”

The Hare is hosting the final performance in this concert series, which will feature the music of Dolly Eltiggen, on Thursday, Oct. 8 (weather permitting), starting at 5 p.m. Tickets are a $10 donation to the Red Roof Retreat, with 100 per cent of the ticket sales for all three events donated to this cause. So far, we have $1,000 and after next Thursday’s concert, we expect to donate $1,500,” Hare said.

Tickets or information is available through theharendo.co website, by visiting their Facebook page or by calling 905-684-4994.

Kim Wade
Special to The Local

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Tickets or information is available through theharendo.co website, by visiting their Facebook page or by calling 905-684-4994.

This evening made me realize how much I have missed live theater,” said Fonthill resident Wendy Brown after Thursday evening’s performance of Shaw Festival’s Vineyard Concert Series at The Hare Wine Co.

This event was the second performance in a series of three live music concerts organized by the Shaw Festival and funded by the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario. The first concert took place last Tuesday, and featured the music of songwriter Dorothy Fields who wrote more than 400 songs for Broadway musicals and films. She is famous for tunes such as “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” and the Way You Look Tonight.

Accompanied by a trio of a keyboard, percussion and double bass, Thursday’s performance naturally flowed from classic American composer and songwriter Cole Porter and featured much of his music. You’re the Top, I’ve Got You Under My Skin, the concert closer, Anything Goes. This last tune featured a little tap and shuffle routine which delighted the 50-member audience seated in the expanse of the back patio area behind The Hare Wine Co. courtyard.

The performance was staged on a backdrop of the escarpment and The Hare Wine Co’s vineyards. Although the evening was chilly, the music kept memories of the escarpment and Niagara Falls to the mind. The music was uplifting, and they ‘didn’t even feel the cold’.

Kim Wade
Special to The Local

Performing at one of three concerts at The Hare, this one the Dorothy Fields Revue, were Kyle Blair, Andrew Broderick, James Daly (trumpet), with Krisi Frank (trotel), Alexis Gordon, and Olivia Sinclair-Brisbane. Not pictured but also performing that day was Jonathan Tan. The revue is directed and choreographed by associate artistic director Kimberley Rampersad with music direction by music director Paul Sportelli. (Katie MacCabe)

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Gratitude possible at Thanksgiving, even during pandemic

With Thanksgiving approaching, we may be experiencing some level of gratitude. Some families will voice their reasons for feeling grateful, and in many cases, there will be a traditional Thanksgiving feast. However, many are finding it challenging to feel grateful in a world that has been impacted by COVID-19. This pandemic has brought us to understand on a more visceral level how much our loved ones mean to us.

We have all learned new ways of doing things. We have become more efficient. The lockdowns have allowed us to get caught up on chores or renovations at home we’ve been putting off. On a broader scale, we can be grateful for being able to live in a country with free, good medical care.

We are grateful to live in a country where our leaders are doing what they can to keep us safe and healthy, and if we don’t agree with their measures, we can be grateful for living in a country where we can still be free to say so and vote them out next election.

By being deprived of contact with friends and family through FaceTime or Skype phone calls, or time to get caught up on chores or renovations at home we’ve been putting off. On a broader scale, we can be grateful for living in a country with free, good medical care.

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The full week of Auckterlonie on Astrology can be found on the Facebook page for The NOTL Local, and on the website www.auckterlonieastrology.ca In Part II of my Podcast, I’ll be reviewing ideas and plans that have led to cooler and more colourful fall days, many people are finding more time to walk, hike or cycle.

We all learned new ways of doing things we enjoy, and what we need to do. It may be a virtual meeting, less time spent on the road or stuck in traffic, how to connect with family through FaceTime or Skype phone calls, or time to get caught up on chores or renovations at home we’ve been putting off. On a broader scale, we can be grateful for living in a country with free, good medical care.

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Larry W. Chambers
Hanna Levy,
Eva Liu
Special to The Local

Months of reduced physical activity and isolation due to COVID-19 lockdowns are taking their toll on seniors’ flexibility, strength and endurance, as well as emotional and social well-being.

The emphasis moving forward should be on infection control, and on giving people information, encouragement and support to increase fitness while at home, as social distance measures are likely to continue into the future.

Despite this, however, the benefit of physical activity in older age is maintained throughout. The ability to continue living without disability, frailty and dementia. Grow older like living longer can also be achieved in this form of activity from the comfort of their homes. Through gathering data in research projects, such as those organized by Zooniverse. Although the priority for housebound older adults is to get them out of the house as often as possible, the internet offers opportunities to continue To view the couch.

The trusted voice of our community

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View from the couch

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Although ‘average life expectancy’ is a commonly used term, ‘healthy life expectancy’ is a far more valuable metric. It describes amount of time one can live without disability, frailty and dementia. Grow older like living longer can also be achieved in this form of activity from the comfort of their homes. Through gathering data in research projects, such as those organized by Zooniverse. Although the priority for housebound older adults is to get them out of the house as often as possible, the internet offers opportunities to
Year after year, cooking remains the leading cause of residential fires across Ontario. We all own many electronics or gadgets that are continually draining our power, however, remaining present in the kitchen is one of the easiest ways to ensure things don’t get out of control. The Niagara-on-the-Lake Fire & Emergency Services, Community Risk Reduction Department will be ensuring this message is spread throughout our community during this year’s Fire Prevention Week. Citizens are encouraged to look for banners placed outside of Old Town, St. Davids, and Queenston fire stations. Look for posters at your local post office, school and community bulletin board. Be sure to follow the Niagara-on-the-Lake Fire & Emergency Services on social media (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) to receive updates and know what to do to remain safe in the kitchen.

As adults, most of us take cooking for granted and begin to believe we can multi-task while doing it. How many people have put a pot on the stove and thought, “I’ll just take out this garbage? Maybe, I have a few minutes, I’ll just change that load of laundry. How many people just sit down and get redirected by their cell phone or laptop? It is these distractions that lead to preventable fires in the kitchen. Remain present, keepcombustible objects off the stove top, turn handles inwards so little ones cannot grab them, and remember to have a lid on hand on the chance a fire does occur. If a fire does happen, carefully slide the lid over a flaming pot to extinguish it before cutting off oxygen to a fire, helping to put it out. Remember to leave your house, get to your safe place and call 911. If you have any questions about how to keep you and your family safe in the kitchen, our bylaws are in place for a reason — to ensure new projects have parameters and can coexist with existing land uses. Each situation is unique and site-specific. One can’t just assume that in existing areas being sought will just rubber-stamp it. It is their job to represent the citizens that elected them and, as citizens, we have the right to follow these procedures afforded to us by law to ensure we are heard.

Yes, there have been delays for this project, but this is not the fault of council. There are many factors involved in the postponement of a public meeting by the applicant and the assertion that it is like any other winery. No two wineries are the same. Our bylaws are in place for a reason — to ensure new projects have parameters and can coexist with existing land uses. Each situation is unique and site-specific. One can’t just assume that in existing areas being sought will just rubber-stamp it. It is their job to represent the citizens that elected them and, as citizens, we have the right to follow these procedures afforded to us by law to ensure we are heard.

Despite missing the spirit of the Great Chicago Fire, which happened on Oct. 9, the NFPA creates a campaign through technologies such as virtual walk apps to explore famous trails around the world, for example: https://monkeyandsso.com/virtual-hikes/. Join an online concert party in the evening for music and a discussion.

In July this year, a survey by AgEcon found that 58 per cent of Canadians aged 65-plus and almost eight in 10 (78 per cent) aged 50 to 64 own smartphones. Eighty-six per cent of Cana-
dians aged 65-plus and 94 per cent of Canadians aged 50-plus report being online daily – see survey infographic at: https://ageccon.taresearch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/OA%20Tech%20Survey-SEP2019-EN-Final.pdf. If the above activities about staying in the community using technology sound exciting, but the technology seems intimidating, two free programs offer students as technology mentors for older adults:

- Cyber Seniors – 1-844-217-3057, email info@cyberse-

iors.org or visit website www.cyberseniors.org
entech.club

These programs match tech-savvy students with older adults looking for help. The students gain practical experience while earning volunteer hours, which develop job skills that enhance opportunities for future employment, and older adults gain valuable skills to help them connect to the community and pursue virtual reality websites to enhance their at-home physical and social activity levels.

Larry W. Chambers has authored thousands of articles and books concerning disease prevention (e.g. dementia), quality improvement in long-term care homes, and innovative approaches for continuing professional development. He research director of the Niagara Regional Campus, School of Medicine, McMaster University. Hanna Levy and Eva Liu are medical students at the Niagara Regional Campus of the McMaster School of Medicine.

The NOTLFE is writing an article on community risk reduction in the Local related to all things fire. Expect to see articles related to fire safety, training, fire department initiatives or developments within the department. The NOTLFE understands our community, and our readers appreciate different ways to ensure we reach every member of the community through using all media platforms available. Thank you for reading, and looking forward to the articles that we produce.

Joan King NOTL
Teen gets wallet, money back thanks to good samaritan

Isaac Andres would like to say thank you to the man who found his wallet, but he doesn’t know who that person is.

It came to him through a circuitous route — the wallet was first picked up by the side of the road by a visitor to town, says Andres.

The 15-year-old had been riding his bicycle from Tim Hortons, along Niven Road, on his way home.

His family used to live on Niven Road, and coincidentally, the man who found the wallet turned it over to Darcy Anderson, a former neighbour of the Andres family, who now lives on Four Mile Creek Road.

Isaac, a Laura Secord Secondary School student, was carrying a new wallet, with no identification in it, fell out of his pocket.

When he realized he had lost it, he assumed the wallet was his, as it was found near his house.

He did put it out on social media, and when he got no response, his mother convinced him to place a small classified ad in The Local.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to the Andres family, Anderson had put a sign on his front lawn to try to find the owner of the wallet.

He later told the Andres a good samaritan had Knocked on his door, and asked if the wallet was his, as it was found on the road near his house.

Anderson said it wasn’t, but he would look for the owner. Then, while Anderson was out of town, Sharon Irvine, the wife of a friend of his, saw the ad in The Local.

She got in touch with Andres, who called the Andres, and Isaac got his wallet back, along with the $700.

Jessica Andres, Isaac’s mother, says she was impressed that “there were three people who did the right and honest thing” to ensure Isaac got his money back. “It has brightened my outlook on humanity, and we are very grateful to them,” she says.

She was also pleased that Isaac, who had been so sure he would never see his money again, learned the very positive lesson that there are good and honest people in the world who indeed wanted to see the wallet and cash returned to its rightful owner.

“I wish I knew who had found it,” says Isaac. “If I could, I’d say thank you to him. I didn’t think I would get it back, I thought it was lost for good. I thought for sure someone would just find it and take it. I’m happy that I got my wallet back and that there are people who are like this,” says Isaac.

“I honestly didn’t think this would happen, but it did.”

Isaac Andres is delighted to have his wallet back, and the $700 in it. (Photo supplied)
Canopy Growth supports heritage trail rehabilitation

Penny Coles
The Local

Rehabilitation of the next section of Upper Canada Heritage Trail is a little closer to reality with a $40,000 donation from Canopy Growth.

The trail from John Street to Charlotte Street has been completed, with the next step in the process for rehabilitation of the former Erie and Ontario Railroad line to take place from Charlotte Street to East and West Line.

Canopy’s Sean Webster was in NOTL last week for the announcement of the donation for a project the company is honoured to support, as it will provide a safe trail for residents to safely walk, run and cycle, he said.

Canopy, which also recently purchased iPads for Niagara long-term care homes, is committed to supporting communities where it has operations. Webster said.

NOTL’s Tweed Farms, owned by Canopy, is one of the largest medical cannabis operations in Canada.

“Canopy Growth believes we can ‘Grow Good Together’ with our neighbours to create change in order to make a positive impact in the communities we call home. We are proud to support the Heritage Trail to achieve those objectives,” said Webster.

With a dead and dangerous tree to be taken down this week, the trail from Charlotte Street and East and West Line will be closed until Friday at 4 p.m. The tree will be removed by crane, along with some other trees, and a brush cleanup, a Town press release said.

Tony Chisholm of the heritage trail committee said the Town’s design for this section of the trail has not yet been completed, but should be available for public input later this month.

Committee members are hoping to find a compromise that will provide a balance for those who want it to look more natural, and those who would like the path to be more accessible for cyclists and those with strollers, walkers and wheelchair users, Chisholm said.

The first section that has been completed is seeing a definite increase in the number of locals who are using it, says Coun. Allan Bisback, whose deck backs onto the trail. Bisback also sits on the committee with the objective of raising funds through donations by local residents and businesses.

The objective is for the Upper Canada Heritage Trail to be an integral part of the active transportation system in Niagara-on-the-Lake, connecting communities and offering a multi-use trail for residents.

The Heritage Trail fund-raising group is seeking donations for the project. Donations can be sent to: The Heritage Trail Committee c/o of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, PO Box 100, Virgil, ON, L0S 1T0.

For more information visit heritagetrail.ca.

Coun. Allan Bisback, Djin Schott and Sean Webster of Canopy Growth, trail committee chair Rick Meloen, vice-chair Tony Chisholm, Richard Coyne and Lord Mayor Betty Disero celebrate a $40,000 donation from Canopy Growth for the Upper Canada Heritage Trail rehabilitation. (Penny Coles)
As we are in the month of October, I’d have to say there is nothing scarier than 2020! Here at Performance Mobility & Home Healthcare Solutions we have been deemed an essential service throughout all of the COVID chaos. There are a number of ways we have adapted our business in an effort to keep our customers and community safe. We have remained open to assist you with short hospital stays, resulting in quick discharge dates, and the need for rental equipment. Our policy around response time is less than 24 hours to make contact and we strive for 24-48 hours for delivery. We understand your equipment needs are essential.

We also offer free delivery in the Niagara region for items like incontinence products, for example, to help people “stay home”. Virtual assessments to bridge the gap between clients and therapists are an option to minimize the number of visitors in your home. In addition, we have put many hours into sourcing out and accessing Personal Protective Equipment, for you! We carry disposable masks (civilian, medical, KN95), vinyl gloves, sanitizer, and thermometers. We also have access to items such as disposable gowns and shoe protectors. Did I mention we support Made in Canada!

NEW! Added to our already full spectrum of healthcare services we now offer a Sanitize and Disinfect Service for your commercial, residential, medical, industrial, or office space. We fog using a hospital grade disinfectant that is anti-microbial, HVAC approved, food grade sanitizer, non-corrosive, and approved as a soft surface sanitizer. Email for a free quote and consultation info@performancemobility.ca

Please, feel comfortable calling or coming into our store to share your story. If you have a problem, we will help you find a solution. We appreciate you allowing us to be your Home Healthcare expert. Thank you to all essential and healthcare workers!

Shop local, stay well, and keep smiling.
When six women gathered around the kitchen island in the home of Dorothy Wiens last Thursday, they were doing what comes naturally—helping their community.

When the friends see a need, they pitch in to do what they can. They’ve been doing that for years. Last week, they were making fruit pies, in response to a call for assistance from Dorothy Wiens, a member, with her husband Erwin, of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Lions Club.

Like so many organizations and service clubs, the Lions have been looking for new ways to fundraise during the pandemic, so they can continue to support their community. Wiens had decided a Thanksgiving pie sale could raise some money to allow the club to continue supporting minor sports for youth, including hockey, lacrosse, soccer, basketball.

“We’re a small little club, just trying to keep on doing what we’ve always done, supporting youth activities in our community,” says Dorothy.

The Lion’s Club sale is this Thursday from 3 to 6 p.m. and Friday from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. from the parking lot at Cornerstone Church, and will offer 160 frozen, unbaked pies at $20 each, just in time for Thanksgiving.

“We have people standing outside in the parking lot with buckets, and you order your pies and throw your money in the bucket,” says Dorothy.

Froese Farms and Mike Homburger of Jordan donated the peaches, Mike and Sandy Perrault, who have a jam stand on Niagara Stone Road, donated the apples, Phil Leboudec of Phil’s Valumart the flour, and Paolo Miele the shortening and oil, says Dorothy.

Lions members helped slice the apples the night before, and most of the peaches had been sliced and frozen when they were harvested. “Otherwise, we couldn’t have done all this in a day,” she says.

Other members provided ingredients and supplies such as the aluminum pie plates, plastic bags and labels, making the fundraiser a true community effort to give back to the community, she added.

While the women who gathered to make the pies understand their goal is to raise money for the Lions and the community, they get just as much themselves out of the shared experience. “Humans are meant to connect with each other,” says Doris, "and that’s been difficult recently. This is an opportunity for us to be together, and it’s been fun.”

As a Lions member, Kathy Dyck, as they discuss the pie-making assembly line is the obvious location. “This is our support group,” says Kathy Dyck. “We have such history together.”

Carole Wiens helped make and wrap 150 fruit pies for the NOTL Lions sale, this Thursday and Friday at Cornerstone Church on Niagara Stone Road. (Penny Coles)
Embracing the present through yoga at Palatine Hills

Kim Wade
Special to The Local

Gathered on a vast green lawn, dotted with trees and framed by large wine barrels and vineyards, 16 yoga enthusiasts arranged their mats in the customary formation in view of their yoga instructor for their Sunday morning practice last week.

They are welcomed by instructor Abbey Morris, who says how grateful she is for the gorgeous weather we are experiencing, and expresses her thanks to Palatine Hills Estate Winery for inviting her to share this practice with them.

Throughout the hour, Morris reminds the participants that this session is time spent taking care of themselves. She helps them become more aware of their bodies by concentrating on their breath and the poses, giving them permission to relax their minds by setting aside their thoughts, worries and preoccupations by concentrating on the here and now.

The quest for that mind/body connection is what attracted Morris to yoga. A recent graduate from Brock University with a degree in media and communications and a minor in sociology, Morris has had her own struggles with finding that connection. She openly discusses her challenges with mental health issues and her diagnosis with anorexia.

“Yoga’s been very transformational for me in my life. It’s helped me with lots of mental health issues. A couple years ago I was diagnosed with anorexia, so yoga really helped me find a mind/body connection that I am very driven to share with the rest of the world. I think that this is a very important time to bring yoga and meditation and assorted therapeutic services to people in these very uncertain times, and to be able to find that connection to something in yourself.”

Morris explains she has always been an active person, taking part in sports, including cheerleading. “I have always done active Vinyasa (yoga), which is definitely my strong suit, and I love being able to teach it. I’m very comfortable with knowing how my body moves and I’ve played sports where I’ve had to cultivate that body awareness, so I think coaching and cheerleading and all those things definitely helped me along the way.”

In December 2019, Morris travelled to Costa Rica and started her yoga teacher training there with her first 200-hour certification. After training in Vinyasa, she turned to Gentle Yoga, Yin Yoga, and also completed training in meditation.

She teaches a Gentle Yoga class in Thorold with specific moves that are easy on the body, developed for the needs of an aging population or people who may be recovering from surgery and/or have physical restrictions that require more gentle movement. “I find that people think yoga has to look and be a certain way, and that’s not really what it’s all about. I like to do these classes so I can understand all bodies that come into my classes.”

Morris explains that Yin Yoga practice is more meditative, and more challenging, as you have to hold the poses for about three to five minutes. The longer pose helps to stretch the tissues beneath the muscles, and to stretch the connective tissues in your joints. She explains it can be therapeutic for people with pain in their hips and lower back.

Morris finds one of her most rewarding experiences is receiving comments from her clients about feeling welcomed to her sessions, and included in her class, regardless of their abilities. “I’m getting rid of that perfectionist attitude that sort of haunted me for so much of my life,” she says.

“Right now,” she announces, “I am very excited. I’m in a mentorship group looking at teaching yoga for women with eating disorders. That was sort of my recovery path, and something that was very transformative for me, so I am very interested in the route of yoga therapy. It’s still quite new, but it is something to take yoga and apply it to different types of mental and physical ailments. It is essentially using yoga to help with stress, anxiety and food fear, she says. “That’s something that I’m looking to do.”

She says her road to recovery “is still very much a journey of mine. So simultaneously I’m learning by my own experience, and she hopes that when teaching yoga her personal experience will help others.

Although COVID-19 has created many challenges for Morris and the region’s yoga studios, she believes her chosen path is a positive one. “It is really neat to be a yoga teacher at this time, because it’s almost like a small social obligation to help people in this time of uncertainty, knowing that people are coming to you to live their reality. It’s mental health and fitness all rolled into one.”

When you practise yoga, she says, “you begin to feel better about yourself, not just your body but your mind, your state of being. You will want to take care of yourself better.”

“Through yoga, people develop this sort of love for themselves and come to appreciate themselves in a way that they feel the need to care for themselves a bit more, rather than concentrating in doing a bunch of abs in hopes that you’ve got a washboard abdomen.”

As far as yoga in the vineyard, “everyone really loves the space,” Morris says. “I used to work in the wine industry, and there is just something about being out in the vineyard and that sense of calm. No matter what’s going on, you can look out there and know that there is calm available. I just love this area and living in Niagara.”

The morning practice was concluded with a calming meditation while participants soaked up the warmth of the waning morning. After the session, they were invited to enjoy a glass of wine on the Palatine Estates patio, on the grass, or back on their mat, socially distanced in the sunshine.

Palatine and Morris have agreed to continue the Sunday morning yoga sessions into October, “as long as Mother Nature graces us with warm presence.”

The classes start at 10 a.m. and are designed for all levels of practice. Tickets are $22, and include 60 minutes of yoga and one glass of wine. To purchase tickets, email abbeysyogais@gmail.com, contact the winery at palatinehillstatewinery.com, call 905-646-9617, or visit Palatine Hills Facebook page for events.

For more information on Abbey Morris and her yoga journey visit https://calendly.com/yogawithabby or follow her blog at Namaste & Rose.

Reason to be thankful

Kathy Brown, manager of the Virgil Avondale store, has been collecting cash for food banks since July. She donated $450 worth of food to Newark Neighbours for Thanksgiving dinners last week, as part of the Community Food Drive, and before that, $2,300 to food banks around Niagara. (Photo submitted)
Mike Balsam
Special to The Local

Former Garrison Village resident Mike Denney was working the golf day he should have been collecting his sixth Canadian Country Music Association (CCMA) award, but like so many opportunities missed during the pandemic, he found out about his win online.

As owner of independent record label MDM Recordings, the 58-year-old has been collecting his music industry award for guiding the careers of successful Canadian country artists Chad Brownlee, Jess Mosiakule, David James and many others.

Denney would be the first to admit that during his days attending Niagara District Secondary School, no one would have predicted he would one day be accepting the 2020 CCMA Industry Person of the Year award.

“At 32 years old, Denney says from his Toronto home: “I was working in the morning (with his father, Wilf, at Woodstream Corporation, where they made fiberglass canoes), then I would go to school in the afternoon. But often that meant heading to the parkway to party. I thought they pushed me out of school in the afternoon. But I was looking through the St. Catharines Standard classifieds one day,” he says, “and I saw an ad for a merchandiser rep, to go into all the department stores in the region to make sure the music section was up to speed. That’s when things started to kick into gear.”

He was hired by the Handelman Company, and for a time he juggled that job with running the DJ company. His role as a rack-jobber may not have been the most glamorous in the music industry, but their annual convention brought together representatives from all of the big record labels in the country.

“There were seven major record companies at the time, and they all did presentations over the course of two days,” he explains.

Denney enrolled at the Trebas Institute of Music, followed by a two-year program at the Harris Institute. After many failed interviews, he was hired by Pinoff Record Sales for their One Stop division, where he was responsible for sales to independent record stores.

That job gave him valuable experience and further connections within the industry. In quick succession, Denney was shortlisted for a job with Sony Music, which he didn’t get, but was hired by PolyGram Filmed Entertainment to sell VHS tapes, had to turn down an offer from Sony the same day he accepted that job, then four weeks later, left PolyGram when Sony made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.

At 32 years old, Denney had his dream job, and he decided to finally move to the Toronto area. Within a year-and-a-half, he was working for that man he met at that Handelman convention. “I ended up reporting to the guy I said I was going to work for, Don Oates. He ended up being my boss, my mentor and a great friend.” CD sales were flying at the time, says Denney. “My job was kids’ audio and video for Sony Wonder, and non-traditional sales, so getting CDs into drug stores and grocery stores. It was fun and challenging, but I did really well. I moved into a national sales management role within a year-and-a-half.”

Corporate politics edged Denney out of Sony after four-and-a-half years. At the same time, PolyGram was in the process of merging with MCA Records, forming the new Universal Music Group. Denney’s former instructor at the Harris Institute brought him in on a contract basis. That turned

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Bravo Niagara! launches matched fundraising drive

Mike Balsom  Special to The Local

Bravo Niagara! Festival of the Arts has just announced a new matching campaign in an effort to raise up to $40,000.

It’s the latest philanthropic donation from local residents Carol and David Appel, who have promised to match in full up to $20,000 in donations from the community at large in support of the Niagara-on-the-Lake based organization.

“We are absolutely abashed by the brilliant programming of Bravo Niagara!” said the Appels in a statement, “and we are committed to helping make it happen.”

Through the matching campaign, the Appels are carrying on a tradition for which their family has long been known, and through which organizations across the country have benefited. When it comes to the arts in Niagara, you would be hard-pressed to find an organization that the Appel family hasn’t supported.

Locally, Shaw Festival Theatre, Niagara Symphony Orchestra and Music Niagara Festival are some of the groups whose programs have benefited from the Appels’ largesse. A quick glance at each organization’s website will reveal the Appel name in no time at all. And a Google search will also reveal hospitals and organizations such as the Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research, which have been recipients of gifts from the family.

The love of and support for the arts is something the Appel children, David and Mark, certainly learned from their parents.

The estate of parents, Bram and Bluma Appel, is still an important contributor to the Shaw Festivals’ endowment fund. Shortly before losing her battle with lung cancer in 2007, Bluma Appel received an honorary doctorate from Brock University for her dedication and contribution to the arts in Canada as a volunteer, board member, fundraiser and philanthropist. She was also named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2001, and the Canadian Stage Company’s main theatre in Toronto bears her name. In 2006, she and her husband contributed $50,000 toward the restoration of a barn at the School of Restoration Arts at Willowbank.

Over the years, Carol and David have contributed more than $750,000 to the Shaw. David’s brother Mark and his wife Gail have also been significant donors to the theatre.

Alexis Spiedenker, executive director and co-founder of Bravo Niagara!, says, “we are honoured to have the generous support of Carol and David Appel. Their incredible philanthropic commitment will help make it possible for us to present exciting new initiatives for our 2020/21 season.”

With the pandemic still hindering the ability of such organizations to bring larger groups of people together to enjoy the arts, Bravo Niagara! has had to shift to online programming through its new Amplified series. In May, past Bravo Niagara! performers, as well as newcomers, teamed with children’s choirs from Chorus Niagara, Laura Secord Secondary School and Fern Hill School in Oakville, to present a new version of the classic song, We Are the World. The video has since been viewed almost 5,000 times on YouTube.

And the Amplified series grows this month with a series of online presentations for the annual Voices of Freedom Festival.

“This fall we are committed to creating inspiring and compelling legacy projects through our virtual recordings and musical short films,” says Christine Mori, artistic director and co-founder. “The series includes three world premieres of newly commissioned works by Bravo Niagara!”

The first entry is a musical short film highlighting the legacy of the Underground Railroad in Niagara, to debut later this month. Featured artists include soprano soprano Measha Brueggergosman and the JUNO Award-nominated Blackburn Brothers, descendants of freedom seekers. Shot at such significant Niagara sites as the BME Church in St. Catharines, the Nathaniel Dett Chapel in Niagara Falls, and the Voices of Freedom Park in NOTL, it will feature the songs Freedom Train, and Sister Vine, an original composition commissioned by Bravo Niagara! to honour the late Wilma Morrison, known as the keeper of Black history in the region.

The overall theme of this year’s Voices of Freedom Festival is Sounds of Hope, commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of the Holocaust. The two musical films to debut in November follow this focus.

Written by Juno-winner Robi Botos, Romani Experience focuses on the history of the Roma genocide during the Holocaust. And Bravo Niagara! composer-in-residence Christos Hatzis presents a stirring new composition for violin and piano called Menorah, performed by Marc Dyck and Christina Petrosa Quilico.

All three videos will debut via the Bravo Niagara! website and YouTube channel.

Meanwhile, Mori and Spiedenker encourage supporters of the festival to consider a donation this fall, especially in light of the Appels’ matching promise, which winds up Dec. 31.

All donations $25 and above will be recognized with an official tax receipt. To make a contribution, please visit bravoniagara.org/match2020.
No Thanksgiving visit to Virgil

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into a full-time position, and he worked his way up to national manager for classical and jazz and strategic marketing.

Just under five years later, the internet and MP3 sharing was beginning to affect the music industry. Universal had laid off about 1,500 people worldwide, and Denney was caught in that wave. He reached out to another connection, Jim West of Justin Time Records. West flew from Montreal to Toronto to sit down with Denney, who was offered a position as Ontario sales manager for their Fusion 3 distribution arm.

This was another turning point for Denney. As he rose through the ranks, he began to receive artist demo packages from unsigned musicians. Jazz singer Eni Fili-Claire Barlow caught his ear. He brought her to Montreal, and she signed to Justin Time on a distribution deal.

“When you work for the big labels, " says Denney, "if you’re in the sales department, you’re in the sales department. You talk to the other departments, but you don’t get involved. At an independent (like Justin Time), I was dealing with unsigned artists, media and publicity people, agents, radio promotion people, artist managers, all these other things I had never done before. That’s where it all started.”

His first foray into country music occurred while at Justin Time, when he over-saw a distribution deal for Aaron Pritchett. “I just hit it off with these guys,” says Denney, about country music artists in general. “They were really cool, and fun. They started taking me out on the road with them to various different festivals. It was unlike anything I had ever done in the music industry, and I had worked in all genres. This country thing was fun, the people are real, the fans are engaged.”

As he was thinking of moving on from Justin Time, he incorporated MDM Recordings, with his eye on signing artists on his own. In 2008, he won his first CCMA awards, and came back with five distribution deals, including for successful artists Melanie Doane and Julian Austin.

Then, in 2009, through a music industry friend named Mitch Merrett, he connected with former Vancouver Canucks draft pick Chad Brownlee, who had begun playing country music. He brought Merrett and Brownlee into the MDM fold, and his independent label was off and running.

His next signing was Bobby Wills, then Denney discovered 19-year-old Jess Moskaluke on Facebook. She signed with MDM, and 11 years later he is still the man behind much of her success (2014, 2015 and 2016 CCMA Female Artist of the Year, 2016 Juno Country Album of the Year, 2018 CCMA Album of the Year).

“There’s something to be said for the success of an artist by who they surround themselves with,” Moskaluke says via email. “Mike has helped and supported both myself, and all of the artists on our MDM roster build the best team in this business, and I believe that’s how you create longevity.”

The hardware has been pretty steady for Denney as well. Besides this year’s Sept. 27 awards ceremony win, because we’re still on the rebound, trying to dig ourselves out of that hole—COVID-19 meant the 27 awards ceremony couldn’t be held in person this year. Denney had been looking forward to getting that Sunday night off when he won the CMMA Instagram page. “I was home by myself, and I was watching the announcements come up on my computer,” he says. “I got up to refill my wine and when I sat back down my phone was exploding. Before I saw myself!”

The pandemic also means he won’t be able to visit mom Gloria and brother Joel back in Virgil this Thanksgiving weekend, or his sister Ginger who lives in Brantford. On the business side of things, Denney fears it’s also forced many young artists to have second thoughts about making a go of it in the music business.

Turning 59 this November, Denney doesn’t yet see a point where he will be ready to walk away from the industry. He admits in the era of Tik Tok, Twitter and Instagram, he relies a bit more on some of the younger people who work for him for advice. But he has adapted to the streaming delivery format the industry has taken, and continues to look for new talent to bring into the MDM fold.

“The thought of an exit strategy crosses my brain more and more as I do this,” he admits. “Pre-COVID I was thinking in four to five years a hard work. It’s a lot of work, and it takes a lot of out of you. I still love what I do. We’ve had back-to-back number one songs at country radio this year (with Jess Moskaluke and new signing Tyler Joe Millet), I’ve always said I would do it until I didn’t feel relevant anymore.”

When he eventually is able to physically hold on to that 2020 Industry Person of the Year trophy, it will be even harder to convince anyone one he’s lost that relevance.