Girls escape, survive fire that destroys family home

Penny Coles
The Local

A family devastated by the loss of their home, most of their possessions, and their beloved dog is focusing on the positive, with a message of gratitude toward the large community of people who have surrounded them with love, caring and compassion.

When fire broke out on the evening of Dec. 15 in the Niagara Falls home of Kate Fish, principal of Crossroads School, and her husband Stephen, a teacher at a Niagara Falls school, their two daughters Evelyn, 12, and Claire, 14, were home alone with a friend. Kate and Stephen were down the street visiting neighbors. Kate credits the calm, quick action of the girls, and a well-rehearsed escape plan for the family in the event of fire, for saving their lives.

When Evelyn called Kate that night, it was to say she was hearing noises from the basement and thought there was an intruder in the house. The three girls then headed upstairs, and Mabel, their six-year-old Bernedoodle, soon followed. During Evelyn’s phone call with Kate, smoke detectors in the house “started screeching,” she says. The house had been recently renovated, with smoke detectors on every level and in every bedroom, and they were all going off simultaneously.

With smoke quickly filling the house behind them, Evelyn broke the screen in her bedroom window, as both she and Kate were calling 911, and the girls climbed out onto the roof. “She was talking to 911 as they were escaping, and she dropped her phone. She called back to apologize, and said there were three girls on the roof of a house, and the house was on fire,” recounts Kate. It wasn’t long before their street was filled with emergency vehicles — police, fire trucks and first responders lined the road.

“Steve had run to the house, and was able get the girls down off the roof — he caught them and got them to the ground, and they ran to the stop sign on the corner. That was our safe spot that was part of our escape plan.”

One of the firefighters went into the house to rescue Mabel, performed

Balmy Boxing Day for Penguin Dip

Sharon Burns
The Local

While it was the 48th year in a row, for many, it was a year of firsts at the Annual Penguin Dip at Balls Beach on Boxing Day.

It was the first time Mary Ann Enns and partner, Vince Mayne, swam in Lake Ontario for the event, which has turned into a fundraiser for Red Roof Retreat.

“We did it because we are 70,” said Enns. “We might as well do something big for our 70s and Red Roof is very dear to our hearts. We would do it again.”

Mayne and Enns are no strangers to adventure. “Last year we went to Greenland and plunged inbetween the icebergs in -4 degrees Celsius waters,” she said. Recently, Vince climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and cycled 900 kilometres around Lake Ontario, with Mary Ann and their trusty golden retriever, Bad, in the support van. They also hiked the Highlands in Scotland this year.

“It was so much fun, and great to see so many people I know,” said Enns, who added “I’m going to challenge the 500 people at pickleball to do the Penguin Dip next year.”

Continued on page 5

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“I’m not selling the winery, I’m buying time.”

Those are the words of Klaus Reif, the lone shareholder of Reif Estates Winery, which was listed recently for sale with Peter Fischer of Engel and Volkers Niagara for $25 million.

With that statement, the 60-year-old 13th generation winemaker, who emigrated to Canada from Neustadt, Germany in 1987, asserts that his reasons for listing the property are not at all financial.

“I don’t need to sell the winery,” Reif insists. “But it’s time to move on. I have realized that I have neglected my family, I have neglected my friends, I have neglected my hobbies. Because I was here every day. The longest vacation I have ever taken was 12 days.”

That realization set in with the deaths of two people very close to him.

First, his uncle Ewald, who came to Canada in 1977, bought Riverscourt Farm on the Niagara Parkway and started the winery in 1982, passed away six years ago after three months in hospital. A 15-year-old Klaus first accompanied his father Gunter on a visit to his uncle in 1978. He immediately fell in love with the country. When they returned home, Klaus had his plan for the future. He knew he wanted to come back to Canada.

“I finished high school then went to business school,” says Reif. “Then I studied winemaking and viticulture. I finished university (Hochschule Geisenheim University) in June 1987 and came here two weeks later. Ewald retired from the winery business and I took it over then.”

Ewald continued to work the vineyards, but eventually retired from his role there when he turned 50. He had an active retirement, travelling often until his illness slowed him down.

“I saw him almost every day,” Reif says of his uncle’s time in hospital, “and we had some deep conversations. One day he told me he was okay to go, because whatever he had wanted to do in his life, he had done. He saw every spot in the world he wanted to see. There was nothing left on his bucket list. He flew with the Concorde, he had a house in Arizona. He was happy.”

On the drive back to NOTL that day Reif contemplated his own bucket list.

“My list is humongous,” he exclaims. “If something happened to me, I would not be happy, I would be furious. The next day I went back to talk to him and he told me I should consider retiring.”

Reif pushed that notion to the back of his mind. But earlier this year his sister Marion, two years older than Klaus, almost to the day, lost her battle with cancer.

“She was taking care of my parents, who are 84 and 82,” he says of Gunter and Elli Reif, who ran their own winery in Neustadt until just a few years ago. “It’s always been difficult for me to spend time with them. I figured if I sell, I will have more time to spend with my parents.”

He’s not in a hurry to give up Reif Estate’s 125 acres of vineyards and five buildings which facilitate the farming.
production, administration and retail operations of the winery, as well as two homes which are part of the $25 million listing.

Reif proudly takes The Local on a tour of the winery. From outside the retail building he points out how the structure, built in 2008, was painstakingly designed to reflect and perfectly fit in with what is now the administration building, originally built in 1865.

He shows off the various tasting rooms, including the upstairs board room, decorated and built along the arts and crafts design style, with wallpaper lining the vaulted ceiling. A large board table is flanked by 13 chairs, one representing each generation of the family in the wine business, going back as far as 1632.

Awards line the mantle there. Some of his most cherished honours include the Best Dessert Wine and Best Canadian Winery Trophies from the 2017 International Wine and Spirit International Competition, an event he likens to the industry’s Oscars. In the expansive bottling room he boasts of being one of the few wineries that still runs its own bottling line. There, he describes how he and winemaker Roberto DiDonemico, whom he hired out of the University of Guelph in 1989 and has been at his side since that day, poured the cement themselves for the winery’s crush pad.

Finally, he shows off the giant wooden barrels that his uncle imported from Germany decades ago. Reif also reminisces about the early days of the VQA designation, when he met with neighbour Donald Ziraldo, his Inniskillin winemaker Karl Kaiser and Paul Bosc Sr. of Chateau des Charmes winery to hatch out the genius of a plan to promote quality in the industry.

“This community has been so good to us,” he says. “It won’t be easy to let this go. But I will probably be here for at least another two to three years. It’s a complex business. Whoever is interested in the winery, I will offer my services to help them ease into it.”

He’s adamant that he wants to find the perfect buyer for Reif Estate. That means whoever is going to be the best fit for the winery, I will offer my services to help them ease into it.”

Reif also reminds us about the family business for 36 years. He has moved away from the typical wine making that would somehow provide guidance and mentorship to teenagers.

“Don’t think we have enough support for that age group,” he says. “I don’t know exactly what to do, but that’s such an important age, and I want to do something to provide help and guidance.”

And the avid car collector looks forward to actually getting to drive something other than his everyday Ford F-150 pick-up truck.

“My dream is to buy a Porsche 911 GT3 RSC, he says of the supercar that does 0 to 100 km/h in just 3.9 seconds and maxes out at 320 km/h.

And like his friend Zi- raldo, he knows he will stay involved in the industry in some way.

“I’m not running away, I’m not moving away,” he insists. “I’ve been in this business for 36 years. I have always learned from older people. Now I’m old, and I hope somebody picks my brain and learns from me.”

Klaus Reif still uses the giant wine barrels his uncle had imported from Germany decades ago. (Mike Balcom)
Scrapping retail wine tax should invigorate industry

Kris Dube
The Local
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Niagara’s grape and wine industry is raising a glass to the provincial government for its recent announcement about the elimination of the 6.1 per cent tax on products sold at winery retail stores.

“This comes as part of a larger agreement that consumers will be able to buy beer, wine, cider, coolers, seltzers and other low-alcohol beverages at participating convenience, grocery and big box stores across the province, starting in 2026,” said Niagara Falls NDP MPP Wayne Gates. “This is why we introduced it.”

Since 2018, Niagara Falls NDP MPP Wayne Gates has introduced legislation three times at Queen’s Park, targeting the 6.1 per cent of sales that go to the government from retail sites at Ontario wineries.

Gates told The Local there were some wineries in the province that are so impacted by the “unfair” tax that they have been on the brink of going out of business.

“We knew there was some urgency to this,” he said. “That’s why we introduced it again.”

He called the recent announcement a “big win for everybody.”

“We all worked together on it,” said Gates, also pointing to involvement from the province’s craft beer industry in the overall agreement.

“Gates is hoping the wine tax will be done away with as soon as possible, telling The Local he would like it to become law by March 2024.

“We need this to happen immediately,” Gates added, saying that this new relief will allow wineries to expand their operations.

Kaiser, a first-term Niagara-on-the-Lake regional councillor, has worked in the Niagara wine industry for 20 years.

She is employed with Reif Estate Winery and also serves as a consultant for other wineries.

Kaiser, who has her own brand works as a consultant for Reif Estate Winery and also serves as a consultant for other wineries.

She is employed with Reif Estate Winery and also works as a consultant for various wineries. As well, she has her own brand of wine, Drea Wine Co., which is sold at Reif.

In late July, she brought forward a motion to regional council to petition the province to eliminate the 6.1 per cent tax, which she said is something that doesn’t exist in any other province or wine-making region of the world.

“The motion was support unanimously,” said Kaiser.

“There was a lot of movement on potential changes to how alcohol is sold in Ontario back then,” said Kaiser, and the recent announcement is the result of a “perfect storm” of concerns being raised by wineries and industry groups, along with politicians.

“It was just a matter of those things coming together,” she said.

Kevin Watson, owner of K.J. Watson Farms in Niagara-on-the-Lake, is pleased with the recent announcement.

“Wineries need to gear up, expand their brands, and maybe get some more listings in the LCBO and grocery stores,” he said, also pointing to it allowing wineries to expand marketing and advertising projects.

Two-thirds of Ontario’s grapes are grown in Niagara-on-the-Lake, said Watson.

The province also says it will enhance the Vintners Quality Alliance Wine support program beginning in 2024-25 for up to five years, to 2028-29, to support the growth and sale of Ontario-grown grapes, a step praised by Ontario Grape Growers chief executive officer Debbie Zimmerman.

It not only provides stability for both farmers and wineries, but it will also fuel growth,” she said in a news release.

The elimination of the retail tax will invigorate Ontario wineries and make it possible for them to reinvest in their businesses and drive innovation.

“Together, we toast to a thriving grape and wine landscape in Ontario,” said Zimmerman.

A new “more open marketplace” will introduce up to 8,500 new stores where ready-to-serve products like beer, wine and seltzers can be purchased, and is the largest expansion of consumer choice and convenience since the end of prohibition almost 100 years ago, according to the province’s news release.

Spirits such as vodka, gin and whisky will continue to be sold at the LCBO, the province said.

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Continued from page 1

CPR, gave her oxygen, and took her to an emergency veterinary clinic, but she couldn’t be revived.

“The firefighter told me that because Mabel had been downstairs and run up to alert the girls to the fire, she had saved their lives, and she was wrapped in a Canadian flag before she was cremated. She was a hero.”

The girls are also heroes, she says.

“Our kids should be the spokespeople for how to escape from a burning building. They were calm, cool and collected. They called 911, got out of the house, and went to our safe spot. It was terrifying. It was fast — four minutes — and they escaped from the last room that filled with smoke.”

Stephen and I have always agreed, our job is to keep them alive until they can keep themselves alive,” adds Kate. “We didn’t expect the test to come so soon, but we all passed, and now there is a sense of relief that is indescribable.”

She has good cause to be proud of what the girls accomplished that night, “but the fact that they were so calm and so confident that their friend trusted them with her life is what makes me most proud.”

“The family has been staying in Niagara-on-the-Lake, first with Kate’s parents, Kathy and Tim Taylor, and then in an airbnb, as other family members arrived for Christmas.

Last Wednesday, they were allowed back into the house to see what was salvageable, which turned out to be very little.

“All the gifts we had purchased, with the exception of electric tooth brushes, were destroyed,” she says. However some friends soon took over the job of shopping to replace and wrap the gifts that were lost.

“I know it was just stuff, all things that were replaceable,” Kate says, “but knowing my kids would have gifts to open Christmas morning, that they would have a traditional Christmas they were accustomed to, meant a lot. It relieved a lot of stress.”

She says the four of them were having dinner one night a few days after the fire, talking about the one thing each would have grabbed if they’d had a chance. Kate and the two girls each said they would take their childhood stuffed animals — Kate still has hers.

Stephan said there were a few reminders of his mother he would want — she passed away when he was 21s — Kate still has hers.

“Years and years of sharing memories,” “All the gifts we had purchased, with the exception of electric tooth brushes, were destroyed,” says Kate.

There are lots of tears, there is also lot of laughter, lots of joy and lots of sharing memories.”

Kate credits her parents for having passed on the traits that allow her to deal with the harrowing experience they have all been through, and still have a positive attitude.

“I am who I am because of my parents, the lessons they taught me and that I taught my kids,” she says. “I see their strength in my kids.”

“They expect it will be about 18 months before their home, the house where Stephen grew up, and which was left to him when his mother passed away, is fully renovated. But even that isn’t worrying her at the moment — they have had several generous offers of places to live.

“The cause of the fire has been difficult to determine, she says — it seems to have been a ‘fluke accident,’ with most of the obvious causes eliminated. ‘It wasn’t human error,’ such as a candle left burning or anything of that nature, she adds.”

In the meantime, “the police, the firefighters, the insurance company, restoration company — they’ve all been amazing. I don’t know if it’s the time of year or if everybody is always so open-hearted. I hope that everybody going through something like this is shown the same love and generosity we’ve been shown.”

“When you consider you’re having a rough day, someone else is having a worse day,” she continues. “I have my husband and kids, and we’re surrounded by love and compassion. People are there who have experienced much greater loss than we have. We are grateful for everything the community has done for us.”

“When Kate speaks of community, it covers a wide net. In addition to family and friends, she and Stephen both have their school communities — their families for seven or eight hours every day — the schools the girls attend, their friends, and as she’s discovering, the families of those friends, who have reached out to offer help. “Even the family of our dog groomer,” she adds.

“Then there are the communities of the Niagara Falls Curling Club, where Stephen and Claire are on its board, and from Beth- lehem Housing and Big Brothers Big Sisters, with Kate on the board of both of them.

“The Niagara community has been amazing. ‘They’ve offered us support, necessities, and extrava- gances. They’ve offered everything. There are no words to describe...’ she says, struggling to speak through her tears.

“It’s just so heart-warm- ing. It’s overwhelming how much generosity, kindness, love and support people have shown us.’

In recent days she’s spoken often about the importance of an escape plan, and been surprised to hear how many people don’t have one.

“This may have happened to us to save one other life. Maybe somebody has gone out and bought a smoke detector, or maybe other families will have a conversation about their fire safety and escape plan.

She encourages others to have those conversations with their families. If Claire and Evelyn hadn’t known their escape plan, “if they hadn’t reacted the way they did in their calm, strong, brilliant way, we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” she says.

“Christmas or not, have that conversation. There is no better gift to give your family. It could save their lives.”

There is a GoFundMe set up for the Fish family. Kate says she struggled with it, but realized “every single person we speak to asks how to help. They ask what they can do. This is a way they can demonstrate their love and caring,” she says.

In addition, when any- one sees the page and shares it, they share the message to go out and buy a smoke de- tector, and to talk about fire safety with their family.

“That’s the greatest component, the message of safety and its infiltration into all of our communis- ties.”

The GoFundMe page can be found at gofundme.com/6/fish-family-house-fire.

Stephen and Kate Fish, with Claire, Evelyn and their dog Mabel. (Supplied)
Lord mayor reflects on first year of office

On behalf of our town council, I would like to extend my warmest wishes to all Niagara-on-the-Lake residents for a joyous New Year.

As I reflect on my first year as lord mayor, I am reminded of how grateful I am for this opportunity to serve our community and to work with an incredibly strong council and staff. This role has filled me with great pride and further ignited my passion for this town and those who live, work and visit here.

In 2023, council approved its Strategic Plan, which acts as a roadmap for the future by guiding decision-making and investments for this term of council. An implementation plan has also been developed with actionable steps to achieve our identified priorities, allocating resources, and assigning responsibilities and timelines for the successful execution of the Plan.

Additionally, new digital service boards were installed throughout select locations in town that help to relay important town messaging to residents and visitors. Over the course of this year, I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to attend multiple conferences where council and staff met with provincial ministers and delegated toward matters that are important to our community, such as irrigation systems, energy conservation, and the transportation master plan, the parking and circulation plan — there is no shortage on the long list of items for staff, councillors and the community to deal with.

Those issues will be handled without two important leaders at the town, as we say goodbye to CAA Marine Chuckie and director of operations Rome D’Angelo, both heading off for new positions in Hamilton.

They have served NOTL well in their time here, and are to be congratulated for finding jobs that will give them great satisfaction in the next stage of their careers — D’Angelo says it will be the last for him — but they will be missed. Ron Simkus, a revered mining engineer who lives in the Dock Area and has worked with the town on Dock Area issues, told The Local Chuckie and D’Angelo “to have set the bar high” in the quality of work they have performed in NOTL. Chuckie has referred to NOTL as a small town with big city problems, and that would be wise to carefully consider during the process of looking for replacements, that won’t come cheap, but must be up to the task and bring the level of experience required to do it well.

A thought with which to welcome the new year: we would do well to remember the saying “In a world where you can be anything, choose to be kind.”

There are variations and origins attached to it, but those aren’t as important as the message itself. The best stories we get to share are always about people who have been kind.

As we think about reso- lutions for the new year, that would be a good place to start. And feel free to share your resolutions with us.

Penny Coles
The Local

Local on the Local

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Where’s Ben?

Eden student Ben Foster continues to discover new locations in NOTL, wondering how far away he can get with them. If you know where this photo was taken, email pen- ny@notllocal.com. Last week, Pat O’Neill told us Ben was on York Road at Sheaffe’s Climb, a historical marker at the Chief Norton sides trail.

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Local on the Local

The Trusted Voice of Our Community

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This council was elected by the taxing residents of NOTL to represent them and their interests to their benefit in all municipal affairs. However, in certain cases involving the use of public property, it is my opinion and one that is probably held by many others that public input should be required.

Based on a recent report this appears not to be the case when council has recently decided in private to offer a unique piece of public property (the Heritage trail) to a private developer, if he decides it is to his advantage, so as to facilitate his preferred access to what is a highly controversial residential development at current and future taxpayer expenses. This is the sole decision of council which undoubtedly results in a very concerned and negative public opinion. Without any public input, this decision carries very little authority and needs to be reconsidered.

Derek Collins
NOTL

LETTERS
Local

In our living room we have a vase with yellow and orange-yellow flowers reminding us of the full benefits my wife Jo-Anne and I were standing at Pleasant Lane of Pleasant Manor watching the impressive parade of colourfully decorated trucks, pickups, vans and tractors with equally colorful attachments going by.

A thought of gratitude entered my mind that all this was done to give pleasure to others, and to us. Here follows the main reason for my writing this to you.

A beautifully decorated piece of machinery stopped, and a young lady ran out and gave me a bouquet of flowers and walked back again. I can’t remember if she or I said anything but I was happy to have been standing there.

And thinking now about Robert Frost and the last line of his poem The Road Not Taken, that "standing there has made all the difference." Thanks to all who made this event possible and wishing all a Merry Christmas.

Amika Verwegen and Sheri Ruby of Ruby Inc. so generously provided special decorations for each and every resident. They were welcomed with so much gratitude from the administrative staff. The highlight was Santa Claus (Martin Mazza) delivering the stockings morning to the residents of Pleasant Manor. Such a special treat for them. Huge thanks to each and everyone who contributed to the ‘joy’ of making this a success. This truly is an outstanding community. With much gratitude, Joan King
NOTL

LETTERS
Local

Fort Erie’s sand dunes are some of the most impressive in Ontario, and have plenty of influence on surrounding ecosystems. (Owen Bjorgan)

local.com

The Niagara Lions Club will be kicking off the 2023 holiday season on Saturday, December 2, 2023.

More than 1,000 people are expected to attend the tree lighting ceremony at 6 p.m. at the corner of Lakeshore Road and Main Avenue in Fort Erie.

The event will feature live music, food and beverages, as well as a visit from Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus.

The tree, which is a 50-foot tall tree from Michigan, was donated by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The tree will be decorated with lights and ornaments donated by local businesses and organizations.

The event is free to attend, but donations will be accepted to support local charities.

The Niagara Lions Club has been hosting the annual tree lighting ceremony for over 50 years, and it is one of the most beloved holiday traditions in Fort Erie.

In addition to the tree lighting ceremony, the Niagara Lions Club will be hosting a tree sale, raffle and silent auction.

The proceeds from the tree sale, raffle and silent auction will be donated to local charities, including the Fort Erie Food Bank, the Fort Erie Public Library and the Fort Erie Health Unit.

The Niagara Lions Club is a non-profit organization that has been serving the Fort Erie community for over 75 years.

The club is dedicated to improving the lives of local residents through various community service projects, including food banks, animal shelters and community outreach programs.
Stockings bring smiles on Christmas morning

Penny Coles
The Local

Once again the generosity of the Niagara-on-the-Lake community has made an overwhelming success of Joan King’s stocking project, designed to bring smiles to the faces of seniors in long-term care on Christmas morning.

King was able to deliver 220 Christmas stockings to the three long-term care homes in town, enough for each resident — stockings that were bulging with gifts purchased by many volunteers, who went far beyond what is expected to add some light to the lives of those who received them.

The staff members who handed them out told The Local in the days leading up to Christmas how much appreciated the stockings are, that they truly make a difference in the lives of those in Niagara Long Term Care, Pleasant Manor, and for the last time, at Upper Canada Lodge.

Kristin Mechelse, program manager at UCL, says “it’s amazing to have such support for our residents, our last Christmas here. It makes the day a little brighter for residents, for them to know others are thinking of them.”

There are youngsters who also get involved in the project — the Crossroads School Kindergarten students and their parents helped stuff 64 stockings.

Amika Verwegen and her four children crafted Christmas cards, enough for every stocking, each one with a Christmas riddle inside: What do reindeer do when they lose their antlers? He goes retail shopping.

The children of Virgil’s Italian Pizza and Subs agreed to put on a Santa surprise in store for them Christmas morning. Martin Mazza of Virgil’s Ilian Pizza and Subs agreed to put on a Santa suit and hand out the stockings personally. His mother is a long-term care resident at Pleasant Manor, and Mazza says everything about the care she receives is good, and the staff are very caring. He was going to be visiting her anyway on Christmas morning, so it wasn’t difficult to say yes to the idea. “I was honoured to be asked,” he says.

With Pleasant Manor so close to his home, he is able to see her every morning, sometimes going back after the lunch rush at the pizzeria, and usually on Monday and Tuesday evenings for a bit when he isn’t busy. His mother loves to walk, and he spends a lot of time walking around the halls of the long-term care area with her. During that time, he has come to know the other residents, high-fiving or fist-pumping as they pass by.

Martin Mazza, dressed as Santa, delivered stockings to all the residents of Pleasant Manor’s long-term care unit, including his mother Lucy. (Supplied)

Joan King and Kristin Mechelse at Upper Canada Lodge laugh over the riddles in the cards and writing the puns and jokes inside, says Amika.

The staff agreed the stockings delivered a lot of pleasure on Christmas morning, especially for those who don’t have visitors. “It’s great to see their faces light up, it makes their day,” says staff member Lucas Steingart.

King continues to be overwhelmed by the outpouring of support, not just for the stockings but the cards, the knitted stockings but the cards, the knitted hearts from palliative care volunteers, help from Dorothy Soo-Wiens and the Lions Club, Sherry Ruby who donates gift tags, and all those who have had a hand in making the day bright for seniors on the receiving end.

At Niagara Long Term Care, staff agreed the stockings delivered a lot of pleasure on Christmas morning.

Joan King and Karen Skeoch, who helped with finishing touches to the stockings at the community centre, show off the ‘overwhelming generosity’ of those who bought items for and stuffed 220 stockings.

The kids, in their Christmas Cards Crew T-shirts, had a lot of fun together making the cards and writing the puns and jokes inside, says Amika.

For more photos visit notllocal.com

Lucas Steingart, Sheila Tryhorn, Brooklyn Gifford and Jessica Koppers show off the stockings delivered to Niagara Long Term Care.

Amika Verwegen with Nova Versteegen, 12; Yuna, 11; Kazuhiro, six and Fern, three. The kids, in their Christmas Cards Crew T-shirts, had a lot of fun together making the cards and writing the puns and jokes inside, says Amika.
THE NOTL Local
December 27, 2023

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Rand Estate access suggestion uses portion of Heritage Trail

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake is making an offer to a developer behind a proposed subdivision that's currently before the Ontario Land Tribunal and has been opposed by a citizens' group since 2018.

Solmar owner Benny Marotta's plan for the Rand Estate on the properties of 200 John and 588 Charlotte Streets is to build 172 residential units, but access driveways continue to be a key issue.

In a special council meeting on Dec. 15, local politicians held a closed session discussion and returned to the public meeting with a resolution about the need for a constraint-based approach with development related to matters such as stormwater grading and cultural heritage attributes.

The developer is proposing accessing the property from 200 John Street, but the town says if that's what is used, the site could accommodate less than 10 units.

However, the town's resolution states that if an access at Charlotte Street is used, an appropriate level of intensification could take place there. But it would intersect with a portion of the town's Upper Canada Heritage Trail, a recreational pathway currently getting a makeover.

A request to use that access would have to come from the developer, and could be an "opportunity to celebrate and improve" the existing trail, serving as a gateway feature, said the resolution, which was read by town clerk Grant Bivol and once council resumed in the open session on Dec. 15.

"Proper road access is feasible" through this approach, the town is saying, also noting that a public process would need to unfold.

But Solmar is "unwilling" to secure the access, according to the municipality. The developer is refusing to make that access available to himself. "Mr. Marotta continues," he said, "to be part of the process as it continues.

"I want to caution the committee that what we're going down the alley of is still an ongoing litigation," said Turcotte.

He said he will consult with the municipality's legal team and find out how the trail committee can be part of the process as it continues.

"This satisfied Chisholm. "We all agree that we'd like to be involved," he said. "We want to make sure the trail isn't compromised in any way," he added.

Related to the proposed subdivision, the town is also recommending it doesn't exceed 135 units, if the access pitched by council is requested.

Another condition, which SORE's update "welcomes and applauds," is the continued support of the Denise Horne report. Horne, while still a heritage planner with the town — she has since left — set out conditions for heritage preservation on the site, rejecting the majority of the requests to either alter, move or demolish heritage aspects of the estate.

The Ontario Land Tribunal hearing on the subdivision application is expected to be held in March.

Developer Benny Marotta told The Local he has no comment about whether his team will act on the resolution brought forward by council, but added, "We're happy to work with the town going forward."
Continued from page 1 

year. “It’s all about her today,” he said. Annika accepted the challenge and her dad supported her by carrying her bag and cheering her on.

Chris Bjorgan, who instructed dippers on the rules and safety procedures from the ramp of the warming trailer provided by his brother Lorne, thought the “turnout was fantastic. It could be a record, “ he said. One count showed 61 people in the water and another 40 endoakers, supporters and fans on shore. Bjorgan said “the weather also helped. The water temperature was probably the warmest I’ve ever felt this time of year.”

In order to qualify as Penguin, one must, for three years in a row, take the plunge as follows. The first time is just to acclimate, the second time, swimmers must dunk themselves completely under water, and the third time, said Bjorgan, “is slow and painful” as swimmers wait, ankles submerged, for everyone to get into the water, before backing up slowly until photographers finish taking a group picture.

Martin Lindqvist, director of hospitality at Chateau Des Charmes, created a fundraising challenge and invited friend Thanna Kurooparan and NOTL Counsellor Tim Balasuk to pledge and to swim in the Penguin Dip, each for the first time.

It was a challenge Toronto-based Kurooparan took seriously. He prepared by taking ice baths at a spa in Toronto, yet “was glad that the weather is warmer this year, so I can get one step closer to being a Penguin” Kurooparan, who was born in Sri Lanka, said it’s “still cold for me.” He is moving back to Vancouver soon, but plans to keep up with this Boxing Day tradition. Lindqvist’s fundraising efforts paid off, raising just over $3000. “It was great to see so many members of our community come out for such an exhilarating tradition,” he said, noting that “there is a true sense of community in the air.”

Thanna Kurooparan, Andrej Holy, Stefanie Bjorgan from Red Roof Retreat, Laini Taylor, Krystle Bernier and Martin Lindqvist. (Photos by Sharon Burns)

Thanna Kurooparan, Andrej Holy, Stefanie Bjorgan from Red Roof Retreat, Laini Taylor, Krystle Bernier and Martin Lindqvist. (Photos by Sharon Burns)

Continued from page 1

“The swim yesterday was great,” he said. “It seems to be gaining momentum again after the whole COVID thing, and it’s a great group of people, and a great cause.”

Ball noted it’s not quite the same for him as when they had the house at the beach, “but it’s still fun. It’s great to see the younger generations wanting to get involved.”

Andy and brother Ed always try to be the last ones out of the water, as a safety precaution, and “now it’s just another tradition,” he said.

But no matter how warm it is out, that water is still cold,” he laughed.

Seasoned Penguins Pat Quinn and Gerald Runsa- man helped dippers safely navigate the rocks down to the beach. Quinn has the longest record at 43 swims, but Chris Bjorgan is catching up with 40 swims under his belt. “I missed a year for a Queen concert in Toronto” he said.

To view more photos, please visit notllocal.com

To view more photos, please visit notllocal.com

Michelle Chappell and Andy Ball.

Thanna Kurooparan, Andrej Holy, Stefanie Bjorgan from Red Roof Retreat, Laini Taylor, Krystle Bernier and Martin Lindqvist. (Photos by Sharon Burns)

Audrey Epp Neuhof, who made her first penguin plunge this year, warms up in the trailer with Ed Ball, a regular.

Audrey Epp Neuhof, who made her first penguin plunge this year, warms up in the trailer with Ed Ball, a regular.

Mary Ann Enns and Vince Mayne decided this was the year for them to try the Penguin Dip.

Mary Ann Enns and Vince Mayne decided this was the year for them to try the Penguin Dip.
Erwin Wiens, Joe Pillitteri and Dorothy Soo-Wiens in front of the Lakeview harvester that was in the Tractor Parade, with a cheque for $50,000 for the Terry Fox Foundation. It will be doubled by an anonymous donor. (Supplied)

Tractor Parade raises whopping $100,000 for Terry Fox

When Dorothy and Erwin Wiens approached Joe Pillitteri about making the Tractor Parade a fundraiser to raise money for the Terry Fox Foundation, it immediately became a competition.

They set a goal of $3,000, and the game was on, but it wasn’t long before Pillitteri’s confidence soon faltered.

“I kept getting texts from Erwin. First he said ‘I got a cheque for $2,000,’ and then I got another one saying ‘I just got a cheque for $3,000,' and that kept going, until not only was Wiens the winner, but even more so the Terry Fox Foundation.

The “friendly challenge,” says Pillitteri, ended up collecting donations of more than $50,000 for the foundation.

“Erwin and Dorothy did not take their foot off the gas for a second,” and as the loser, Pillitteri says he will be taking the Wiens out for a well-earned dinner.

Of course, “it’s really all Dorothy. She is amazing. Erwin is really just eye candy for Dorothy,” he can’t resist joking. “We all know that money was really raised by Dorothy.”

Pillitteri raised about $15,000, the Wiens closer to $35,000, about $5,000 of that from donations collected from spectators during the parade.

Pillitteri thanked Carol Wiens, Susan Muste, Kristen and Megan Wish, and Mike and Madison Key for walking alongside the tractors and collecting donations. If the vehicles hadn’t been moving so fast, they might have made more, “but they really gave all they had.”

The rest from generous businesses, with the total hitting $48,445 — until Matthias Oppenlaender showed up with a cheque for $2,000, pushing the total over the $50,000 mark.

“People have this pre-conceived notion of what they are capable of. Terry Fox had a notion that he could run across Canada on one leg. Dorothy and Erwin — they found the time and the energy to do something like this.”

The Wiens put on an amazing event, he says. “This is what the Terry Fox Foundation is all about. It was really special, and it means the world to me.”

To make it even better, says Pillitteri, the foundation has an anonymous donor who doubles any donations during the month of December, “getting us over $100,000 for Team Pillsy, with a team total for this year of close to $240,000 and our lifetime contribution to over $700,000.”

“That should put NOTL in the number three or four position across Canada. We’re behind Toronto, Montreal and maybe Calgary for 2023, but we’re right up there.”

Penny Coles
The Local

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Mike Balsom
The Local

A visit from Santa wasn’t enough to inspire the Niagara Predators to a top-tier effort against theBradford Bulls Fri-
day in their last game before a two-week holiday break.

Dressed as Saint Nick, head coach Kevin Taylor arrived at the Meridian Credit Union arena with a bag of gifts for his team. He had a great time dis-

tribute personalizing gag gifts to each of his players in the locker room. But the Preds came out flat right from the opening faceoff and gave up a 7-1 decision to the Greater Metro Junior A Hockey League’s South Division’s sec-

cord place team.

The Bulls scored three goals in each of the first and second periods, capitalizing on a lack of backchecking by the Predators, a number of power play oppor-

tunities, and an overall lacklus-
tre Niagara performance.

The Preds didn’t even get a shot on Bulls goalie John Del-

aney until five minutes into the first period.

“I expected a lot more to-

night,” Taylor said after the game. “Maybe they were al-

dready on vacation. It just seemed that they didn’t want to be here. They were checked out. It was frustrating, after having a bit of fun before the game. I thought it was the thing to do, so this is tough.”

Niagara’s lone goal, by for-

ward Declan Fogarty, came in the dying seconds of the game. In fact, as per league rules, once the Bulls had built a six goal lead there were no stoppages of the clock during the third period, meaning Fogarty’s goal was the last action of the game.

The team’s performance was especially abysmal to Taylor for two main reasons.

First, Friday’s game fol-

lowed a strong performance by the Preds, a 4-3 overtime loss, against the very same Bulls team in Bradford Wednesday.

That night the Predators spotted the Bulls the first goal of the game. But defeceeman Guy Manco tied it up in the waning seconds of the first period, with assists by Josh Frenna and Nicho-

las Nicolliet.

Georgey Khomovskoy scored twice in the second, his fifth and sixth goals of the season, to put the Preds up 5-1, while Niaga-

ria goalie Kyle Magri knocked away all 19 Bradford shots to keep his team in the lead.

But Magri continued to face a barrage of attempts by Bradford in the third, and Michael Silvaggio and Linus Callenvik found the back of the net to force the overtime.

Callenvik’s tying goal came with just 45 seconds left in reg-

ulation. He also netted the win-

ner in the extra period.

The Predators were outshot in both games; 55-20 on Wednes-
day and 42-15 on Friday.

“I was really hoping for a strong game tonight,” Taylor said. “Especially after getting a point on them last game. I know we got outshot in that game but we played really well. We clogged up the middle and all their shots were from the outside. And then they come out like this tonight.”

The other reason for his dis-

appointment was that for the first time in many games Taylor had a nearly full squad at his dis-

posal Friday, with only forward Nolan Wyers out with an injury.

“With the lineup we had to-

ight, it should have been a lot better,” Taylor lamented. “We had expectations because of what happened last game, and with this lineup we expected to be able to do good things. It makes no sense.”

“There’s two weeks now to dwell on this,” Taylor added, “and I’m someone who will dwell on this for a while. I was really looking forward to going into the Christmas break on a high note. All I expected tonight was an effort, that’s all I wanted, really, for the guys to work hard. That’s what makes it so disap-

pointing.”

Both he and team owner and president Robert Turnbull hinted that some changes may be needed before the sixth place team with a 10-15-3 record be-

gins the second half of its season January 5 at home against Tott-

enham.

“I’m going to coach differ-

ently in the new year,” says Tay-

lor. “I think there’s been enough of me giving everybody a fair amount of ice time. I might now even dress the four lines. Maybe it’s time to cut back. There are certain guys who really want to be here, and others who are just going through the motions.”

That Jan. 5 home game is fol-

lowed by road games in North York, Toronto and Durham over the following three days. Following those games, on Jan. 9 the league will hold its All-Star Games in West Nippa-

ing. Despite their record, the Predators will be represented well that day.

Goalie Zane Clausen and captain Logan Ballie will rep-

resent the Predators in the All Star Game, while Isaac Locker and Aiden Jones, playing in the U18 All-Star Game, will have a famil-

iar face on their bench, as Taylor serves as an assistant coach.

To view more photos, please visit notllocal.com

Gary Zalepa gets ready to drop the puck at 2023 James Berg tournament. (Supplied)

The second annual James Berg Memorial Tourna-

ment raised $8,000 Satur-

day, smashing last year’s total of $5,500. Organized by the family of the late James Berg (wife Caro-

lyn, children Mackenzie, Madison and Mitch), eight teams, some formed just for the tournament, com-

peted to take home a team set of T-shirts and bragging rights, with the team led by Kyle Pauls coming out victorious for the second straight year. Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa supported the tournament this year by coming out to reffere the two semi-final games. $6,000 of the pro-

ceeds will be donated to the NOTL Wolves Minor Hockey Association, while the remaining $2,000 will go toward a scholarship fund for graduating Wolves players.

To view more photos from the tournament, please visit notllocal.com

Decian Fogarty scored the Preds’ lone goal on the last play of the game against the Bulls.

James Berg tournament supports minor hockey, scholarship fund

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Gary Zalepa gets ready to drop the puck at 2023 James Berg tournament. (Supplied)

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Local SPORTS

Preds look forward to starting 2024 with easier schedule

Mike Balsom
The Local

The team led by Kyle Pauls wins for the second straight year. (Mike Balsom)
In Memoriam

It is ‘Forty Years On’ since the early and sudden death on December 29th, 1983 of our father, John Drope. He was best known as the inspiration and founder of the Pillar and Post. The P&P represented an exquisite combination of the many gifts he possessed and the things he loved. Beginning as a modest iron forgery and reproduction pine furniture manufacturing facility he created a unique and historically themed establishment for entertainment, lodging and hospitality. John liked to be at the centre of a good party, so there was a culture of quality and fun at the Pillar. He was most proud that he employed thousands of people over that first decade. As a director of the Niagara Foundation, he cared deeply about preserving the colonial elements of Niagara. In turn, he was a ‘pioneer’ of the tourism business that Niagara-on-the-Lake is so well known for today.

For many years, Dad was also an active member of the Shaw Festival’s Board of Directors. He created ‘The Shawction’ now known as Shivery. For his work on the restoration of Court House, The John Drope Hall is in his name in an upstair’s reception hall by the Niagara Foundation one of his eminent tried and trues. He loved Niagara in the quiet way, history, tradition and the people from all walks of life. That was the public John Drope. He dazzled as a very talented multi-sport athlete at Ridley College and beyond, was sought out on every dance card and served in the Royal Canadian Navy in WWII. He was a beloved friend to many, to whom he was affectionately known as ‘Dropy’, ‘Matthew’, ‘Johnny’, and ‘Dad’ among other monikers. Most good guys are lucky to have one nickname!

We, his children: Kathy, Pat, Sarah (deceased), Nancy and Will and our late mother Marvyn, take to heart his words: ‘Life is a gift given to all of us to make the best of it and it’s all ours. We are all one in this and no one of us is better than another. Let’s all work together to make this world a better place.’

John was a man of principle and integrity, his pride in the Pillar and Post shines through in the company today. He is very much missed by everyone who knew him.

Sincerely,

John’s children: Kathy, Pat, Sarah, Nancy and Will

In Memoriam in our Classifieds, Deadline is Tuesdays at 1 p.m.

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