Upper Canada Lodge staff appreciate community support

Joan King, at the community centre Friday, was overwhelmed with the support for what began as a simple project to fill about 80 stockings for Upper Canada Lodge, and expanded to more than 200 stockings overflowing with gifts for seniors at all three long-term care homes in NOTL. (Penny Coles)

While we hear about some of the local initiatives to support staff and residents in long-term care during the pandemic, there is also much that goes on behind the scenes, all of it welcome by staff and residents.

Marg Lambert, administrator of Upper Canada Lodge, says the regional home has received “tremendous support” from residents’ families, and the Niagara community, “that has been greatly appreciated by all the staff and residents at the home.”

“We have received financial donations that we use for ongoing staff appreciation events as a way to say thank you to our staff from the families for their hard work throughout the pandemic,” she says.

The beautiful outdoor holiday displays were made possible because of donations of lights and decorations from the local community, families and staff of the lodge.

“Members of the NOTL Garden Club decorated our gazebo this year with garlands and boughs, which was greatly appreciated, and we also received many Christmas cards for our residents from students and staff of UCL. The stockings that the community put together for our residents this year is amazing. We are so incredibly appreciative of the amazing support at Christmas, and all throughout the year.”

Some of that support comes as COVID-19 has highlighted how challenging the job of protecting seniors has become. But that’s not just a local issue, says Lambert. “I think it is accurate to say that the whole world now understands how difficult the job is for every staff member working in long-term care.”

If there is any benefit to come of the pandemic, she says, it’s that long-term care may finally receive funding to increase staffing levels, which has been needed for many years.

Across the region, and the province, staffing is now becoming a problem in hospitals and long-term care homes, as more staff become infected in the community, or are having to isolate because someone in the family has tested positive.

“I think the most difficult part of our job right now is every week, when we test all of our staff for COVID-19, we wait to see if we are going to make it through another week with all negative results, and stay outbreak-free. It is a bit nerve-racking,” says Lambert.

“I think we all feel that we have a responsibility to ensure we are providing the best care possible to keep our residents safe.”

Continued on page 3

Outpouring of love

Outpouring of love

Outpouring of love

Outpouring of love

Outpouring of love
The provincial announcement of a lockdown starting Boxing Day was welcome news, says Dr. Mustafa Hirji, but he would have liked to see it happen sooner.

"I think the timing is a little bit too late. I think it is perhaps a missed opportunity that they didn’t announce it Monday or Tuesday, and that the days didn’t add up to 45,000-plus new cases. "Once you’d made the decision, they shouldn’t have delayed putting it in place. That delay means literally tens of thousands of additional cases, and probably the current growth rate of COVID-19 cases in Ontario, the delay of the lockdown will stretch, and staff are not being paid and not be out interacting with other people. That’s what’s really going to matter," says Hirji.

Niagara hospitals and long-term care homes are "stretched," losing staff not necessarily because they have COVID-19, but like nonessential travel. "It’s not entirely prohibited, he says, “and rightly so. I would be very reluctant to say people who are at the end of their life are not allowed to spend time with their loved ones, so there is some limitation visiting still happening. "Visitors and staff are being notified to everyone rather than tested regularly, he says, but it’s not a foolproof method, with a lapse in time before results are known. "You just can’t catch 100 per cent of the cases. And when there are more cases in the community, there is going to be greater risk that some infections are going to get into the homes."

Other than specific outbreaks, which earlier this week included 11 hospital units, long-term care and retirement homes across the region, the spread in the community has been similar to what we’ve seen in the past few weeks, says Hirji, involving households, people visiting with friends, co-workers and extended families. Last weekend and early this week saw record numbers of cases in Niagara Region, beginning with 126 recorded last Saturday, more than double any other day since the pandemic started. Sunday saw another 92 new cases, Monday 82 more. There were just 35 new cases on Tuesday.

"We’ve been in a state of emergency for nine months. We’ve been in a state of emergency for nine months," Hirji said. "We need to go back into February or March where it extended longer, or get to the end of January and have down, so we don’t come to the full benefit of this lockdown."

The lockdown needs to happen, to bring cases down we’ll be in the same situation as the UK, where they just headed into their third lockdown, or France, which had to extend their lockdowns. There are going to be people who are sure going to be out of work and no longer have an income. Lots of people are going to be struggling with social isolation, and heading into the holiday season is the worst time for this to be happening. Lots of businesses are going to have to shutter temporarily, and many of them are already struggling."}

"The lockdown needs to happen, to bring cases down. We are putting our essential health care and things leaving for groceries, access to health care and things along those lines, “said Ruller. "A simple motor vehicle collision can involve several police officers, paramedics, and eight to 10 firefighters. We are putting our essential workers at risk if we don’t do it by the recommendations of public health.”

"We’ve been in a state of emergency for nine months now, which is bound to take a toll on mental health," she said. Look online for mental health resources, “check in on neighbours, on your loved ones, and check in on yourselves as well.”

One of our biggest concerns that we’ve had throughout this evolving pandemic has been the unintended consequences that can occur from simple things like nonessential travel. That means “don’t leave your home unless you’re doing it for everybody who is impacted by COVID.”

message couldn’t be more clear: stay home
Street to deliver stockings for every resident.

Bev Wiebe and Marg Plato headed to the Niagara Long Term Care Residence on Wellington Street to deliver stockings for every resident.

Continued from page 1

safe and well-cared for, but in some ways, we have also been more fortunate than most in that we are still able to work and get paid. We don’t need to worry about paying the bills or buying groceries, which is a concern for so many others in the Niagara area right now. It’s not all bad.” Staff morale has been up and down over the past 10 months, she says. “It was scary when it started, and we literally shut down, but we were fortunate. The ability to increase staffing and use redeployed staff from other Niagara Region divisions.

Over the summer, she says, “we settled into a routine, with the additional staffing that allowed us to really focus on our residents’ needs, but then the direction changed and families were able to visit again.” Although outdoor visits were a little nerve-racking at first, she says, “overall things were well.” But as restrictions were lifted, “it made the staff scared of relaxing the visiting rules.”

They were nervous about the increased risk of visitors or family bringing COVID-19 into the home, which had remained free of outbreaks. “Our staff had worked so hard to keep the virus out of the home, and had implemented so many safety precautions that we hoped would continue to work.”

They have appreciated the diligence of families in following the rules, of which there were many when visiting the home, “but I believe they understood that we were doing everything we could to keep our residents and staff safe.”

The support from residents’ families, she says, “has been amazing. It has been very hard on the families as well when they were not able to see their loved ones, but we continue to receive emails and cards of support from our current families, and in some cases, families who no longer have anyone living in the home.”

Kristin Mechelse, program manager at Upper Canada Lodge, says although the pandemic has created challenges and the need for changes to their daily life, it has also provided opportunities for staff to do things differently, “and demonstrate what truly compassionate caregivers they are.”

Recreation staff, for example, she says, “have had to completely change the way they provide programming opportunities for our residents. Since the pandemic caused visitor restrictions in our homes, our staff found a variety of different ways to keep our residents and family members connected through phone calls, Skype and Face-Time calls, window visits, emails and even pen pal letters.”

The recreation staff at UCL stepped up “by working additional hours, learning new skills, providing not only meaningful and safe programming opportunities, but also emotional support, and even hair cuts for our residents.”

Staff have gone above and beyond,” says Mechelse, “and we are very lucky to have such a dedicated group of staff in all departments of our home. I think our staff prove daily that this is not just a job. It is truly a passion for providing the best care possible for our seniors.”

Amika Verwegen and her young son Kazuhiro Versteegen were at the community centre Friday to drop off more than 200 cards made by her three oldest children, Kazuhiro, 3, Yuna, 8, and Nova Versteegen, 9, along with neighbourhood kids Takeh Buczakich, 10, Ella Wilms, 10, Naomi Wiers, 10, and Owen Nzonoukere, 11. Verwegen heard about King’s stocking project and wanted to help by having hand-made cards for each stocking. When she heard how many, she says, she enlisted the help of other kids, and they got it done.

Joan King shows off local author Bobbie Kalman’s book, Refugee Child, a story of her experiences as a young girl during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. It includes three chapters about a very beautiful Christmas, when the very generous and kind people her family stayed with in Austria ensured she and her family had everything they could have asked for, and more. Kalman donated several books for the stockings.

**Staff request: follow rules to reduce community cases**

Upper Canada Lodge is beautifully decorated for Christmas, thanks to donations of lights and decorations from the local community, families and staff of the lodge. Members of the NOTL Garden Club decorated the gazebos. (Photos supplied)
Gerry Kowalchuk wants the quaint, historic Old Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake to leave a lasting impression on visitors, and after doing some research on similar towns around the world, decided the best way to accomplish that is to create an impressive focal point for people to see as they arrive.

“He wants that to be his gift to NOTL a little more than a year from now,” said Betty Disero to stop by for a chat at his Rye Street home, where he briefly outlined his idea for a project to fund the Old Town, making the entrance more iconic focal point for people to see as they arrive.

His goal became to create a “striking” entrance on Queen Street, a rejuvenation of the gateway to the Old Town, he says. He envisions a “symbolic representation” that will complement and enhance the town image with “landscaping excellence which reflects innovation and creativity.”

Other than that, he says he has no idea of what it should or will look like — that is a job for experts. He is also clear “there is nothing wrong with what is there,” but believes the important site could be improved with the help of a landscape architect firm.

Kowalchuk, who moved to NOTL a little more than a decade ago, says he is grateful for how his life has unfolded. As a way of paying forward to the town he and his wife have come to love, in 2014, he set up a family fund with the Niagara Community Foundation.

Explaining his philanthropic endeavours through the foundation, he says he learned a strong work ethic and frugality from his parents, and through his early experiences, the value of “connecting with people,” all of which led to a variety of opportunities that culminated in a career as an investment advisor, of which led to a variety of opportunities that culminated in a career as an investment advisor, from which he is now retired.

The fund, which he manages with one of his daughters, was created to help people in need achieve their goals, but Kowalchuk says he began some time ago to think long and hard about a donation he could bequeath to the town in his will.

He initially envisioned it being set up on a community project after he was gone, but then decided he’d like to see it happen while he’s still alive, and can be involved in the project.

His first step, in the fall of 2019, was to ask Lord Mayor Betty Disero to step by for a chat at his Rye Street home, where he briefly outlined his idea for a rejuvenation of the existing entrance to the Old Town, making it clear he was offering $250,000 to fund the project.

Disero set up a meeting with some town staff, and the project moved forward, following a suggestion that Kowalchuk make a presentation to the town’s community in Bloom committee, which he did, in December.

In January, 2020, councillors had submitted a recommendation in favour of the Queen Street entrance and a work plan for the site. That committee, which is now close to recommending the hiring of a landscape architect firm, includes two councillors, John Wiens and Wendy Cherrapita.

CIB representatives Janet Trogden and Janice Johnston, and residents Alex Topp and Bill Clark.

Kevin Zurzotte, the town director of operations, and J.B. Hopkins, parks supervisor, have been included in committee discussions and have been very helpful, says Kowalchuk.

After several meetings between last January and March, it became clear the most important task was identifying qualified landscape architect firms and determine how to move forward with gathering expressions of interest in the project, says Kowalchuk. Having Topp’s, a retired member of a landscape architect firm, on the committee, proved to be helpful.

When COVID struck in March, committee meetings were cancelled, and only resumed in October by video conference calls. Since then, significant progress has been made despite the pandemic, he says.

After narrowing their search down to three firms, and interviewing them, they expect to make a choice at their Jan. 5 committee meeting, based in part on the work samples each has submitted.

“Seeing their work product has given me a handle on their capabilities,” he says.

He hopes they will have approval from council soon after, and after awarding the contract, could see work begin on a design in February.

Each firm that has submitted a bid has committed to doing a number of conceptual drawings, three at minimum, should they be hired. From there, says Kowalchuk, he has confirmed the committee can look at all the elements in the drawings and if necessary, can choose which elements they would like to see incorporated in a final design.

“I think we will have a lot of possibilities, and with the help of Kevin and J.B, we, as a committee, will make a decision,” he says.

A second bid will go out, likely next spring, for a construction company to carry out the work, which will be overseen by the landscape architect firm as contract administrator, says Kowalchuk.

The tentative timeline he has set out has construction beginning next September, after the end of the 2021 tourist season, with planting to follow in the spring of 2022, and completion by June, in time for the next influx of tourists.

Although it’s a long way off from completion, he says, it’s best to take the time to get it right, and he’s “proud to be the donor of this project.”

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, through its contractor CRL Campbell Construction Ltd., will be commencing with the removal and replacement of a road crossing culvert on Mississauga Street between Johnson Street and Gage Street. The work is scheduled from January 4 through April 30, 2021.

The section of road over the structure will be closed to all through traffic for the duration of construction.

A detour route will be provided around the site for traffic. This closure is necessary to facilitate a shorter construction schedule for the construction of the structure.

Emergency Services will have limited access during this closure.

Any inquiries concerning this project may be directed to Mike Komljenovic, Engineering Supervisor for the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Your co-operation is appreciated.
Local artist contributes paintings for Christmas

Local artist Kevin Conway doesn’t sell his work, he gives it away. Or if he does sell it, the money is donated to causes that are important to him.

This Christmas, he has chosen to donate paintings to Newark Neighbours. Conway says, “for years, I volunteered at the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, and know first hand what life is like for people needing assistance.”

The cheerful, brightly coloured paintings will be a surprise, and a welcome gift for those in NOTL who will receive them with their Christmas food and gifts, says Newark Neighbours chair Laura Gibson. In the past, he has given paintings to the Romero House in Toronto for refugees, and more recently to support programs for students with autism.

After not painting for 35 years, Conway picked up a brush again in 2017, after cancer forced him to slow down. His first exhibit was at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library in 2018, where he sold paintings to raise money for York University’s autism students support program, which he founded in 2014. A percentage of his sales was also donated to the library.

Most of his acrylic paintings are done in a studio at the back of his NOTL home.

For more information about Conway visit https://www.kconwayart.com/
Here we are in the midst of what for many is usually the happiest time of year, yet we’re surrounded by bad news that seems to get worse by the day. It’s difficult to watch TV news, and not be depressed and overwhelmed by all we see and hear. The numbers of COVID cases are climbing all around us, and we’re hearing a sense of urgency in the warnings we’re receiving from all levels of government.

The pleas to stay home and interact only with our own, only after a warning from the authorities, give business time to adjust, and during that time, allow for COVID to continue to spread at alarming rates. Intended or not, it also gives shoppers time to finish their shopping, a contradiction to the message to stay home.

If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it’s to focus on all that is positive, and cherish what is important in life. Family and friends. Love and compassion. Tolerance. Caring for it, all around us, but easier for some to recognize than others.

That provides us with the opportunity to help others who are struggling to feel loved, to find joy, to experience the goodwill the season typically delivers. It doesn’t take much. Maybe a phone call, a surprise gift left by their door, letting them know we are thinking about them and we care.

Our wish for everyone at this time of year: health, happiness, joy, love . . .

We’re not alone.

At The Local, our goal has always been to bring to you the good news of all the great people and events in our community, to unite our community, and in the face of adversity, we have worked to protect each other. Together, we have worked to protect each other, set up safe scenarios for the holidays, and during that time, allow for COVID to continue to spread at alarming rates. Intended or not, it also gives shoppers time to finish their shopping, a contradiction to the message to stay home.

We should be living in this wonderful town we have created, a town surrounded by bad news that has everything in abundance. It is probably way too much, but I was transfixed with disbelief and mesmerized at the twists and turns the plot was taking me. Kate Winslet is astonishing, it was a pretty good adventure. It never forget the adventure.

Donald Combe is a retired English teacher who loves to go to movies. Until he can’t reunite, he has graciously agreed to share his opinions, through “short and sweet” exclusives, of Netflix series and movies for The Local.

Feeling of unity and caring continues through COVID

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What’s happening to world’s ecosystems during COVID-19?

Owen Bjorgan
Special to The Local

Every day, we are barraged with new information regarding the pandemic, politics, and other developments from around the world. But wait. Around the world? What about ecosystem degradation on the other side of the world?

It’s all Ontario and Canada, and rightfully so, as we need to focus on what we can do to maximize safety in our regions. The pandemic and its unending statistics are one thing, but what about globally important ecosystems being removed behind the scenes while we’re on our screens — in other countries?

While the media has us hyper-focused on the front line, I can’t help but wonder what might be happening with the rest of the world. What’s happening in Egypt? Nigeria? Chile? What’s happening in the environmental sector in Ontario, alone, what are we not aware of around the world? And why does it matter to us, here in Ontario?

I picture developing nations strung across the tropics. Imagine governments which are financially hungry with little regard for biodiversity, alone humane working conditions. A rainforest is standing alone. A river is to be dammed. Many governments of developing nations have complete oversight and regulation on how they treat their natural resources, sometimes, at a costly and unsustainable rate.

From what I’ve seen here in NOTL and Niagara alike, we’re no better on a smaller scale. We’ve lost 90 per cent of our freshwater wetlands. We just won’t see it happening in the next couple years. We just won’t see it happening amidst the currently closed world.

Protecting the diversity of species present in our communities only strengthens the communities only strengthens the ecosystem services which nature provides for residents of NOTL, such as flood control, carbon sequestration, and contributions to fertile soils.

I painfully envision families around the world, desperate to make a living. We’re talking real poverty and a need for food to sustain the family. The amount of unchecked deforestation clearing and burning in the next couple years is likely to be enormous. A headline of such losses isn’t likely to make it to the forefront during the coming couple of years.

Instead, we will likely live with the effects of such decisions in these regions, where a few are reaping massive benefits from natural resource exploitation, no matter how irresponsibly executed. Is it on the minds of workers? To care for a rainforest, a gecko, or an orangutan, when you have a family to feed and a government who feels the need to recover quickly? From a nation’s perspective, if you’ve been economically rocked by COVID, why not just tap into your natural resources? Can you blame them? It’s a profound situation.

To remove your nation’s natural resources aggressively on a truly enormous scale, we’ve lost 90 per cent of our original forest cover and wetlands. We predict we’ll see profit overshadowing biodiversity at a global scale over the next few years, in an effort to offset economic losses caused by the pandemic.

The amount of unchecked deforestation clearing and financial desperation is simply pouring gasoline on an even bigger fire that is about to burn.

And so, we will continue to pick away at the global body of biodiversity as a unit of one. We just won’t see it happening amidst the currently closed world.

Rare ecosystems around the world, including southern Ontario’s Carolinian Forest wetlands, are now at greater risk during the pandemic. (Owen Bjorgan)

Correction

The name underneath the letter “Waste of time and money” on page 7 of last week’s edition of The Local was incorrect. We sincerely apologize to both Lezlie Wade, who did not write the letter and does not agree with the content, and to Jim Howard, who did write the letter.

Thanks to a generous community

Reflecting back on a simple request to have interested people fill a stocking for the seniors in long-term care made me realize what a truly caring and very kind community I live in. The generosity, thoughtfulness, and outpouring of help was overwhelming. All the thought that was put into giving those ‘special’ items was heartwarming.

Each and everyone who contributed can be happy to know you have brought pleasure to one of the NOTL seniors in long-term care at this magical time of the year. The spirit of giving was certainly alive in our community.

Thank you for being a part of this simple yet meaningful request.

Happy Christmas and a healthy 2021.

Stay safe, Joan King Queenston

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

The Niagara-on-the-Lake LOCAL

All the best for 2021 from all of us at
Two local families responsible for mystery art

Penny Coles
The Local

The mystery of the outdoor, lamp-post artwork has been solved.

Amika Verwegen and her children, with her neighbour Fabienne Nzouankeu and her son, are responsible for creating and hanging 32 Christmas paintings throughout their Old Town neighbourhood, that includes The Promenade, Old Town neighbourhood paintings throughout their Christmas, and drilled the plywood on which the kids created their Christmas paintings, and drilled the holes to help hang them. The kids used whatever time they could find outside of school, over the course of about a week.

Verwegen’s three older children, Nova, Yuna, and Kazuhiko Versteegen, along with Owen Nzouankeu, were the “future Bankys” (referring to the famous anonymous British street artist) the Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre was trying to identify.

And they were indeed, with the aid of their moms, trying to make their neighbourhood streets a little merrier.

Verwegen, with Fern, her baby girl, and Fabienne snuck out after dark one evening, and spent about two hours hanging the paintings, managing to do so without being caught.

Thankfully, says Verwegen, the paintings remain untouched.

She understands this will be a challenging holiday for many, especially the seniors in her neighbourhood, and says she feels blessed.

And her four children live with her in-laws, Herman and Eva Versteegen, and so will be able to enjoy Christmas together, which is a blessing for all of them. “Everybody will be together,” she says.

The Versteegens, who have lived in NOTL for about 50 years, get to watch little Fern and their other grandchildren grow up, and Verwegen is grateful to be surrounded by family.

The paintings were Christmas-themed, but one that was really important to her daughter Yuna, says Verwegen, was the one of a cat.

“She told me all the people walk their dogs on the street, but there are lots of cats at home. She wanted a cat in a painting for the street, where all the dogs walk.”

Verwegen says she and the kids try to go for a walk every day, and they see their neighbours outside. “They mean a lot to us, and give us a lot of joy. It’s nice to give them a smile, not just at Christmas, but all year.”

Lisa Andreana, chair of the Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre, lives in the neighbourhood.

“I was enjoying my walk one evening after dark to attach the mystery art to lamp posts around their neighbourhood. (Photos supplied)

As a reward for promoting the arts in the community, the Pumphouse has offered complimentary memberships to the arts centre for the two families.

Caroline Cellars Winery

Wine Boutique and Tasting Bar
Open for Purchasing! Order Online for Curbside Pick-up and FREE NOTL Delivery Visit our website to place your order or check our store hours.
We will be CLOSED December 25th and 26th.

The Farmhouse Café Closed December 25th through January 23rd While Niagara is in Lockdown

NOW OPEN TO SERVE YOU SAFELY

Open to the public until Thursday, December 24th 7:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. We will be closed until Monday, January 4th - giving our elves a bit of a rest before we start curbside again. We will be resuming curbside pickup and free on-site/home delivery starting Monday, January 4th from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Our new hours for January - Monday to Friday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Your purchase supports local small businesses in Niagara.
Residents on Shaw’s Lane appreciate all the time and dedication of all the front-line workers around the world during the pandemic, says photographer Rene Ber- tshi, and showed their gratitude with this little serenade with different instruments Saturday evening. The Town asked residents to ‘Make Some Noise,’ and Shaw’s Lane residents, including Jean-Guy DesRochers, Sheila Ashton, Monika Baldwin, Ann Holcomb, Allan Magnaco- ca, Pati Kriple, and Raymond DesRochers obliged. (Rene Bertschi)

Volunteer firefighters made some noise Satur- day evening, using their sirens to show gratitude to front-line workers. Trucks and firefighters at the Queenston fire- hall joined the Town-organized event, as did Pat Conlon across the street from the firehall. (Fred Mercnik)
45th annual Penguin Dip cancelled due to COVID

The organiser Chris Bjorgan, organizer of the annual Penguin Dip on Boxing Day in Niagara-on-the-Lake, likes a crisp, cold day for the fundraising swim.

This year, he would have been happy whatever the weather, instead of cancelling what would have been the 45th annual dip into the frigid water of Ball’s Beach.

“It’s especially disappointing to have to cancel a milestone year, and will be the first time since the first dip that the traditional event hasn’t occurred, says Bjorgan.

In the years since the swim became a fundraiser for Red Roof Retreat, founded by his sister-in-law Steffanie Bjorgan, the milestone anniversaries have been the best, bringing out a bigger crowd of swimmers and spectators, and raising much-needed funds for the organization which provides overnight care and day programs for children and young adults with special needs.

“Most years we pass a hat, and maybe raise about $1,000,” he says. “This was going to be a big one.”

Coun. Clare Cameron and her husband Mackenzie decided to experience the Penguin Dip for the first time last year, and took their three dips with the veterans.

To become a member of the NOTL Penguin Club, they’ll have to repeat that two more years, although fortunately it doesn’t have to be consecutive years.

Both said they were up for the challenge, determined to become official Penguins, and Bjorgan says this year the Camerons said they would help out with the fundraising for Red Roof.

“I thought this year we’d have in the range of 60 people,” says Bjorgan.

His brother Lorne was one of the originals, and there are swimmers, including Lorne, who will take part in the anniversary dips, although they are no longer regulars.

Chris was hoping this would be such a year.

Chris, 63 years old and retired since last February, is a regular participant in the dip.

A lack of publicity meant a particularly small crowd came out on Boxing Day, but the numbers have been slowly increasing, and this could have been a banner year.

Last year saw 20 swimmers and a large crowd to watch.

But COVID, especially with the recent increase in cases, makes it impossible to hold a safe event, he says.

Although swimmers could have spread out and kept their distance, moving into lockdown Boxing Day morning would have meant breaking the rules.

And physical distancing in a trailer between three dips to make it an official event would have been impossible.

“It would have also been difficult with the number of spectators who would have shown up,” he says. “I would feel so bad if someone becomes ill from something I had a hand in arranging.”

New Year’s Levee cancelled

The Jan. 1 New Year’s Levee at Navy Hall, a 30 year tradition hosted by Parks Canada and the Friends of Fort George, has been cancelled.

The annual event draws large crowds of people who come out to meet with friends, neighbours and dignitaries who offer official New Year greetings. The firing of a cannon across the Niagara River toward Fort Niagara, last year with honorary cannoneer Bill Ashburn, is the crowd-pleasing finale of the event.

“2021 would have been our 31st annual New Year’s Day Levee, and we are extremely disappointed to have to cancel this event,” says Friends of Fort George executive director. “The Friends of Fort George and Parks Canada staff would like to wish everyone a safe and happy holiday, and we hope to be able to celebrate the new year with everyone in 2022.”

Wishing you a pleasant holiday and Godspeed 2021!
Maanak Malhotra, winner of The Local colouring contest for children five and under, receives a beautiful gift from Megan McLean of Maple Leaf Fudge, and Sirena Gill, winner for six-to-10 year-old category, receives hers from Phil Leboudec of Phil’s valu-mart. The Local thanks the two businesses who contributed prizes, and the many children who submitted their artwork. (Karen Skeoch)
There was a snowstorm on Christmas Eve, and an argument in our house. By the time we finished dinner and Mom settled the younger kids with Grandma, everyone was upset. When she drove me into the crowded church parking lot, we were late. It was almost time for the pageant, and my special role as the Little Christmas Angel. The teacher had shown everyone beautiful pictures of the Nativity by famous artists, so we understood exactly how the scene should look. Mary would wear a blue hooded cape, and Joseph would be in red. They would wrap the naked Baby Jesus in a white cloth. A bright white spotlight would shine on them. Everyone else stayed in the background. We’d rehearsed for weeks after Sunday School so it would be perfect.

My grandmother had made me a beautiful angel costume, with a long white gown, gauzy wings and a gold tinsel halo. I could hardly wait to stand on the raised platform in the background, behind the Holy Family at centre stage. Our choir would sing ‘Angels We Have Heard on High.’ I practised spreading my wings and gently flapping them to cool the baby’s face. I thought God would probably watch from high above the overhead lights and smile. God would know I was serious about my responsibilities. In my six years on Earth, this would be the most thrilling thing that ever happened.

When I arrived in the church basement where everyone assembled to go onstage, chaos reigned. My gown and wings were gone! Frantically, I tugged on the choir director’s robe and fearfully asked where they were. Then I learned a sad truth. Because I was late, they’d assigned my costume and role to someone else. There was no place left for me.

“Go sit in the audience with your mother and watch,” said the director. I was stunned. It was Mom’s fault we were late, and she’d ruined my Christmas Eve. More than anything, I wanted to be a glorious angel! As I sat cross-legged on the cold, tiled floor, tears spilled down my face and left salty tracks on my cheeks.

A kindly Sunday School teacher offered an old striped bathrobe, and the handle from a floor mop. She said I could be a shepherd standing in the background. I reluctantly accepted, and tied a rope around my waist to hitch up the oversized gown. It smelled like cigarettes. The gorgeous angels organized to go on stage while I stared, sick with envy. As the pageant began, everyone forgot about me.

From behind the red velvet curtains, I watched the entire cast assemble before a packed audience. Ooh! Aahh! A polite round of applause broke out as they took their places. I had no lines or directions to follow, and wandered onto the stage in an improvised solo performance. Strolling about, I pretended to search for something — sheep, perhaps?

“Baaahh, baaaaah . . . here, sheep, sheep, sheep.” Feigning concern, I checked my Mickey-Mouse watch. Did the old-time ‘Sharon Frayne Special to The Local

I was privileged to provide essential services this year to my clients and I sincerely thank them for their trust. To my colleagues, friends, and all residents I wish you all good health and a safe 2021.

Merry Christmas
Anger, disappointment turns to love

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shepherds wear watches? When I heard a few giggles from the front row, it occurred to me I’d made a mistake.

It was crowded at the back of the stage, and impossible to find a place to stand. The Wise Men, in their fancy crowns and long capes, elbowed me out of the way. Two boys disguised as a brown cow tried to kick me. I tripped over my drooping robe, and had to roll up my floppy sleeves.

Our Mary was a young mother who brought her beautiful newborn child to church that Dec. 24, 1959. While her tiny baby wiggled on a soft white blanket in the little wooden manger, she beamed with joy. The baby gurgled and waved a chubby hand. I reached out and touched a wee warm finger. The babe smiled.

Attracted to a glowing light in the middle of the darkened auditorium, I looked up. It was my mother’s shining face, attentive to every move on stage. Our eyes met, and I saw her smile.

Afterwards, on the slow, snowy car ride home, Mother tried to console me. “Those angels seemed awfully hot and cranky up there. I could see them scratching, and they sang out of tune. It’s a good thing you weren’t one of them.”

After a moment, I said, “It turned out better.” As the wind blew drifts of snow across our path, the world outside the car disappeared. Face tight with worry, Mother hunched forward over the steering wheel, straining to see the road. Barely visible beneath their burden of snow, the twinkling red and green lights strung on our trees welcomed us as we pulled into the driveway. We were safe at home, and both of us took a deep breath. I reached for her hand. “I love you, Mommy.”

She gave me a hug. “Merry Christmas, Sweetheart.”

Sharon Frayne is the co-chair of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Writers’ Circle.
Mike Balsom
Special to The Local

Clues to the early history of Canada’s postal service, which was begun right here in Queenston, now sit safely and securely in the Brock University library.

The Alexander Hamilton collection was recently donated to Brock and, following a successful application to have it designated historically significant by the Government of Canada, many of the documents and artifacts can now be viewed via an online exhibit.

David Sharron, head of archives and special collections at Brock, says the collection has been valued at almost $350,000. The documents and artifacts were all contained in a mailbag that was likely stored for years somewhere at the Willowbank Estate. Included in the collection are much of Alexander Hamilton’s correspondence and records during the time that he was Postmaster of Canada’s postal service, one of the most successful early merchants in Upper Canada.

When Robert died in 1809, Alexander, still in his late teens, and his brother George inherited their father’s business holdings. Much of that fortune, however, disappeared during the War of 1812.

After serving under William Hamilton Merritt in the war, Alexander got busy rebuilding the family’s financial fortunes. Much of Alexander’s success in that endeavour came from his late teens, and his brother George inherited their father’s business holdings. Much of that fortune, however, disappeared during the War of 1812.

After serving under William Hamilton Merritt in the war, Alexander got busy rebuilding the family’s finances. Much of Alexander’s success in that endeavour came from the different roles he took in public life.

Hamilton built Willowbank between 1834 and 1836. After he passed away in 1839 at 48 years old, his wife Hannah raised their ten children at the estate. The Hamilton family continued to live in the mansion until 1839, when he passed away. The rest of the collection includes business correspondence relating to some of the other roles Hamilton took on over his brief life. "There is a lot of correspondence with William Hamilton Merritt," says Sharron. "There’s great detailed messages from Merritt, saying, "we are about to open up stocks in a new company, the Welland Canal Company, and we would like you to find good citizens who would support this.' He was reaching out at the early stages of building the canal.

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Important documents discovered at a garage sale

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Other notable names mentioned in the correspondence include the first Anglican Bishop of Toronto, John Strachan, Samuel Street, a member of the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, and Justice of the Peace and Niagara businessman Thomas Clark.

On the subject of Hamilton’s personal life, or what it was like to live at Willowbank at the time, the collection sheds little light. It does, however, demonstrate how influential and significant the Niagara area was in the early days of the nation.

Sharron looks forward to a day when those interested in early Canadian history can get their hands on the documents. As well, with staff working from home during the pandemic, they have not been able to properly digitize the entirety of the collection. But he is hoping to celebrate the acquisition with the Willowbank School of the Restoration Arts as soon as possible.

When that time comes, all precautions are in place to maintain the condition of the documents. “Humidity and temperature controls are in place,” assures Sharron. “Security is top notch at Brock. When people come in there is a sign-in procedure. Light is another issue. Everything is kept in a dark room, cooled until someone asks for it. Then it goes out to a nice reading room, where someone can enjoy it.”

They will, most likely, have to peruse the collection in Brock’s facilities. “For another institution to borrow anything, we would first have to ask the federal government for permission,” continues Sharron. “We would have to ask for data to prove they can provide the same protection that we can. We’re very happy to work with anyone in the heritage community in Niagara. If we can’t give them the original, we would certainly work with Willowbank to get them quality digital or printed reproductions.”

The documents that have been digitized to this point can be seen in Brock’s online exhibit at https://exhibits.library.brocku.ca/exhibits/library.brocku.ca/alexander-hamilton/

Much of the Alexander Hamilton collection, valued at almost $350,000, was found in a bag at a 1940s garage sale, and was purchased for 17 cents. The documents include a map, a letter agreeing to a stay of execution, a liquor licence and a mail ledger, from the mid 1800s. (Photos supplied)

At the time of publication, the Niagara Historical Society had not yet announced how they would celebrate the acquisition, if at all. “We’re still writing and processing the document,” continues Sharron. “We’re happy to work with anyone in the heritage community in Niagara. If we can’t give them the original, we would certainly work with Willowbank to get them quality digital or printed reproductions.”

The documents that have been digitized to this point can be seen in Brock’s online exhibit at https://exhibits.library.brocku.ca/

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We hope everyone has a Happy Holiday and a wonderful New Year
Celebrate New Year’s Eve with the Fitzgeralds

Mike Balsom
Special to The Local

This has been a year like no other and, with Monday’s announcement of a return to lockdown restrictions, most will be happy on New Year’s Eve to celebrate its end. Music Niagara offers a joyous celebration that afternoon, with the return of the singing, fiddling and step-dancing Fitzgerald siblings.

The family group, consisting of Tom, Kerry and Julie Fitzgerald, last performed for the festival in July 2017. That summer, the siblings fit the NOTL show into the middle of a tour of Ohio, just before heading off to the U.K. and Ireland, where their Celtic music and dancing have their roots.

When it came time to book a New Year’s show to conclude Music Niagara’s 2020 At Home Series, general manager Karen Lade says the Ottawa Valley area family act was an obvious choice. “We were looking for something to end the year on a celebratory note,” Lade tells The Local. “They were received so well last year...”

“This has been a year to celebrate its end,” says Tom. “We grew up playing music and dancing have our roots, what’s common between all of us. From here, Celtic music, east coast Maritime music, as well as American folk music and step dancing is available to listen to on juliefitzgerald.ca.”

Indeed, all three of the Fitzgeralds maintain their own websites. A visit to kerryfitzgerald.ca will lead to her 2018 album Fiddle Beatz, an experimental fusion of her original fiddle tunes with electronic music production. A three-song EP (extended play, or mini-album) of Tom’s original fiddle compositions is available to listen to at tomfitzgeraldmusic.ca, while Julie offers online music and step dancing lessons to dancers of all skill levels through juliefitzgerald.ca.

Together, though, along with Alanna Jenish accompanying them on guitar, their act draws on a tradition with roots on the Emerald Isle, through the Maritimes, on to their Ottawa Valley home.

The Celtic connection came naturally to the Bancroft-raised siblings. “It’s what we know,” says Tom. “We grew up playing old-time music. Picture a square dance. We don’t necessarily play that in our show as much, but it’s our roots, what’s common between all of us. From here, Celtic music, east coast Maritime music, as well as American folk music, it’s kind of all transplantable.”

Continued on page 17
A Music Niagara Christmas Celebration, with Jesse Whiteley, Anthony Renaldi, Alisha Oliver, Ernesto Cervini, Dan Fortin and Donovan Locke from the Toronto All-Star Big Band, was filmed at Willowbank Estate recently, to be aired online as part of their At Home series on YouTube.

The music we grew up playing, he continues, Ottawa Valley fiddle and step, kind of originated in that small geographical area. Even outside of that, people ask ‘what is that?’

There’s a certain style about it that is very Ontario, though we often do play with a lot of friends from the Maritimes.

All three Fitzgeralds, and Jenish as well, are accomplished and awarded musicians. Tom is a Canadian Grand Master Fiddle Champion and a Canadian Open Fiddle Champion, while Julie is a two-time Canadian Grand Master Fiddle Champion, as well as two-time Open Step Dance Champion. Kerry is an Ontario Open Step Dance Champion and Canadian Grand Master Fiddle Finalist, while Jenish has captured the Southwestern Ontario Open Fiddle Championship. All four play multiple instruments, as well.

Tom and Kerry both studied jazz at Humber College, while Julie holds a kinesiology degree from Western University. Jenish, meanwhile, graduated with a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Toronto. The Fitzgeralds have worked in the past with the likes of Natalie McMaster, the Leahys, Tommy Hunter and Wayne Rostad.

In their earlier days, the young Fitzgeralds were often accompanied by the other members of their family. “There used to be six of us,” Tom says of their family band. “My dad learned to play bass and my mom learned to play piano, just so they could accompany us. We’re obviously a fiddle-heavy group, so we needed some backup. And we have an older brother who used to play drums with us. So it was a full family thing at one time.”

Their New Year’s online show is a high energy, exuberant performance, combining some familiar seasonal tunes, traditional Celtic and Bluegrass songs and original compositions. For the Fitzgeralds, Let it Snow becomes Let it Jig, and they play a haunting, wonderful rendition of Gustav Holst’s In the Bleak Midwinter.

They take on the Bob Wills 1940s classic It’s All Your Fault as well. Their set also includes a few songs written by the siblings. Fin honours their Irish idol Brian Finnegan while Ed in the Clouds reminisces on their time spent on an Irish folk cruise with English Celtic guitarist Ed Boyd. As well, days spent laughing, conspiring, bickering and performing at a restaurant near their hometown at Potash Lake inspired the wistful original The Lakeside Jig, which segues directly into their take on the upbeat reel St. Andrews Flight. They cap things off with a nod to the Maritime influence with the rollicking PEI Set.

Through the entire performance, it’s a marvel to see three siblings playing, singing and dancing with so much joy and exuberance. They seem to feed off of each other’s energy, while Jenish anchors it all with her deft fretwork on acoustic guitar.

The show was filmed at the Welland Campus of Niagara College by the school’s Broadcasting - Radio, Television and Film students under the direction of their professors, continuing a relationship with Music Niagara that benefitted both parties throughout the pandemic.

A Celtic New Years Celebration with The Fitzgeralds hits the Music Niagara Festival website and YouTube channel at 4 p.m. on Dec. 31, and will continue to be available for viewing following its premiere.

A Music Niagara Christmas Celebration, with Jesse Whiteley, Anthony Renaldi, Alisha Oliver, Ernesto Cervini, Dan Fortin and Donovan Locke from the Toronto All-Star Big Band, was filmed at Willowbank Estate recently, to be aired online as part of their At Home series on YouTube. (Mike Balsom)
A very successful premiere season for *Away in a Manger*, a living nativity scene, was hosted by Benchview Equestrian Centre this weekend. The event was held for two days, and raised more than $3,000 for The Darte Family Youth Mental Health Fund. Two other charities were supported, with a food drive for Newark Neighbours, and a mountain of toys collected for children in the 3F pediatric cancer unit in McMaster Children’s Hospital his Christmas season.

Participants drove up to a manger, where they stopped to observe local people dressed as Mary, Joseph, wise men, shepherds, and angels. Vineridge Academy took the Sunday afternoon sessions, while local families were featured on Saturday and Sunday evenings.

The event was organized by Pat Darte, Jane Neaves, Caroline Polgrafia, Mona Babin and Melina Morsch to raise awareness of the difficulty so many are having with the new norms the pandemic has introduced.

Steri Plus was on site with equipment that creates a virus-killing steam chamber that all volunteers walked through upon arrival and before departure. Organizers said the Christmas spirit is something they wanted to share as a community, regardless of challenges due to COVID-19.

There were plenty of happy visitors wishing all a Merry Christmas from the safety and comfort of their cars, as they enjoyed the lights and sounds and sites of this very special Christmas event. Organizers say they hope to make this an annual event.

Jennifer Visca and her son Lucas took part in Benchview’s nativity scene.

Mona Babin
Special to The Local

Bill Auchterlonie
Special to The Local

The full week of Auchterlonie on Astrology can be found on the Facebook page for The NOTL Local, and on the website https://www.auchterlonieonastrology.ca. In part II of my podcast, thanks to AstroButterfly, we get the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn at 0 degrees of Aquarius, a new world order. Thursday, Dec. 24: It’s Christmas Eve, with the Moon in homey Taurus most of the day. Despite a bit of stress in the morning, the rest of the day is sweet, especially this evening. It was 202 years ago today that *Silent Night*, composed by Franz Gruber, was first heard in Oberndorf, Austria.

Friday, Dec. 25: Merry Christmas! A surprise just past midnight may have many of us wide awake and smiling. And thinking what to do next. It’s a day where indulgence and imagination are hand-in-hand. In what would become the most horrific war ever, soldiers on both sides took the day off and exchanged gifts and played soccer.

Times have changed a lot since Dec. 25, 1914.
SMITH, GLENDA BLANCHE (NEE TONKS)—Sadly, on Thursday, December 17, 2020, Glenda Blanche Smith (nee Tonks) passed away at Joseph Brant Hospital, Burlington, ON at the age of 85, after a brief illness. Heartfelt thanks to palliative care nurse Diana. Glenda’s pride and joy were her two daughters Laurie Simpson and Karen Lombardi and much-loved son-in-law Bert Lombardi. She had great love and pride for her three grandchildren and their partners McKenzie Simpson (wife Amanda), Philip Lombardi (fiancé Toni) and Christopher (wife Natasha).

Glenda lived a long and abundant life with her predeceased husband George W. Smith of 42 years. Whether sailing, travelling the world or enjoying wintering in Florida, they enjoyed the time they spent in their custom-built home in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Glenda much enjoyed her garden and had a lifelong love of books. In Glenda’s later years, she was influenced by her son-in-law Bert. He introduced her to the game of golf and also the love and appreciation of wine. Over her life, Glenda was blessed to have three wonderful dogs; Skipper, Peanut and Sheldon. A private family service was held on December 22nd at St. Mark’s Anglican Church, Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON. When safe to do so, a celebration of life will be announced in The NOTL Local. In lieu of flowers, a donation may be made to Red Roof Retreat, Niagara-on-the-Lake, or can be done through Morgan Funeral Home, 415 Regent St., P.O. Box 453, Niagara-on-the-Lake or at www.morganfuneral.com

To place your classified ad, contact Karen: classifieds@notllocal.com

Deadline: Mondays at 3 p.m.
By any standard, 2020 has been a most unusual year, for the first time in our history, one event has controlled literally everything. The dynamics of family, our spheres of influence, and our community at large have been redefined. Our every day lexicon now includes pandemic, crisis, mask, social distancing, contact tracing.

We have seen social norms challenged; the cries of the common man ignored by leaders who seemed oblivious to the turmoil around them. So many things we have in the past accepted as normal have been replaced by new-norms; truths replaced by alternative truths; logic replaced by head-scratching absurdities. The words in Elvis Presley’s song “If I Can Dream” seem so timely...

There must be lights burning brighter somewhere
Got to be birds flying higher in a sky more blue
If I can dream of a better land where all my brothers walk hand in hand
Tell me why, why can’t that dream come true, right now?
...We’re locked in a cloud with too much rain
We’re trapped in a world that’s troubled with pain
...Out there in the dark there’s a beckoning candle
And while I can breathe, while I can walk, while I can stand, while I can talk,
while I can dream;
please let my dream come true, right now

Even though this year’s holiday celebrations will be very different, it is my hope that you and your family will see that beckoning candle, that you will find silver linings in the cloud we call COVID.

For me, I have decided that the “norms” of 2021 will be family, friendship, and community; wonderful things happen when we treat others the way we would want to be treated. It is my dream that together we can make 2021 a very special year. I hope you will dream with me; please let my dream come true, right now.

Doug Rempel and
your Bosley Niagara Team