

STRATFORD TIMES

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Coldest Night of the Year 2024 campaign begins

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

United Way Perth-Huron and Shelterlink Youth Services are hoping for more participation and fundraising for the upcoming Coldest Night of the Year walk to support those facing homelessness.

The Coldest Night of the Year walk will return to Stratford's Upper Queens Park on February 24, 2024. The press release from the United Way Perth-Huron said the in-person walk starts at the Upper Queens Park bandshell and will circuit around Avon River. Walkers will return to the bandshell and enjoy dinner courtesy of Soup Surreal. The event check-in begins at 4 p.m. and opening ceremonies start at 5 p.m.

"Our event is fun, but our cause is serious," Sonya Heyen, manager of resource development and communications at United Way Perth-Huron, said. "We need the compassionate and caring people to make a stand and show solidarity for people facing homelessness and that's why we walk on a cold evening."

The Coldest Night of the Year Walk aims to raise \$180,000 for Shelterlink Youth Services and the Connection Centre, run by the United Way Perth-Huron. The event raised \$152,419 during their 2023 walk.

Shelterlink Youth Services provides emergency services and outreach for youth 16 to 24-years-old in Perth County who are either experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. The Connection Centre provides shelter, showers, laundry, and hot meals at St. Paul's Anglican Church for those facing homelessness in Stratford.

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SPACE ISLAND SHINES ON OPENING NIGHT

(FRED GONDER PHOTO)

Explore space this winter at Tom Patterson Island. One of the most popular light installations is back at the island with a new addition - the Lunar Lamp Posts, which are sure to light up any cold night.

No End in Sight: City of Stratford Budget Discussions Stretch into January

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The City of Stratford 2024 budget process has started, yet unlike other cities in the area, it is far from finished. Budget deliberations started on Thursday, December 14 and proceeded again on Friday, December 15.

The finance and labour relations committee managed to discuss the operational budget, capital forecasts, and expansion requests for each city department, and

although most councillors saw the need for increased budgets, Councillor Cody Sebben just wasn't accepting of the tax increases and continued to turn down motions throughout both days.

"I think we are supposed to be doing everything we can to save money," said Councillor Sebben, "I certainly would be very disgruntled if I had a 10 percent tax increase coming my way. We do need to make the hard choices, but I think one of those hard choices is saying no."

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No End in Sight: City of Stratford Budget Discussions Stretch into January

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

What started as an 8.27 percent increase in the tax rate, based on a 10.54 percent increase to the tax levy, moved up to 9.98 percent, based on a levy increase of 12.46 percent after the first two days.

The results from a survey on Engage-Stratford's website noted that all respondents prefer no property tax increase; however, 63 percent of respondents could support tax increases to maintain or increase service levels. Furthermore, 67 percent of respondents felt they received fair or good value for their tax dollars.

Keeping in line with these results, most councillors motioned to approve all expansion requests, other than the Parks and Recreations Master Plan, which saved the city \$80,000 this year. According to council, this request will be moved to the 2025 budget for review.

Over one hour of deliberation was spent on discussing Destination Stratford's Lights On Festival, where the city will invest \$150,000 into the program to enhance visitor engagement. Half of the total amount will affect the tax levy for city taxpayers, and the rest will come from the MAT tax, which started early this year.

Although feelings were mixed, Councillor Henderson did note her agreement to support Lights On Stratford. "It's important that we promote winter tourism," she said, "It helps all our downtown businesses, bed and breakfasts, motels and gas stations. I know it's a direct hit on the taxpayers, but it will indirectly help us so much in the winter months."

"We're a tourism city whether we like it or not," she said.

In opposition to Councillor Henderson's comments, Councillor Sebben said, "We're looking at a gradual increase in expansion [with the Lights On Stratford Festival], which is coming directly from the levees, so I can't support the expansion."

Councillor McCabe echoed Councillor Henderson's comments in support of Lights On Stratford. "We had a pandemic which shut down businesses in the hospitality sector for 360 days, causing a devastating effect on the local economy," said McCabe, "We need to be able to employ in the hospitality sector throughout the year in order for them to live here, that is certainly a necessity. So, as part of that, we need to expand into the winter season and come up with non-traditional ways in order to support our economy, and I believe Lights On Stratford is doing just that."

Next, focusing on affordable housing, the City of Stratford approved expansion requests of \$215,000 for Servicing Va-

cant City-Owned Land for Affordable Housing, \$180,000 for Interim Space Design and Construction at 82 Erie Street and \$500,000 for the Affordable Housing Project, located at 398 Erie Street.

Almost all councillors noted the importance of affordable housing programs, although it will directly increase taxes throughout the city. "One of the sad ironies of this is that to make housing more affordable, the only tool we have is to use municipal tax dollars," said Councillor Mark Hunter, "I honestly looked through this budget carefully, and I found almost no fat in the budget to cut."

Other notable approved requests were for \$120,000 for the Municipal Facilities Space Utilization Master Plan, \$150,000 for the Community Improvement Plan and other finances allocated toward new software upgrades throughout City departments.

The Grand Trunk site will have a \$0 investment for 2024; however, will again be looked at during the 2025 budget meeting.

The budget deliberation did not conclude after the second day, City Councillors will now move into January to complete the finance and labour relations committee meeting. Most councillors did note the stress of having to be in their current position, managing a budget that had not increased prior to last year, for upwards of 7 years.

"This has put us in the position that we're in now where we're having to catch up," said Councillor McCabe. "We have to start having serious conversations about density in this community because it is very expensive, with our old infrastructure and our old buildings, to provide at this scale of population, the services that we are asked to provide."

"Certainly, there are factors that have been identified," stated Mayor Martin Ritsma, "We talked earlier about grants that have been removed or reduced from both levels of government. We talked about the loss of the ability to collect certain taxes. We talk about the inflation rate that impacts us in our own homes. We have responsibilities that haven't been on our plate in other years, like the acceleration of homelessness and affordable housing, which has become our responsibility. Also, the environment piece that we have to do our part about. I think a lot of communities and a lot of municipalities across Ontario are struggling with the same thing and having this same conversation; it's a tough pill to swallow."

The next finance and labour relations committee meeting will be held in mid-January 2024 when City Council will hopefully approve a final tax increase.

Most Perth County Residents satisfied with life despite socioeconomic challenges

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Kristin Crane, Director of Social Research and Planning, United Way Perth Huron, presented to City Council a Quality of Life Summary on behalf of United Way Perth Huron.

The presentation will be used as information for the Council to better understand and recognize issues related to socioeconomic challenges within Huron Perth and how to better manage funding to enhance the quality of life within the community.

Crane notes that affordable housing is a human right in Canada and internationally, but many households in Huron Perth are spending a substantial part of their income on shelter costs. "A median yearly after-tax income of 37 thousand dollars means that you're paying 46 percent of your income just to pay for a one-bedroom apartment or one-bedroom rental."

Food insecurity is a high priority, especially with new stats from Agri-Food Analytics Lab, which recently published its Canadian Food Price Report, noting that Canadian food costs will rise again in 2024, expected to cost the average family over seven hundred dollars more annually.

Crane notes that 63 percent of those who participated in the Social Research and Planning Council's survey experienced food insecurity, with families with children being the most affected. "We found that 24 percent of people's incomes did not meet their needs," said Crane, "Of the respondents, 87 percent had to sacrifice their household food budget to pay for other expenses, such as rent or mortgage, utilities or transportation. 63 percent of re-

spondents are employed full-time."

With regard to discrimination, Crane notes that 69 percent of immigrants and/or visible minorities experienced discrimination in Huron Perth. The report found 81 percent of indigenous peoples had experienced discrimination, and further that Black residents had the highest self-reported experiences of discrimination (86%). The report was conducted through randomized phone interviews, and the results are statistically significant and representative of the population as a whole.

A highlight from the report found that in Perth County, most residents report being satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, with low levels of stress across all age groups. "Self-reported life satisfaction is one of the most direct measures of quality of life," said Crane, "Low levels of life satisfaction can be associated with poor mental health. Fortunately, in Perth, 97 percent of people report being either moderately satisfied or very satisfied with their lives. So that's very encouraging."

Making note of the robust, small business community in Huron Perth, Crane said that these businesses give back to the community, "We know that those small businesses and nonprofits contributed significantly to quality of life," she continued, "They have a high rate of participation in the community then purchase goods and services locally, and often hold fundraisers and volunteer at local events. They also employ many people in our region."

Looking ahead to 2024, Crane notes that the local workforce, government, nonprofits, and community organizations should engage in diversity and education training to reduce discrimination to help improve the quality of life in Huron-Perth.

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STRATFORD TIMES

Stratford's Community Newspaper

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Enjoy some soup for a good cause

SYDNEY GOODWIN

Times Correspondent

Soup's On 2024 is sure to add some joy and warmth to the cold Canadian January. Every year, the community comes together to enjoy good soup and fundraise for a great cause put together by the Alzheimer Society Huron Perth.

Soup's On is taking place Saturday, January 13, 2024, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Stratford Rotary Complex and is proudly presented by Hyde Construction.

Admission to the event is by donation at the door. 'Soupons', the official currency of Soup's On, are available for purchase. Five dollars will get you five 'soupons' and these can be used to get your soup samples. Attendees are encouraged to bring their own spoons to reduce the environmental impact of the event.

The Alzheimer Society started this fundraiser back in 1995 to help the community come together and raise

money and awareness for a worthwhile cause: to offer necessary help for those living with dementia.

As the years have gone on, the popularity of this event has continued to grow; not even the pandemic could stop Soup's On from continuing their tradition.

"In 2021, we held a Soup's On trail. A bunch of the businesses that typically came to Soup's On actually did it out of their restaurants, and then people walked around on a soup trail to taste the soups and vote on their favourite," explained Erin Dale, the Manager of Fund Development & Communication with the Alzheimer Society.

With 2024 marking the second year of Soup's On's return to in-person, Dale is excited to re-experience the close-knit community feeling that this fundraiser is all about. "A diagnosis of dementia does not mean your life is over. There are many things you can do to maintain a healthy life-

style, including staying active and social within your community, which is what Soup's On is all about," Dale notes, stressing that dementia is an ever-changing disease, and how flexibility is so important when working to help it.

This special event is not only about soup, it's also about coming together and having a fun day with the family. "There's going to be a silent auction, live entertainment, and a kids corner. So there's a little something for everybody," Dale says. The Alzheimer Society works hard on this event every year to make sure that it is a warm, welcoming, and inviting space for people of all ages to attend and enjoy.

For more information about this event, visit the Alzheimer Society website at <https://alzheimer.ca/huronperth/take-action/fundraise-participate/soups>. You can also call the Alzheimer Society at 519-271-1910, or send an email at erind@alzhp.ca.



CORRECTION: the November 24, 2023 article entitled "The Stratford and Area Master Gardeners plant pollinators to support local wildlife" had incorrectly listed the name of the Conservation Fund involved. The

article should have referenced that funding came from the **Donald McTavish Conservation Fund** held within The Stratford Perth Community Foundation. The Times apologizes for the error.

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STRATFORD TIMES

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Looking back on 2023 with Perth Wellington MP John Nater



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

"It was an interesting year, that's for sure," said John Nater, Perth Wellington MP.

Although, for the most part, we are out of the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, all levels of government seem to be playing catch-up to manage funds and provide communities with a way back to 'normal.'

Stratford Times sat down with Nater to discuss goals, accomplishments and what happened in 2023 earlier this week.

Nater started with a great accomplishment he believes will give Perth Wellington agricultural sector the recognition it deserves. The MP's office was proud to advocate for Bill S-227, An Act to establish Food Day in Canada. The process, not an easy one, started over 20 years ago.

"During the BSE crisis for Mad Cow disease, Anita Stewart from Wellington County started the process of designating the first weekend in August as Food Day in Canada as a way to promote local beef," said Nater. "Over the last 20 years, this has expanded to include all forms of food in Canada, and our office did a lot of work in The House of Commons to designate this day."

"I'm happy to say that now that the first Saturday in August will be Food Day in Canada, where we can celebrate all parts of our great bounty here in Canada."

The agriculture sector in Perth Wellington comprises local farmers who produce good products and excel beyond others in Ontario, Nater said about the local farm sector. "We're number one for dairy in the country, number one for chicken in the country, and top four and five for beef and pork," said Nater. "We also have amazing farmland. So, when you're talking about agriculture in Perth and Wellington counties, our farmers are number one."

Sustainability is on top of mind for the MP. He acknowledges local farmers' work on their work to fight climate change, even

though, at a federal level, farmers are not getting the credit they deserve, he said.

"[Farmers] have come up with sustainability plans, looking forward to how they make their industry more efficient, more sustainable, but really looking at it from a grassroots standpoint," said Nater. "I sometimes I think when the [Federal] government tries to get involved, it becomes a top-down approach, but I would suggest shifting the focus on what's happening on the ground; there is not enough recognition or benefit that's given to the farmers for their involvement in environmental stewardship."

Next up, the MP discussed affordable housing in Perth Wellington; Nater notes that he is displeased with the Federal Government's funding methods, which seem to leave small and rural communities behind. "I'm really disappointed with some of the current Government's approaches to what I consider small, rural communities when it comes to infrastructure funding," he said. "We have programs that would benefit us locally, but we seem to get overlooked because of how funding is distributed."

Nater notes that larger regions are able to put more time into grant applications and generally receive more funding, which he believes is an unfair distribution due to the size of the communities. He notes that he consistently advocates for fair funding and distribution of grants to small and rural communities like Perth Wellington.

One program Nater says is very effective at providing appropriate funding is the Gas Tax Fund, which is based on a formula where municipalities are allocated funds and can use this money where they see fit. "This way, you can get the money out the door and into the hands of the municipalities, where they have the flexibility to allocate it where they see fit."

Moving on to immigration, Nater said that there are currently 2.4 million people backlogged waiting for immigration

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Looking ahead to 2024 with Perth Wellington MPP Matthew Rae



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Perth Wellington MPP Matthew Rae is clear on his goals for 2024, "Affordability is the number one issue we hear in the office and when I'm out community," he said, "Ensuring that we continue to provide relief to individuals in the province is essential."

Discussing the Gas Tax cut, Rae notes that the Ontario Government is planning to advocate for the tax cut to be extended until June 30, 2024, which will help Ontarians keep money in their pockets.

Rae also discussed the GAINS Program, which ensures a guaranteed minimum income for Ontario seniors by providing monthly payments to qualifying pensioners. "In 2024, We're looking at expanding the GAINS program. This program provides seniors and low-income seniors with financial assistance." Rae says this will extend program eligibility for nearly 100,000 people across Ontario.

Regarding health care, Rae notes that although the province is working towards better working conditions and increased funding for Ontario Healthcare, it can be challenging. "In health care, especially rural health care, there are gaps, but we've invested 200 million dollars to help provide education and internships to nurses, especially those in rural areas."

Next, Rae discussed how the Ontario Government is investing in critical infrastructure to help support and maintain municipal water projects to help build more housing and spur economic growth. "Investing in wastewater infrastructure will ensure that small towns can work with nonprofits or work with a private developer to build a wide range of housing, and this funding can help facilitate that."

In keeping in line with building more af-

fordable housing, Rae also said the Ontario Government is supplying local communities with an opportunity to receive the Building Faster Fund. This fund supports local municipalities that meet housing targets. "120 million dollars is being allocated to rural municipalities," says Rae, "There is flexibility into how these funds can be used."

Regarding housing initiatives, Rae says the Social Relief Fund is a specific fund that is granted to municipalities at the provincial level. It is an annual fund that cities can count on year by year. "That money is essentially a lump sum given to the local service provider. They can decide how they want to allocate the money."

Ontario is meeting its targets with regard to greenhouse gas emissions, and Rae says, "I'm very committed to meeting our targets for greenhouse gas emissions," he continued, "Ontario is on track; we are committed to meeting the federal government targets."

Rae says rural farmers are top of mind and continues to advocate for business risk management for farmers. "I've been working with Lisa Thompson, the Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, to ensure we continue supporting our farmers."

In 2024, MPP Rae will be working on a Private Member Bill - Life Lease, which is going to the committee in early 2024. "As we discussed earlier, we are in a housing crisis, and there's no easy solution," said Rae, "The Life Leases Bill is one way that we can help people get into the housing market and help build equity for those that may not be able to afford a house."

The Life Leases Act will act as a housing model between renting and owning. "I see it as a way to potentially address some of the missing middle in the housing spectrum," said Rae.

Grand Opening of Optimism Place Expansion

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Optimism Place is Perth County's only women's shelter, and since 1983, they have created a safe space for women and children who are experiencing domestic violence.

The Building on Hope Capital Campaign was announced in September 2022 and completed this week. Staff and community members attended the official opening and ribbon cutting for the new space on December 18. "It's truly been all hands on deck to make sure this came together before the holidays," said Jasmine Clark, Executive Director at Optimism Place Women's Shelter and Support Services.

Optimism Place made note of their dream for the space on their website, "We envision a day where every Perth County woman and her children seeking safety will be able to receive the residential and community-based safety and support they need to heal from their trauma and build a future of hope and optimism."

Although unveiled earlier this week, the expansion will start to offer space for women and children who experience domestic violence in early January 2024. Last year, Optimism Place had turned away 335 women and children due to a lack of space, but in 2024, they will now offer 15 new beds, which should help offer more availability to women and children in need.

Matthew Rae, Perth Wellington MPP, attended the ribbon cutting and later noted, "It was a pleasure to join Optimism Place staff, board members, and members of the community to mark the completion



CUTTING OF THE PURPLE RIBBON

Members of the community, Staff at Optimism Place and local City and Government officials were all there to show their support for the local women's shelter on December 18, when Optimism Place opened their newly expanded facility doors for the first time.

of their ten new bedroom expansion project." The Ontario government provided over \$77,000 through the Ontario Trillium Foundation to help ensure the completion of the project.

Rae also expressed his gratitude to those who made this expansion happen, "Thank you to Board Chair Kate Graham, Executive Director Jasmine Clark, and the entire team for all that you do to support women and children in our rural communities."

John Nater, MP, was also in attendance at the unveiling of the finished project, and he, too, extended his gratitude. "Through the hard work and dedication of so many volunteers, board members, and staff at Optimism Place, today we marked the 7,000-square-foot expansion of their facil-

ity. I was pleased to acknowledge the federal financial support of over \$3 million through CMHC."

Nater also thanked the community for pulling together to provide the additional funding, "Even more impressive was the incredible fundraising effort undertaken through the "Building on Hope" Campaign in the community. There is still so much work to do to eradicate violence against women in our community, but we can be grateful for the essential services provided by Optimism Place."

Speaking of community, the City of Stratford provided more than \$82,000 in building permits and other fees, and Marklevitz Architects Inc. contributed services worth \$94,000 in total.

The space expansion added ten bedrooms with 15 beds, six accessible washrooms, five washer/dryer sets, one fully accessible elevator, five dedicated counselling office spaces, extra space for janitorial needs, storage space, and a backyard play structure.

MP John Nater

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

processing, and many of these are in healthcare, childcare, skilled trades and demanding industries.

Nater notes that on a federal level, the government is working to fast-track qualified workers who are immigrating to Canada in order to get them into the workforce and their professions faster, "One of the things we've proposed is a blue seal program so that if you're [in Canada], and if you have the qualifications, there'll be a standardized test across the country. If you pass, you can work in your profession right away."

With regard to the rising rates of mental health concerns across the country post-pandemic, Nater says that programs, such as the 9-8-8 Suicide Prevention Program, are essential and well-received by all levels of government but are just taking too long to be implemented. "Although this program is essential and a great idea, it took over three years to be implemented across the country."

"We're dealing with a really serious situation with regard to mental health," says Nater. "We see it in agriculture, healthcare and all sectors. I don't want to be too critical of the government, but I am concerned with how long programs take to implement."

Although noting his dissatisfaction with

the timeliness of mental health program funding from the federal level, Nater does say that there is more recognition of mental health concerns in specific sectors, such as agriculture, "they have now dedicated resources for agriculture folks working in the industry, because that's one area where people tend to hold everything in and plow their way through, rather than seeking support."

Seeing that COVID-19 is still affecting small businesses, Nater notes his concern about the CEBA loans: "[Business owners] are starting to get back on their feet, but they're not there yet," he said, "It doesn't look like the government's going to offer additional flexibility with the CEBA loans, and a lot of folks are in that crunch situation. It's kind of this perfect storm of negative consequences that are happening right now, literally as we speak, and coming into the New Year."

Nater says he has been advocating for small business owners with the Minister of Finance and hopes to find a way to offer some flexibility in loan repayment and schedules that can protect small business owners. "We've seen far too many local businesses that have already closed their doors, especially in the food service sector. So, anything we do to provide some flexibility is needed. We are really pushing for this in January."



JOHN NATER M.P. PERTH-WELLINGTON
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Coldest Night of the Year 2024 campaign begins

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Heyen said the Stratford-Perth-St. Marys By-Name-List indicates there are 142 people in Stratford and surrounding area who are experiencing homelessness.

"Even if there's one or two people homeless, you'll find us out there walking because everyone matters," she said.

Elizabeth Cooper, United Way Perth-Huron's manager of community development, said that about 20 teams have registered for the 2024 Coldest Night of the Year as of December 13. Team names can be creative and include Warm Hearts, Cold Hands, Mighty Cold Mustangs, and Team Haggis.

"When people come up with creative names for the team, it just adds to the morale and the excitement of the event," Cooper said.

The first 300 teams across Canada to

raise \$500 will receive a Coldest Night of the Year Hoodie, and several Stratford walkers were the recipients of the 2023 event's sweater. All participants who raise \$150, or youth under 18-years-old who raise \$75, will receive a toque. The design changes every year, and the 2024 pom-pom white toque features blue, yellow, and grey stripes.

"Those are always so fun to collect and really great for photo opportunities when people put them on with your team," Cooper said. "We always have lots of fun with the toques as well."

It's free to register as a participant for the Coldest Night of the Year walk. To register and/or to donate, visit cnoy.org/location/stratford. Donations not specific to any team or walker will automatically be donated to the Stratford Shelterlink Staff Team's fundraiser.

Stratford BIA supports Downtown Connections Centre

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

A cheque for \$1,957 was presented to the Connections Centre (Cash donations must first go through United Way) at the Downtown Stratford Business Improvement Area (BIA), located at 47 Downie Street.

The funds were collected during the two weekends of Winter Wander-Land, hosted by the BIA downtown Stratford in November and December.

Jamie Pritchard, General Manager of Downtown Stratford Business Improvement Area, said, "The Connection Cen-

tre was chosen as they are in the downtown core and take care of all of the folks from our community that really need this space." Winter Wander-Land was a great success, said Pritchard.

There were thousands of visitors to Winter Wander-land, including over 4,000 carousel riders, 650 visits to Santa, 1,400 S'more kits distributed and almost 3,000 candy canes given out. Pritchard says the event was filled with "joy upon joy" both weekends, and the BIA is happy to support such a wonderful cause this holiday season.



(AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

JOY UPON JOY

Jamie Pritchard, BIA General Manager, Sonya Heyen of the United Way Perth-Huron, Mayor Martin Ritsma and Kim Griffiths of the BIA.

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Rae Announces Combined \$14M in Infrastructure Funding

On December 14, Matthew Rae, MPP for Perth-Wellington announced municipalities throughout Perth and Wellington Counties will receive \$14,468,702 in 2024 for local infrastructure needs. This funding is part of the province's overall \$400 million investment through the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund (OCIF).

"Our government is working with our rural and small communities to build critical infrastructure such as roads, water and wastewater, and bridges," said Rae. "We are ensuring our municipal partners can count on provincial infrastructure funding, allowing them to undertake necessary projects, while reducing the impact on their budgets."

The OCIF supports local infrastructure projects for communities with populations under 100,000, along with all rural and northern communities. Municipalities may accumulate their funding for up to five years to address larger infrastructure projects.

"The City of Stratford is so appreciative of these Provincial funds through the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund (OCIF)," said Martin Ritsma, Mayor of the City of Stratford. "One of our greatest challenges as a municipality, similar to those across the province, is the upgrading of existing road and linear infrastructure and the building of new. Whether it is to support residential or employment growth in our local community. A special thank you to MPP Matthew Rae for understanding our needs and supporting us every step of the way."

"We are very appreciative of the OCIF Funding we receive as it helps reduce our infrastructure deficit," said Gregg Davidson, Mayor of the Township of Mapleton. "The extra funding this year will get us one step closer to upgrading our wastewater capacity so we can support new home growth."

"Small, rural and northern communities need stable funding for their unique

infrastructure needs and to provide safe and reliable services," said Kinga Surma, Minister of Infrastructure. "That's why our government continues to provide funding, especially during these challenging economic times. Our investments in community infrastructure are helping to create jobs, build stronger local economies, and lay the foundation for a stronger, more resilient Ontario for generations to come."

In December 2021, the Ontario government announced an additional \$1 billion for critical infrastructure projects that support economic growth and job creation in small, rural and northern communities, bringing the government's total investment to nearly \$2 billion dollars over five years.

Funding allocations are based on a formula that recognizes the different needs and economic conditions of communities.

As announced in Ontario's 2023 Fall Economic Statement, the government

is also protecting communities and unlocking new housing opportunities by investing \$200 million over three years to help municipalities repair, rehabilitate and expand critical water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure. Eligible municipalities will be able to nominate housing-enabling water and wastewater projects in early 2024 through the new Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund.

Perth-Wellington 2024 OCIF levels are as follows:

Municipality	2024 Funding
Wellington County	\$ 2,764,871
Mapleton	\$ 1,140,309
Minto	\$ 1,314,896
North Perth	\$ 972,700
Perth County	\$ 703,009
Perth East	\$ 307,460
Perth South	\$ 425,969
St Marys	\$ 597,536
Stratford	\$ 3,115,579
Wellington North	\$ 1,682,295
West Perth	\$ 1,199,829
Total	\$ 14,468,702

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PC Connect free transit pass program at libraries ending December 31

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

Libraries will soon no longer be able to offer free PC Connect transit passes.

The Perth County Facebook page announced on December 6 the PC Connect Library Bus Pass Pilot Program will end on December 31, 2023. The free passes were available

at libraries part of the Perth County Information Network, including the Stratford Public Library.

"The PC Connect Library Bus Pass program was a pilot project aimed at increasing awareness and access to PC Connect," Maggie Kerr, the transit project coordinator for Perth County, said to the Stratford Times. "The pilot program was offered for nearly seven months, and while extremely successful, continuing it in its current form is not conducive to our overall service sustainability objectives."

Perth County library patrons used the passes for 1,035 trips before December. The passes received lots of positive feedback and showed what PC Connect bus-

es offer to transit riders.

"We hope to continue to serve these new riders and assist residents with getting where they need to go – from work, appointments, visiting friends and family, and simply maintaining an independent and active lifestyle," Kerr said.

Krista Robinson, the CEO of the Stratford Public Library, said that patrons were disappointed the pilot program is ending and wanted it to continue on. However, she understands PC Connect's decision.

"I am hopeful that those who used our passes will continue to use the PC Connect service to travel throughout the county," Robinson said.

The Perth County Information Network and PC Connect will meet and discuss other options in January 2024.

PC Connect travels through Perth County, Stratford, St. Marys, London, and Kitchener-Waterloo. More information about the transit service and schedules can be found via perthcounty.ca/en/pc-connect-transit-system.

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Repurposing 24 St. Andrew Street to preserve a piece of History



(AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

FUTURE THEATRE SPACE

The old archives building at 24 St. Andrew Street could be utilized as a small theatre space in the future.

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At the December 11 council meeting, The City of Stratford held a public meeting regarding a zone change for land located around 24 St. Andrew Street and the greater Perth County Campus at 1 and 5 Huron Street.

Alexander Burnett, City of Stratford planner, presented the zone change application to the council and city staff members, which would allow 24 St. Andrew Street to be utilized as a small theatre space.

The current building is located within the City's Heritage Conservation District, and re-using the existing, vacant building is intended to conserve the heritage attributes of the property and building. This proposal presented aimed to repurpose the building and save it from demolition.

The proposed change is to rezone the old building, used previously for the County of Perth Archives, into a small theatre that could enhance the community. "No changes are proposed to take place at the courthouse or the former Service Ontario building as part of this application," said Burnett.

The purpose of this zone change is to rezone the property from an Institutional Community (IN1) Zone that permits a variety of institutional uses, including an auditorium, a library, a municipal office, a place of worship and a school, to a site-specific Institutional Community Zone.

In addition to the already permitted uses of the proper-

ty, this change would permit using it as a theatre, theatre classroom, performing art studio, studio theatre, retail store, theatre restaurant, and special event space. This space will hold a maximum theatre capacity of 80 persons and will not permit any additional parking.

24 St. Andrew Street is currently vacant but has been considered for demolition in past years. Perth County and The City of Stratford believe that revamping the space and using it as a small theatre, it would conserve the heritage attributes of the property and building.

A Notice of the Application was sent to surrounding property owners on November 16, and one community member did attend the Council meeting to share her support of the change, "It's an absolutely beautiful building that has sat empty for too long," she said, "So having a use that is complimentary to the area is great."

The community member mentioned her concerns about parking in the area, as it is said to be busy at times. Although council also raised concerns regarding parking in the area, City Planner Burnett noted this shouldn't cause a significant change in traffic due to theatre performances generally taking place after business hours and on weekends.

Stratford City Council intends to consider this application at a future regular council meeting where the members of the council will have an opportunity for a full discussion of the application after reading comments received from the public at this time.

If anyone would like to receive further information of this application, please email clerks@stratford.ca

Rhonda Ehgoetz Acclaimed as Perth County Warden

In an election held on December 7, 2023 at the Perth County's Paramedic Services' Headquarters in Stratford, Perth County Council acclaimed Rhonda Ehgoetz, the Mayor of Perth East, as Warden of Perth County. The position of Warden is elected by Council annually and held for a term of one year. The 2023-2024 term will be the second for Ehgoetz as Warden.

Warden Ehgoetz has served twenty-three years in politics with thirteen years serving on Perth County Council. She was elected as Deputy Warden for 3 years from 2019-2022. During her time on County Council, she has served as County representative on many of the Boards and Committees.

"I want to thank Council Members for their trust in me to fulfill this important role for a second term," said Ehgoetz. "We've accomplished a lot over the past year, and I look forward to continuing that excellent work in the coming year. We are in an exciting time at Perth County. Over the next year we expect to see the completion of several important projects such as the County's New Official Plan and the completion of construction at the Courthouse Campus. I have thoroughly enjoyed my role and having the opportunity meet many residents and stakeholders across Perth County."

In addition to the election of Ehgoetz as Warden, Doug Kellum, Deputy Mayor for North Perth, was acclaimed to the role of Deputy Warden for a second term. "I am grateful for the opportunity continue to serve as Deputy Warden," said Kellum. "We have an excellent Council and I look forward to continuing our momentum in cultivating opportunity in our vibrant region."

"On behalf of County staff, I want to extend my heartfelt congratulations to Warden Ehgoetz and Deputy Warden Kellum on their respective acclamations," said Chief Administrative Officer Lori Wolfe. "Staff are excited and eager to continue working together with Council over the coming year toward the goals of our new Corporate Strategic Plan."

Perth County Council is comprised of 10 members representing the four Lower-Tier Municipalities: The Municipality of North Perth, The Township of Perth South, The Township of Perth East, and The Municipality of West Perth). Below is a list of current representatives on County Council.

Weekend Quiz

- 1) What did the Three Wise Men bring as gifts?
- 2) In the song "Jingle Bells", what kind of sleigh is mentioned?
- 3) What brings Frosty the Snowman to life?
- 4) Who plays Elf in "Elf"?
- 5) "All I Want For Christmas Is You" is sung by who?
- 6) Which country does eggnog originate from?
- 7) Under which type of plant are people supposed to kiss?
- 8) Where does Santa Claus live?
- 9) How many sizes did the Grinch's heart grow?
- 10) In the song "12 Days of Christmas" what was given on the 11th day?

This week's answers are found on pg. 39

Shelf Help

The Skull, by Jon Klassen
@SPL: J FIC Klass

In this gorgeously-illustrated retelling of the Tyrolean folktale, a young girl named Otilla runs away. In her travels through the woods, she comes across a giant old house, where a skull lives. The skull grants her shelter, under the condition that she help him escape something of his own horror.

This winter, cozy up and embrace the dark, cold atmosphere of Jon Klassen's



The Skull. Chock-full of bravery, wit, and wry humour, Klassen reimagines the tale as an ode to the unspoken acceptance, trust, and understanding of beautiful friendships. Perfect for any moody 6-10-year-old, *The Skull* brings a warm and sweet twist to an otherwise delightfully macabre story.

Emma Brommer
Public Service Librarian
Stratford Public Library

Grief and Loss during the Holidays with Rotary Hospice

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Registered Social Workers Jaclyn Turpin and Melissa McManus from Rotary Hospice hosted a one-hour virtual



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webinar to help educate those who have experienced loss. This is the first of a new quarterly webinar series hosted by Rotary Hospice.

Turpin and McManus currently work at Rotary Hospice and provide support to residents and families who are there supporting their loved ones. This includes providing follow up support to family members with the hope to extend the bereavement programming to community members in the new year.

Although working directly at Rotary Hospice, the two wanted to extend their reach and provide more support to Stratford and beyond; therefore, they will now offer online webinars related to grief and loss topics.

"We are excited to be able to extend our reach in the community," said Turpin, "We want to support folks who have been involved with the hospice and also to those in the communities that we know are grieving outside of the hospice, as well."

The December presentation was specifically related to grief and loss during the holiday season. "We have kind of this box of what grief looks like according to our society, which can be very tricky," said Turpin, "We see examples on TV of what grief should look like, and unfortunately, these aren't realistic representations of our own experiences with grief."

Turpin went on to discuss with those in attendance how coping with grief and loss can look different for each individual, and it could also look different day by day.

The educational webinar discussed that becoming more tired, having difficulty eating or sleeping, increased sickness and/or difficulty concentrating are normal aspects of grieving. Turpin also noted that grief in children can look different still. "The everyday life experience of someone who may be grieving from a loss does not usually fit into a perfect category and can be quite different around the holidays," said Turpin.

"The holidays are a time filled with expectations," said McManus, "Expectations to attend holiday gatherings, expectations to be busy and to shop and



GRIEF AND LOSS WEBINARS

Registered Social Workers Melissa McManus and Jaclyn Turpin at Rotary Hospice getting ready for the holidays

(AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

expectations to feel holiday joy. All of this can be extremely difficult during the holidays."

These expectations can be difficult to manage, but McManus said that practicing saying no, having a plan B or not celebrating or decorating this year if you choose are all healthy ways to manage and cope with loss at your own pace.

The Rotary Hospice Registered Social Workers also shared that being patient with yourself, setting boundaries and giving yourself time to grieve are all important steps to help the holidays be more manageable during this time of loss.

The two shared ways to help ease the difficulty, and although not every recommendation may work for everyone, it's common for comforting and memorable experiences to help ease the pain of loss.

Baking or cooking a favourite recipe, singing a favourite Christmas song, setting a place for the deceased loved one at the table for dinner during your holiday meal or lighting a candle in memory are all ways to help cope with grief and loss around the holidays.

If you have loved ones who have experienced loss and will be alone this holiday, McManus notes that inviting them to a holiday dinner, calling and texting and asking them how you could support them during the season are all great ways to reach out without overstepping boundaries.

In March, McManus and Turpin will host their next webinar on Firsts and Grief Bursts. If you'd like more information on hospice programming or grief-specific resources, please reach out to them at sw@rotaryhospice.ca.

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Famme & Co.'s fun way of giving back this Holiday



(AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

DONATING FUN

The team at Famme and Co. loading up the House of Blessings van just in time for the holidays.

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Famme & Co Professional Corporation of Chartered Professional Accountants added some holiday cheer to the office this year by giving back to their community.

Each week, starting in November, the team had a specific goal of collecting high-need items from The House of Blessing's wish list, starting with cans of soup. As the weeks went on, the staff collected 81 pouches of baby food, 62 cans of meats, 28 boxes of cereals, 38 boxes

of crackers, and much more. One notable item that House of Blessing specifically requested was Kraft Dinner. When two of the partners learned of this need, they pitched in to donate 70 boxes in total.

Famme & Co. partners decided to spice things up even more by providing a gift card draw for staff members who made donations. Each week, names of staff members would be put into a draw to win a gift card for a downtown business.

By making donating fun, the staff at Famme & Co. were able to donate a van full of high-need items to House of Blessing this holiday.

Merry Christmas

May the joy and peace that were present at the birth of Christ be present in your home this season.

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Changes to COVID-19 vaccine administration at Huron Perth Public Health

In January 2024, Huron Perth Public Health (HPPH) will shift its COVID-19 vaccine program and specifically focus on providing COVID-19 vaccinations for youth aged 11 and under at their clinics.

"We've been proud to work with pharmacists and local healthcare providers this fall to ensure residents of Huron-Perth had access to COVID-19 vaccinations," says Dr. Miriam Klasen, Medical Officer of Health for Huron Perth. "While pharmacists and participating healthcare providers will continue to provide COVID-19 XBB vaccinations in the community, HPPH will focus on ensuring access to youth aged 11 and under."

"Children are a priority population that may also require a series of vaccine doses to be protected," notes a spokesperson from HPPH, "In addition, access to pediatric vaccination may be more limited (e.g., less access through pharmacies

because they may not vaccinate children under age 5). Thus, the health unit needs to maintain this service throughout the respiratory season to ensure that children are able to access and complete their vaccine series.

The response to COVID-19 has begun to be incorporated into regular public health work, including the discontinuation of one-time COVID funding from the provincial government. Because of this, the health unit says they will not have the capacity to continue to offer as many COVID-19 vaccine clinics in 2024 as years past.

"This fall in Ontario, 75 percent of COVID-19 vaccine administration has happened through pharmacies," said an HPPH spokesperson, "Vaccines will continue to be available through participating pharmacies and primary care providers. Improving access is one effective strategy to increase vaccine uptake; where

there are barriers, vaccination rates may be lower."

HPPH is urging community members to get vaccinated for COVID-19, and according to the HPPH Respiratory Activity 2023-2024 dashboard, there were 51 cases of COVID-19 reported and four cases of influenza reported in the last week of November. In addition, there were 12 hospitalizations due to COVID-19 and one hospitalization due to flu. Sadly, since the start of the respiratory season, seven residents of Huron and Perth have died due to COVID-19.

"The holiday season has begun," says Dr. Klassen. "Please protect yourselves and your loved ones by getting vaccinated against influenza, COVID-19 and RSV, if eligible. Note that at this time in Ontario, only residents of long-term care homes and some retirement homes are eligible for RSV vaccine. It's not too late to get your vaccines to protect your families

and communities and enjoy a safe and happy holiday season."

Residents can reduce their risk and their loved ones' risk by staying up to date on vaccines and using other means of protection:

1. Wearing a tight-fitted, well-constructed mask in indoor public settings for anyone at the highest risk of severe infection and when in healthcare settings/ places with mask policies.

2. Staying home when you are sick and wearing a mask until day ten from symptom onset

3. Washing hands often

4. Covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze

5. Regularly cleaning high-touch surfaces

6. Optimizing indoor air quality

7. If you are at high risk, speak with your healthcare provider about antiviral treatment options.

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Rae Announces \$4.59M for Area Hospitals

On December 12, Matthew Rae, MPP for Perth-Wellington announced that hospitals in and servicing Perth-Wellington, would receive \$4,595,967 million through the province's Surgical Recovery Fund.

"Our rural healthcare system remains a top priority for me," Rae said. "This funding will improve surgical wait times and provide care closer to home. I will continue to support our rural hospitals and the important care they provide."

The Surgical Recovery Fund is used by hospitals to open operating rooms on evenings or weekends to further reduce the surgical backlog and surgical wait times.

"These funds are having an immediate and positive impact on the HPHA Team - Nurses, Medical Radiation Technologists and Medical Device Reprocessing Department Team Members." Andrew Williams, CEO & President of Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance said. "MPP Rae's

ongoing advocacy and support are helping ensure the quality of care across our organization remains strong, and his efforts on our behalf are truly appreciated."

Funding was provided through two application-based funding streams, the first being the Surgical and DI Innovation and Efficiency Program. This funding supports innovative solutions, tailored to local need, to boost surgical capacity.

The second stream is the Surgical Pathway Training Program, which aims to grow the healthcare workforce by adding and upskilling surgical health professionals. This includes those involved in surgeries every step of the way, from diagnosis, the procedure itself, and the recovery process.

Nearly \$1 billion has been invested over 3 years through the Surgical Recovery Fund, returning the surgical wait list to below pre-pandemic levels.

Surgical Recovery Fund: Surgical Pathway Training Program

Recipient	Amount
Listowel Memorial Hospital	\$ 11,352
North Wellington Healthcare	\$ 13,176
Stratford General Hospital	\$ 74,612
Groves Memorial Hospital	\$ 55,800
Guelph General Hospital	\$ 81,394
Surgical Recovery Fund: Surgical and DI Innovation and Efficiency Program	
Guelph General Hospital	\$ 4,359,633
TOTAL	\$ 4,595,967

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First RWMP Veterinary Surgeon

Have you ever walked by this plaque on Wellington Street and wanted to know more about John Luke Poett?

The Plaque reads, "Brandenberger Block: erected by W. M. Brandenberger, included amongst the people and businesses here was John Luke Poett, first veterinary surgeon of the North West Mounted Police."

John Luke Poett was a graduate of the Class of 1860, Edinburgh, Scotland Veterinary College.

In 1870 he moved to Stratford with his two children and his wife Merina. The town was in the midst of a boom which followed after the GTR moved its engine shops from Toronto to Stratford. For Poett, Stratford was especially attractive as it did not have its own veterinarian.

Despite this apparent opportunity, Poett took nearly a year to open an office. His first advertisement appeared in the Stratford newspaper in October 1871. It announced simply that John

Poett, had opened an office and gave the business hours as 8 A.M. to 6 P.M., with the added note that he could be reached at home after hours. No mention was made of Poett's training or

experience and there was no need to take such trouble as he was now the only veterinarian advertising in the paper.

John Poett 1894

Poett was in Stratford for less than three years when an opportunity arose which profoundly affected his career.

In May 1873, the Canadian parliament enacted legislation which provided for the establishment of a Mounted Police force in the Northwest Territories. A skeletal outline of the structure and organization of that force, which soon became known as the North West Mounted Police, was included in the act. Among its terms was provision for the appointment of a commissioned veterinary surgeon whose annual salary was to be not less than \$400 but not more than \$600. The position was tailor-made for Poett so he decided to



JOHN LUKE POETT

apply. In 1874 he was officially appointed the first veterinary surgeon for the North West Mounted Police.

His first task was to prepare 200 horses to travel to Manitoba for active duty. The 800 mile trip was terribly grueling. Poett faced the agonizing task of keeping sick, starved and ex-

hausted horses in marching condition and alive. He stayed in Winnipeg and Swan Lake Barracks for three years providing exemplary veterinary services for the NWMP.

When he retired from service (reason unknown) he had only a few options if he wished to continue practicing veterinary medicine in Canada. He was only thirty-seven years old, but with a wife and now six children he could not delay a decision. He chose to return to Stratford where he was known and had achieved a certain respect. In early September the local paper announced Poett's return and his intention to begin "prosecuting his profession of Veterinary Surgeon for which he has a first-class reputation." Poett's office opened for business with the promise that "all diseases of the domestic animals would be carefully and scientifically treated. For the next seven years Poett's advertisement appeared regularly in the Stratford papers.

In 1884 he returned to the west with his wife and six children for a nine year second tour of duty with the NWMP. He died in 1895 and was buried in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan.

Contributors: Paul Wilker and Gord Conroy

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Poett first left 1893, Maple Creek Saskatchewan. Source: Taken from the book *Vet in the Saddle*, by Franklin M. Loew 1939

Merina Poett wearing her "widow's weeds" in 1895 after John Poett died in 1895. She died in 1917 at the age of 87 and was buried near her husband.



Stratford's Special Olympics athletes gearing up for 2024 Winter Nationals in Calgary

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

Stratford will be represented through Team Ontario and Team Ontario Curling for the upcoming Special Olympics Winter National Games, with seven local athletes competing.

The Special Olympics Winter National Games will run from February 27 to March 2 in Calgary, Alberta with 4,000 people attending including athletes, coaches, and volunteers.

Curlers include Curtis Bender, Dylan Haynes, Tiffany Keller, Meghan O'Donovan, Jacob Ponsford, and coaches Jane Larkworthy and Dorie Woolrich. Mike Keleman will be representing Stratford in five-pin bowling. Mike Hitchcock will be playing with London, Ontario's floor hockey team during the National games.

All the athletes are excited to head to the National tournament.

"I'm looking forward to meeting some new friends, new coaches, and old coaches. I look forward to going to Calgary and having fun," O'Donovan said.

"It's my first National game, so yeah, I'm excited and proud," Haynes said.

The curlers also enjoy playing the sport together.

"It's been fun to work with them, honestly," Keller said. "We're together as a team and listen to each other."

"I feel we are all supportive of each other," Ponsford told the Stratford Times. "We all have different skills and abilities to contribute to our team."

All athletes have extra time practicing in addition to their regular sessions. The curlers practice twice a week, sometimes right after their regular meetings. Keleman bowls extra games and Hitchcock travels to London to play floor hockey in addition to training with the Stratford team.

"We're trying to give them the best opportunity we can to reach their potential - or exceed it as one of the coaches said," Larkworthy said. "They're doubling what they would normally do for their sports for this."

Special Olympics Stratford and Area aims to raise \$8,400 for costs tied to the upcoming Winter Nationals such as uniforms, travel expenses, and training camps. Each athlete must collect 20 per cent of the registration fee, and all have either done so or exceeded that goal. Supporters can either become a fan or donate to the Crowd Change page.

"If we can make that \$8,400, that would be terrific. It would be wonderful," Larkworthy said.

Visit specialolympicsontario.crowdchange.ca/53355/team/24583 for more information and to support the Special Olympics Stratford and Area athletes.

Special Olympics Ontario



Hundreds of pounds of food to the House Of Blessing



(GARY WEST PHOTO)

LOADING UP FOR A GOOD CAUSE

Constable Darren Fischer from Stratford Police Service, who helped in loading this Van at Zehr's for transport to Stratford's House of Blessing last week.

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

Stratford's House of Blessing has been helping the needy in the Stratford and Perth County community for decades.

When Christmas rolls around, the staff and volunteers are so thankful to the community for the continued donation of food and toys to make the season memorable for everyone.

The House of Blessing sponsored a Food Drive last week at Zehrs, Food Basics, and No Frills, and at the end of the day, they came away with 6,400 pounds of donated food.

The staff thanked all shoppers from all over the region who were buying extra and donating food so not one family would go hungry at this time of year.

The House of Blessing staff are thankful to members of the Stratford Police Department and Perth County Paramedics for all their help filling and packing their trucks and vans again this Christmas season.

Joanne Lakin from the House of Blessing stated, "They exceeded their numbers for November and had close to 1,600 individuals who received food in that month, up considerably from the same month one year ago".



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Dec. 12 Mitchel Gomes, Kitchener	\$50.00
Dec. 13 Pat Robinson, Sebringville	\$50.00
Dec. 14 Joanne Innes, St. Pauls	\$50.00
Dec. 15 Duane Harmer, Mitchell	\$50.00
Dec. 16 Val Stevenson, Caledon	\$200.00
Dec. 17 Shirley Rats, Stratford	\$50.00
Dec. 18 Gail Scheerer, Stratford	\$50.00
Dec. 19 Brad Tinning, St. Marys	\$50.00
Dec. 20 Austin Schmidt, Woodstock	\$50.00
Dec. 21 Henry Groenestege, Sebringville	\$50.00
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2024 CALENDARS ARE GOING QUICKLY



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2023 Annual Accessibility Award presented to Grade 9 Student

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Andy Mark and Diane Sims, on behalf of the Accessibility Advisory Committee, presented the 2023 Annual Accessibility Award to Nathaniel DeWeered, 14, at last week's City Council Meeting.

The Stratford Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) advises the City Council on improving opportunities for persons with disabilities. The committee also helps to provide feedback for the identification, removal and prevention of barriers for the full participation of everyone in the community.

The annual presentation of the Accessibility Award is presented during the International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3, 2023. This day aims to promote an understanding of disability concerns and help to increase awareness of accessibility issues that persons with disabilities face within communities. The day aims to acknowledge the political, social, economic and cultural life of those with disabilities.

Beginning their presentation with an honorary mention, Sims spoke to Zac Gribble, Executive Director at Destination Stratford, for his contribution to



ACCESSIBILITY AWARD

Nathaniel DeWeered, 14, shaking hands with Councillor Cody Sebben at the December 11 council meeting after receiving the 2023 Annual Accessibility award

the City of Stratford by installing the new public washrooms at the Boathouse.

“Having your rounded, accessible, safe washrooms is foundational,” said Sims,

“Having welcoming public spaces that truly benefit and serve everyone in our community is so important.”

“Each year, our committee honours this day by acknowledging one business organization or individual in Stratford that has worked hard to make Stratford more accessible for the community,” said Sims, “This year’s award is being presented to a community member for their efforts in making our community more accessible.”

This year, the 2023 Accessibility Award was presented to DeWeered, who identified a StopGap ramp in one downtown location and wondered why every business with limited accessibility didn't have one.

DeWeered decided that he would initiate a service project with the local Cadets' group to assist with installing more StopGap ramps around the community. He then led a group of his peers to construct and install 16 accessibility StopGap ramps throughout the community and did so during his free time, on evenings and weekends.

StopGaps ramps are custom-designed to fit step heights between 2 feet and 9 feet. They are typically made of wood or plastic. The ramps are intended to help communities discover the benefits of barrier-free spaces for everyone.

(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)



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Raising awareness for the need for blood

STEWART GRANT

Publisher

Perth-Wellington M.P. John Nater, in partnership with Canadian Blood Services, hosted a blood donor clinic earlier this week at St. Marys' Pyramid Recreation Centre to help encourage eligible Canadians to begin donating in response to the national blood shortage.

"It's free to do and it just takes a little bit of time, but it can have such a big impact on people's lives," Nater said.

As Maureen Macfarlane, Community Development Manager of Canadian Blood Services, explained to the Independent that donating blood is not always top of mind, adding that less than 4 percent of eligible Canadians traditionally give. "Unless it affects you personally, you often don't think about it. We try our best to get out there and spread the word." Nater commented on the per

Nater commented on the personal connection that he was thinking of as he donated on Monday night. "Our friend Jim Aitcheson, Mayor of Perth South... his daughter Kelly is battling leukemia right now. One of things that she's talked



IT'S IN YOU TO GIVE

(STEWART GRANT PHOTO)

Maureen Macfarlane, Community Development Manager of Canadian Blood Services, visited with blood donor John Nater, Perth-Wellington M.P., on Monday night, December 11th. Nater was among approximately 100 citizens who donated at the blood donor clinic at the Pyramid Recreation Centre in St. Marys.

about and that their family has talked about is the importance of blood donations for cancer

patients like her and so many people across the country."

According to national blood

inventory levels tracked at Canadian Blood Services' website, blood.ca, current stores of blood type O-, O+, A+ are especially needed.

Macfarlane told the Independent, "O's and A's are always in demand." She explained that in the case of emergency situations for example where every second counts, O- blood is given because it can be provided to anyone. O+ is also quite versatile in that it can be given to anyone with a positive blood type.

When asked about how people would know what type of blood they have, Macfarlane replied, "When you donate, you get a blood donor card in the mail and it has your blood type on there. If you download the GiveBlood app, it tells you what your blood type is but it will also tell you what your bleed time is, your hemoglobin, all these stats. It's an awesome app. You can get into your appointments, and you can book and change. And if you ever want to create a team, people can join your virtual team on the app or on blood.ca."

Uniondale native Keith Mitchell, who has served as Nater's Legislative Assistant for the past eight years, said that he uses the GiveBlood app regularly. On

Monday, the 33-year-old was giving blood for the 37th time.

"I try to make it the full 6 times a year," said Mitchell.

According to Macfarlane, eligible males are able to give blood as often as every 56 days, while for women it is every 84 days. The difference in timing has to do with iron levels.

Nater asked Maureen how long blood could be preserved for.

"A whole blood unit is put back to the lab and separated into red blood cells, platelets and plasma," she began. "Plasma we can freeze up to a year, platelets can be kept only 7 days, and 42 days for red blood cells. Plasma is the only one that we can freeze, and that's why there is always a constant need, especially with platelets; cancer patients use a lot of platelets because they can't receive chemo treatment until their platelets are at a certain level."

The next blood donor clinics in Stratford are on Tuesday, December 26th (1 to 8 p.m.), Tuesday, January 30th (1 to 8 p.m.), and Saturday, February 10th (10 a.m. to 2 p.m.) at the Rotary Complex. To book your appointment, visit blood.ca, use the GiveBlood app, or call 1-888-236-6283.

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Warriors win three of four ahead of 2023 finale

**STRATFORD WARRIORS
2023-24 Player Statistics
(through December 18, 2023)**

PLAYER	POS	GP	G	A	PTS
Braydon Stumpf	F	31	8	32	40
Michael Denney	F	31	24	14	38
Carson Harmer	F	29	16	21	37
Camden Daigle	F	31	13	22	35
Cole Lewis	F	31	14	18	32
Jaxon Broda	D	28	7	15	22
Joey Brehmer	F	31	9	12	21
Casey Bridgewater	D	24	5	13	18
Drew Agnew	F	29	5	9	14
Jacob Wiseman	D	23	5	7	12
Haden Frayne	D	27	2	10	12
Dylan Dundas	F	26	4	4	8
Liam Gorman	F	26	3	2	5
Rhyse Brown	F	19	2	3	5
Wyatt Adkins	D	16	0	5	5
Tristian Huinink	F	14	3	1	4
Zach Bell	F	25	3	1	4
Evan Hjelholt	D	24	0	4	4
Owen England	D	24	1	2	3
Zachary Schooley	F	25	1	2	3
Cole Brooks	D	21	0	2	2
Keaton Bartlett	D	10	0	1	1
Ben Graham	F	9	0	1	1
Gianmarco Caringi	F	3	0	1	1
Trenten Bennett	G	9	0	1	1
PLAYER	RECORD	GAA	SV%		
Matthew Perdue	13-9-1-0	3.24	.907		



IN PERFECT POSITION
Warriors defenceman Jaxon Broda slides to thwart a 2-on-1 pass attempt by Brantford in their December 8th GOJHL game at William Allman Memorial Arena. Stratford won the game 5-2, giving goaltender Carter McDougall (also pictured above) his first win in a Warriors uniform.

SPENCER SEYMOUR
Times Regional Reporter

With just one game remaining on the schedule before the holiday break, the Stratford Hunter Steel Warriors sit in third place in the Midwestern Conference after winning three of their last four games.

Their most recent victory came on December 15th when the Warriors hosted the Strathroy Rockets in an interconference match-up. Heading into the third

period, Stratford trailed by a score of 3-1 and, cutting the lead to one, a powerplay marker by the Rockets restored Strathroy's two-goal advantage with just over 13 minutes left to play.

However, three goals by the Warriors in five minutes and 13 seconds, two of which were scored by Camden Daigle and one by Joey Brehmer, not only erased the Rockets' lead but put the Warriors ahead by one before eventually winning 6-4. Head Coach Dave Williams said that, while you don't want to fall behind in the first place, he was happy to see the Warriors continue fighting to make the comeback.

"For the group to be able to work their way back, especially after giving up the goal that made it 4-2, it was impressive,"

Williams told the Times. "I thought there was a fair bit of energy when we scored early in the third but then to give up that fourth goal seemed to zap that high of getting back within a goal. That was a moment in the game where we could have gone in any direction but it was good to see them continue working to battle their way back and win the game."

Carson Harmer had two goals in the game including an empty-netter and Drew Agnew also scored for the Warriors in the third period. Agnew, a Dewitt, Michigan native, now has points in three straight games and in four of his last five. Williams credited the six-foot-three forward for doing a much better job of getting into prime scoring areas.

CONTINUED TO PAGE 22



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**GOJHL STANDINGS
Midwestern Conference**
(Standings through December 18, 2023)

	GP	W	L	OTL	T	PTS
Elmira Sugar Kings	31	22	7	0	2	46
Listowel Cyclones	28	21	5	1	1	44
Stratford Warriors	31	19	9	3	0	41
KW Siskins	27	15	8	1	3	34
Cambridge Redhawks	29	16	12	1	0	33
Ayr Centennials	29	14	15	0	0	28
Brantford Bandits	30	6	23	1	0	13
Caledon Bombers	31	2	28	0	1	5

Fighting Irish end three-game losing skid

SPENCER SEYMOUR

Times Regional Reporter

The Stratford Bentley's Fighting Irish got a hat-trick from Ben Hawerchuk as part of a 7-1 victory over the Alvinston Killer Bees last Saturday, December 16th, a win that ended the team's three-game losing streak.

Hawerchuk's first of three goals came just under five minutes into the first period against Alvinston. Matt Fuller scored the eventual game-winner at the 10:44 mark of the opening frame followed just 31 seconds later by the second goal of the game from Hawerchuk.

After the Killer Bees cut the lead to two in the second period, Hawerchuk completed the hat-trick with two minutes and 50 seconds left on the clock. The Fighting Irish then enjoyed another three-goal period in the third as Ray Robbins, Justin Murray, and Brody Smith each found the back of the net. Stratford more than doubled Alvinston in shots with a 46-21 shot advantage. Zack Weir earned the win in goal with a 20-save performance.

The win pushed the Fighting Irish into sole possession of fourth place in the WOSHL standings, breaking a tie with the Tilbury Bluebirds who climbed into a tie with Stratford after the Fighting Irish lost three in a row. The second loss sustained by Stratford came on December 9th against the very same Bluebirds.

After a scoreless first period, the Warriors took a 2-1 lead on Tilbury in the second with goals by Graham Brulotte and Warren Gorman. The Bluebirds, who



HAT TRICK

Ben Hawerchuk #65 scoring his hat trick goal in his debut game with the Stratford Bentley's Fighting Irish. The other players for the Killer Bees are #35 Nolan Dekoning, #5 Owen McGowan and #77 Josh Jamieson.

(FRED GONDER PHOTO)



outshot the Fighting Irish 48-37 in the game, took a 3-2 lead in the third with goals just one minute and 10 seconds apart. Stratford managed to tie things up on a powerplay marker by Matt Henderson which eventually forced overtime. However,

just 61 seconds into the extra frame, the Bluebirds potted the game-winner

while shorthanded to take the game by a score of 4-3. Despite the loss, Weir made 44 stops in Stratford's crease.

While their loss to Tilbury came down to overtime, the Fighting Irish's loss to the Petrolia Squires on December 15th was not nearly as close on the scoreboard. Despite narrowly outshooting the Squires by a final total of 45-43, the Squires routed Stratford in a 9-3 blowout.

Petrolia jumped out to a 3-0 lead in the opening period, two of which came while the Squires were shorthanded. After both teams scored twice in the second, including a shorthanded marker by Gorman and a powerplay tally by Spencer Mills, the Squires once again dominated the score-sheet in the third, outscoring Stratford four-to-one en route to a 9-3 final score. Petrolia's four goals in the third period

came in a span of just two minutes and 49 seconds.

Stratford ends the 2023 portion of their schedule with a visit to the Delhi Flames this Saturday, December 23rd, before hosting the Lakers from Woodstock next Friday, December 29th.

STRATFORD FIGHTING IRISH 2023-24 Player Statistics

(through December 18, 2023)

PLAYER	POS	GP	G	A	PTS
Ray Robbins	F	10	7	6	13
Cooper Leitch	F	13	5	6	11
Dylan Buckholz	F	14	5	6	11
Sean O'Brien	F	8	2	11	13
Ryan O'Bonsawin	D	12	5	4	9
Cameron Stokes	F	7	2	6	8
Matt Fuller	D	12	2	8	10
Warren Gorman	F	12	4	8	12
Matt Henderson	D	13	4	6	10
Riley Coome	D	11	3	3	6
Matt Granger	D	13	2	4	6
Graham Brulotte	F	11	5	11	16
Justin Murray	D	6	3	5	8
Brody Smith	F	11	3	2	5
Mav Petrie	F	13	2	2	4
Zachery Tierney	D	3	1	2	3
Colin Martin	F	14	1	2	3
Sebastien Nogueira	F	14	0	3	3
Michael Finlay	D	8	1	1	2
Steven DeGroot	F	6	1	1	2
Mason Goldie	F	1	1	0	1
Spencer Mills	F	10	1	2	3
Curtis Nogueira	F	11	0	1	1
PLAYER	RECORD	GAA	SV%		
Darren Smith	3-1-0	3.75	.907		
Zach Weir	5-4-0	3.07	.910		

Mark Dewan honoured by OFSAA

STEWART GRANT

Publisher

St. Mike's teacher Mark Dewan was recently named a recipient of the OFSAA Leadership in Sport Award. The honour is presented annually to a teacher-coach who has made a significant contribution to the educational athletic program.

Dewan has been a mainstay in the St. Mike's athletic program since 1995. Over the years, he has coached track and field, cross-country, Nordic skiing, swimming, adven-

ture racing, and mountain biking. In total, his teams have reached OFSAA an astounding 54 times.

When Dewan is not coaching, he is supporting various Warrior teams and helping to preserve cherished high school memories by taking professional sports photos.

Congratulations to Mark on this well-deserved award.



WOSHL STANDINGS

(Standings through December 18, 2023)

	GP	W	L	OTL	T	PTS
Tillsonburg Thunder	13	11	2	0	0	22
Petrolia Squires	15	10	5	0	0	20
Strathroy Jets	16	9	7	0	1	19
Stratford Fighting Irish	14	8	6	0	2	18
Elora Rocks	14	7	7	0	1	15
Tilbury Bluebirds	13	8	5	0	0	16
Alvinston Killer Bees	11	6	5	0	1	13
Woodstock Lakers	14	7	7	0	0	14
Dunnville Aeros	15	5	10	0	2	12
Delhi Flames	13	5	8	0	1	11
Orangeville Blitz	16	1	15	0	0	2

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Warriors win three of four ahead of 2023 finale

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

“Drew has done a better job here lately at getting to that inside ice. It’s no secret that most of the goals that get scored come within 10 to 15 feet of the net. It’s just having that willingness and commitment to get to those spots and battle when you get there and Drew has done a much better job at doing that more consistently.”

Just 48 hours before grounding the Rockets, the Warriors travelled to LaSalle for a cross-conference battle with the Vipers. Unlike their future win against Strathroy, the Warriors couldn’t complete a third-period comeback, falling 5-3 on the road. LaSalle scored four goals in the final eight minutes and 19 seconds of the second period which Williams felt was the only prolonged stretch of lacklustre play by his group.

“There was a lot to like about our game. We just had eight or 10 minutes in the second period when we struggled. We struggled with managing the puck, decision-making, and our awareness on the ice. When you’re playing a good team in their rink, some nights they are going to take advantage of

those opportunities. I thought we got off to a good start after a long bus ride and for good stretches of the game, we played quite well.”

“We had several good opportunities for us to score early in the game and I thought their goaltender was quite good,” Williams continued. “We got ourselves back into it in the third and got it back within one but against good teams, it’s tough to overcome those deficits. But I did think there were many positives in how we played.”

In the third, Harmer scored for Stratford on a powerplay assisted by Brehmer and Haden Frayne. Later in the period, the third member of that forward line Cole Lewis found the back of the net, but the Vipers hung on and added an empty-net goal in the dying seconds to secure the win.

The trio of Brehmer, Harmer, and Lewis has been a major bright spot for the Warriors as of late. Before being held off the



scoresheet against the Rockets, Lewis had recorded goals in five straight and in seven of his last nine.

“That whole line of Carson, Joey, and Cole, all guys we’ve mentioned and they’ve complimented each other well. The way they are playing together has allowed them to all find such strong statistical results. Cole plays a very complete game. He is a good example for all of our players when it comes to playing that 200-foot game. He is willing to go to those hard areas, he’s willing to get to that inside ice and the net front, and he’s willing to do the dirty work to get rewarded. He just plays the game the right way and does it consistently.”

As for Brehmer and Harmer, their production has also been consistently strong recently with Brehmer having points in five straight and nine of his last 10, while Harmer has scored four goals and 10 points in his last four outings.

heavy on pucks and does a good job along the wall in our end. He’s good at hunting down pucks on the forecheck. I think Joey has been getting these opportunities earlier in the year, but he was struggling to get the puck off his stick a little bit faster. His getting pucks to the net a bit quicker has allowed him to capitalize on more chances because he typically has that presence around the blue ice and it’s good to see a guy like that get rewarded.”

“I think Carson is playing with the most confidence he has to this point, not that he had any reason not to be really confident in his play. But I think the success he’s had recently has given him even more confidence to make more plays and the right plays. He has a really good 200-foot game and he’s a highly-skilled player who plays with a fair amount of grit. Night in and night out, he’s one of our most consistent performers.”

The Warriors also picked up wins over the Brantford Bandits and Caledon Bombers earlier this month. First, on December 8th, Stratford outshot the visiting Bandits 51-26 en route to a 5-2 win. Lewis and Harmer each had three-point games while Carter McDougall made 24 saves in the Warriors’ crease.

Stratford then was on the road on December 10th to visit the Bombers in Caledon who they routed by a score of 9-2. Matt Perdue stopped 26 of 28 shots to earn the win in net while Michael Denney had a four-point night that included a hat-trick. Daigle, Harmer, Brehmer, and Braydon Stumpf all had three-point games.

“Joey plays a pretty heavy game. He brings some intangibles beyond scoring. He’s a guy who is always

Send in your sports reports

Coaches and/or parents are invited to send in your sports reports and pictures to the Stratford Times to let Stratford and area know how your teams are doing throughout the 2023/24 season (and to create some great scrapbook material to be reflected upon in future years).

Game reports should be kept to a maximum of 100

words. Please include a brief description of what happened during your games, including the names of those who scored and any special efforts made by your players.

Please have all reports and pictures in by the end of the month by emailing stratfordtimes@gmail.com.

The greatest gift of all is to spend Christmas with those you love.

Wishing You Happy Holidays and a Joyous New Year!

 **Tri-County Mennonite Homes**

15U Stratford Stingers Black competed in the Challenge Cup in Strathroy



TAKING HOME GOLD! (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)
 Front row (left to right): Liv Leppington, Paige Witschi
 Back row: Coach Brad Hernden, Abbie Straus, Vivienne Kouwenberg, Lilli Lavree, Willow Kraft, Coach Lori McCabe

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Correspondent

The 15U Stingers Black travelled to Strathroy last weekend to compete in the 16U Girls Challenge Cup against nine other teams from across Ontario. Despite only having six players, they came out on top.

In their first game, the Stingers Black took on Rose City, ending in a strong win, beating them 25-11 in the first set and 25-19 in the second. Later, playing against the Chatham Ballhawks had a close first set, losing 21-25, but later came back with two strong sets, beating them 25-20 in the sec-

ond and 15-12 in the third.

Moving onto the afternoon, Stratford Stingers Black took Twin Bridges with an easy win, 25-21 in the first and 25-8 in the second. In the quarter-final game, Stratford Stingers Black again took on Twin Bridges, sweeping them 25-7 in the first and 25-9 in the second.

During a close gold medal game, the Stingers Black played Chatham Ballhawks, leading in the first set 25-21 but losing in a tough fight 27-25 in the second. Thankfully, the Stratford Stingers Black came out on top in the final set, winning 15-10 and taking home gold.



Light up Stratford contest winners & runner ups

Judges from the volunteer Civic Beautification and Environmental Awareness Committee (CBEAC) have selected the winners and runners-up in its annual Light Up Stratford Contest, which first began in 1994. Residents of Stratford and the surrounding area are encouraged to take a drive and enjoy the decorations in the five Stratford Wards and the commercial/industrial/business sector.

Here are the results. Winners are listed below with the runners-up for each Ward in parentheses.

Avon Ward: 31 Cody St. (175 Bradshaw St.)

Falstaff Ward: 312 Cobourg St. (299 Devon St.)

Hamlet Ward: 202 John St. (119 Patricia Rd.)

Romeo Ward: 38 Morgan St. (16 & 18 College St.)

Shakespeare Ward: 238 Louise St. (124 Railway Ave.)

Commercial/Industrial/Business:
 Winner – Orr Insurance – 50 Cobourg St
 Honourable mention - Bradshaws 129 Ont St., Retro Kello 65 Albert St., Saville Pool & Spa 456 Erie St.

Thank you to all the Stratford residents and businesses who gave so much of their time and effort to light up and make Stratford sparkle. Our judges had a hard time picking just one winner and one runner up in each ward. As you drive around you will see all the wonderful displays. Thank you to our sponsors Orr Insurance and Dordel Awards from the local community who helped us make this happen.



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Snowmobile volunteers prepping trails and hoping for snow in Perth County

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

Volunteers in Perth County are thinking positively about winter activities.

Pictured are North Easthope Snowmobile Association members, who were busy installing orange "trail markers" on the weekend beside Road 106. The group is hoping for snow that will get their snow machines humming.

The Snowmobilers were out on their 4-wheelers earlier this week setting up the winter trail to keep everyone safe this winter. At the same time, they thanked all landowners and farmers for allowing their sport to happen safely.

The approaches at the roadways snowmobilers will travel across, including stop signs and trail maps, were also installed by volunteers three weeks ago. As the markers were being sledded into the frost-free ground, the North Easthope Snowmobile Association members could be heard singing, "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow."



MARKING THE TRAILS

(GARY WEST PHOTO)

Pictured from L-R Greg Ankenmann, Danny Schurink, Nathan Brenneman, Brad Wettlaufer, Bo Schurink, Alex Van Klaveren, and Kayde Eichler. (Absent Tooke Zehr)

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A Christmas Concert in support of the St. Marys Library Food Pantry

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Harmony of Friends, a local musical band, is hosting their annual concert with special guest Lanny Hoare at Holy Name of Mary Church in St. Marys on December 22, starting at 7:30 p.m. There is no cost for entry; however, Harmony of Friends will be accepting monetary donations, which will go directly towards the Library Food Pantry in St. Marys.

Harmony of Friends will be playing music to coincide with the Christmas story, which will play as a multimedia presentation in the background during the musical performance. This heartfelt event will also have Hoare depicting the character of The Innkeeper, where he will tell the story from a new perspective. "The Innkeeper's story is unique," said Tom Donati, Bandmate and one of the event organizers, "The Innkeeper's side of the story of what actually happened that night, from his point of view, which really hasn't been seen before."

"Some songs are traditional, and some will be contemporary," said Donati, "You'll hear classics, like Silent Night, but it'll be our version of the song, so still a classic, but in a new way."

The Band has hosted this event for a number of years at several churches across Perth-Huron, and each year, it's a "packed house," says Donati. "We've gotten bigger and stronger because of the church com-



MUCH-NEEDED LOVE FOR THE HOLIDAYS (AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

Tom Donati, Harmony of Friends band member, presented a one thousand dollar cheque to Rebecca Webb, Library Services Coordinator at the St. Marys Public Library, to help fill the shelves at the Library Food Pantry before the holidays.

munity and the community as a whole."

This year, Harmony of Friends specifically chose to support the local Library Food Bank due to the great need within the community. Donati notes that he has personally witnessed more people in St. Marys who need support, and he, along

with the rest of the band, wanted to do something about it.

Because the event will take place on December 22, the group wanted to donate before the holiday rush; therefore, decided to pre-emptively support by donating one thousand dollars right away. "We wanted to give the money now so they can use it in time for Christmas," said Donati, "Any-

thing over and above the one thousand dollars will be collected that night and given to the Library Food Pantry in the new year to keep their shelves full."

Donati presented a cheque with the donation amount on December 11, 2023, confident the community will come together and be able to exceed this during the performance on the 22nd.

Speaking with Rebecca Webb, Library Services Coordinator at the St. Marys Public Library, she notes the need is continuously increasing in town, and financial donations are always a blessing. "We love to get monetary donations from the community; although we love all types of donations, financial support allows us to purchase specific items that we know are needed."

What started in 2022 as a way to fill the gap, the Library Food Pantry has become a way for all community members, especially those who may not qualify for other means of support, to access weekly supplies of grocery staples that they need. "There's no income testing, so we don't ask any questions," said Webb, "There's no registration required. Anybody can come; they can take what they need."


Regarding the No Room at the Inn multimedia concert, "Everyone is welcome," said Donati, "If you can donate, great; if you can't, please still come and enjoy the night."

No Room at the Inn will be playing at Holy Name of Mary Church, located at 149 King Street North in St. Marys; all are welcome to listen to the Christmas story and enjoy a fresh take on Christmas musical classics, all while supporting the community.

A Christmas benefit concert for the Library Food Bank Pantry

HARMONY OF FRIENDS

with special guest Lanny Hoare



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What's happening at the Library this Holiday season

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Stratford Public Library is bursting with fun this holiday to keep everyone of all ages busy during their Winter Break Bash.

The all-day fun during the break will include classic activities like Movin' and Groovin' Story Time, Maker Mania, Baby Steps Story Time, STEAM Team Challenge, Story Starters, Marble Mania, Simply Storytelling and Creation Station throughout the holiday break.

Liz Anderson, MakerSpace & Marketing Librarian, said, "Morning programs are geared towards younger children, but everyone is welcome at all events." For more information on the fun, daily events happening at the library, please visit www.splibrary.ca/winterbreak.

"The other really exciting event we have on is the Tales and Trails initiative over at the Stratford Perth Museum," said Anderson, "We've set up a story trail so you can read the book *Picture a Tree* by Barbara Reid. She's done the most incredible illustrations using plasticine. The story can be read as you walk along the nature trails at the museum."

This fun and unique event is a perfect outdoor activity for families of all ages, and everyone is welcome to visit and experience the trail. For more information on Tales and Trails, please visit www.splibrary.ca/tale-sandtrails.

To celebrate Lights On Stratford, the



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

GIFT GIVING GUIDE

Brittany Meadows, Public Service Librarian at Stratford Public Library, holding a copy of the Holiday Gift Guide, meant to help you find the perfect gift for the book lover in your life.

Stratford Public Library will also host a fun event called Nightlight Stories on January 4 from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m., which is also being held at the museum. "People can walk the trail to read books and also do indoor activities like songs, crafts, stories, and lantern making," said Anderson.

Picture a Tree by Barbara Reid will be available from now until March 31 at the museum and is supported by the Stratford Perth Museum and the Rotary Club of Stratford. For more information, please visit www.splibrary.ca/nightlight

The wrapped books program at the Stratford Public Library is now complete. However, the space on the library's main floor will feature staff favourites from 2023, such as books, movies, puzzles, and maker kits for everyone of all ages.

And finally, for the last-minute shopper, a Best Bets Guide Booklet is available at the library. The Public Service Librarians have created a holiday Buying Guide for the book lovers in your life. This booklet will feature different lists, such as *For the Sky Diving Granny in Your Life*," said Brittany Meadows, Public Service Librarian, "And will also feature lists like, *For the Escape Room Enthusiast*, *For your Tik Tok Loving Teen*, *For the person curious about other people's lives*, and many more fun and unique lists."

Stop at the Stratford Public Library during regular business hours to learn more about upcoming holiday programs.

Merry Christmas to the Stratford Community!

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After a 42 year career, Paramedic Jeff Sager retires

WENDY LAMOND

Times Correspondent

After a 42-year career, Paramedic Jeff Sager has retired.

Jeff Sager, who was born and raised in St. Marys, has recently made the difficult decision to retire from his role as a paramedic, leaving behind a long career of compassion, leadership, and unwavering commitment to the community.

Jeff's career started when he graduated with honours from Conestoga College Ambulance and Emergency Care program as well as the Advanced Emergency Medical Care Assistant program.

This would be the beginning of a long, dedicated career that would take him from early days in Wiarton as an Ambulance Officer to Stratford General Hospital and Stratford Ambulance Service where he was a paramedic and Assistant Operation Manager.

Throughout that time, Jeff graduated with honours from Humber College's Ambulance Management Program showing a commitment to continuous learning that would help his career and be able to better assist those in his path that he could help.

The next 23 years, he was Paramedic Commander then acting Deputy Chief/Commander for Perth County Paramedic Services but also took on various roles from fleet vehicle maintenance to scheduling, asset inventory and public rela-



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

tions assignments.

Jeff was not only a paramedic but also a face of Perth County Paramedic Services in the community. He participated in special events like the International Plowing Matches, concerts, career days, Evan's Touch the Truck events bringing

ORNG to the event, mock disasters and emergency management exercises.

Although Jeff's career has many highlights, a paramedic's job also has many challenges and emotional trauma's as they are often first on the scene for a variety of situations.

Jeff, reflecting on his career commented, "We work with the ill, the injured, the dying, mental health cases, undesirable conditions and people of all sorts, the families and relatives, other care givers and yet death-defying acts sometimes really do end in death".

The emergency services job is a 24 hour, 7 days a week operation that never stops and will often lead to PTSD in this line of work.

He has had a couple of defining moments in his career that stand out the most. One being a tragic accident involving a church group of children that left a lasting impact and emotional toll on him emphasizing the importance of mental health support needed for those that dedicate their lives to helping others.

The other was when he was at a presentation at the Mitchell High School and met student Jenna Chappel. Jeff noticed that Jenna was very emotional and following the presentation he approached her and asked if he could assist. Jenna told the story of how her father and younger brother were killed in a car accident the year earlier and as it turned out, Jeff was the Commander on duty for that call. A connection was made between

that two and they have stayed in touch since then.

In his career Jeff has delivered six babies, saved four lives from cardiac arrest, and has assessed and treated more than 22,000 patients which has involved many neighbours, friends, and family during those calls.

What is next for Jeff? In 2021 and 2022, he completed the Wedding/Funeral Officiant, Pastoral Chaplain Course and was then after completed the Lay Pastoral Minister Course.

He will be taking part in baptisms, weddings, elopements, renewals, funerals, and celebrations of life. He will also be helping at Andrew Hodges Funeral Home and Greenwood Court in Stratford.

One of the next steps for Jeff is that he is now the Chaplain for the Town of St. Marys Fire Department.

Drawing on his experience from his career, he acknowledges the challenges and stressors faced by First Responders and traumas that remain hidden beneath the surface and can now help others. He will be leading talk sessions with the fire department and will be there for them after coming back from emergency responses where some extra support and guidance is needed to help cope. One of his passions is picture taking which he will help with training and different events for the fire department.

Fire Chief Richard "Andy" Anderson commented on having Jeff at the firehall "Having Jeff as Chaplain was the missing piece of the puzzle.

He is 24/7 and he takes care of the firefighters and has brought so much wealth of knowledge from his career and is an integral part of the department".

Leaving a long, challenging career such as Jeff's, makes one want to give out many thanks as this work not only affects the paramedic themselves but co-workers, family, and friends.

Jeff would like to thank his wife Deb, their kids Ryan, Amanda, Tyler, families and siblings for their love and support. Also, all the Allied Agencies that he has worked with over the years and the hospitals in Perth County especially the ER departments.

A special thanks goes out to Julie Jeffrey, who Jeff worked with for years, her husband David and family for their on-going love and support.

In retirement, Jeff will also be spending some quality time at his happy place in Sauble Beach. He leaves behind not only a professional legacy but a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in all the lives that he has touched. Thank you for your commitment to our community.

Wishing Everyone
a very

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and

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Inaugural Stratford Winter Film Festival coming this February

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

A new festival is coming to town just in time to pull us out of the winter blues that inevitably hit in February each year.

The Stratford Winter Film Festival (SWFF) is the brainchild of a trio of transplants who bring with them a broad skillset that they feel ready to take on this project. The three men, Leslie Marsh, Craig Sangster, and Bruce MacInnes, who have been here a few years now, found that there wasn't much going on in town during the winter, particularly February, so they brainstormed what they could do to bring together something the community could embrace.

"We all enjoy films; it was really born out of what we could pull off in terms of something we could do in February when there's not a lot to do that would stimulate a certain amount of business that everyone could get a hold of and be predominately indoors, use accommodations and things like that. It's not that we are film experts or festival experts; we just landed on some-

thing we thought we could do," explains Sangster.

In the short term, they are hoping to sell six hundred passes and pair up with local businesses to cross-promote stimulating more seasonal business for the Festival weekend.

In the first year, they will work out the mechanics of ticket sales, social media promotion, curating films, and the many other details that need attention in the six months it takes to put it together.

The theme of SWFF is music, food, and history. "Many people come to Stratford for the food; music? Well, we could use more music and musical-related stuff because Stratford has a great history in music. And history, it's an old part of Canada, and Stratford is proud of its history, so we are trying to have as broad an appeal as possible," said Marsh. "Certainly, these are things we are passionate about and reasonably well versed in and have opinions on, and they have a broad appeal. We want to appeal with as many as possible, so they are safe categories," MacInnes adds.



The films are being curated with a collective and cooperative approach. The group has solicited various businesses and stakeholders for what they thought were their favourite films in each category.

From these twenty or so solicitations, they have curated a master list and, from there, will choose the ten or twelve that will be showcased during the weekend of February 9 to 11. "We're trying to have a universal appeal for the first year as a kind of proof of concept, but certainly, we are doing this for the audience. Here's something

we would like to share. I can tell you in my family, there are a couple of kids; they're teenagers. There are so many movies from years ago that I would like them to see that I wish they had seen. So, this is the kind of stuff we're putting in the festival so that a family from Toronto or Kitchener or Stratford will come because there's a film they want to share," said Sangster.

While SWFF may contribute to the cultural scene in Stratford, it is with the community in mind that the trio endeavours to bring an opportunity to create meaningful memories. "We

would love SWFF to become a platform to showcase local talent for filmmakers, but that's not year one. We will concentrate on community first and work out the details," said Sangster.

The Festival will be held in five different venues over the three-day weekend. These include Revival House, Avondale Church, Grayson Mills, Factory 163 and Little Prince Cinema. Passes cover all three days and cost \$99 each.

For more information, ticket purchases and Film announcements, please visit the website stratfordwinterfilmfestival.ca.

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To Raise Empathetic Children, Lead by Example*

Studies show time spent with grandchildren confers benefits to both parties



THOMAS R VERNY, MD

Times Contributor

Many parents see the task of parenting as transforming a crying, hungry, wild little child into a civilized being, like them, of course. Actually, the exact opposite is true. Much recent research is finding that children start life with a nobility of soul and spirit. Sadly, before long their well of loving kindness is gradually poisoned by their care givers. How does this happen and what can we do to nurture rather than destroy the inherently good nature of children?

Before we look at some these recent studies, let's get our terms straight. The word altruism refers to behavior that is voluntary and

intended to benefit others, be they animal or man, even at the risk of harming oneself.

A fundamental motivating force of altruism is empathy. Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling while sympathy is our relief in not having the same problems. Empathy and compassion are part of the same perception and response continuum that moves human beings from observation to action.

We have known for a long time that babies cry when they hear other babies cry and, once they have enough physical competence, they sooth others in distress.

Harriet Rheingold was the first to describe how infants at 18 months of age spontaneously pitched in to help in a variety of household chores. The research on infants' helping behavior was then revitalized about 15 years ago through the seminal works of Warneken and Tomasello who found that some infants as young as 14 months pass objects to another individual, when this individual reaches out for an object

unsuccessfully. For example, they helped when the experimenter reached out for a clothespin that dropped on the ground. From around 18 months, infants begin to help in more situations. For example, they will open the door of a cabinet when an experimenter, holding a stack of books, wants to put the books in the cabinet but cannot successfully open the door.

A University of Ottawa study asked parents to recollect the earliest instance of their child's helping behaviour. Of the 80 parents who responded to the questionnaires, 49 recalled their children's earliest helping in the second year of life and 31 parents of the latter group recalled helping behaviour even before eight months of age.

Michael Davidov followed three-month-old infants at ages 6, 12, and 18 months, and their observed responses to others' distress. Empathic concern was moderately consistent across both situation and age, from as early as three months. Importantly, early individual differences in concern for others predicted later prosocial behavior.

on the floor beyond reach but within the child's reach.

In the test group, the researcher pretended to accidentally drop the fruit onto the tray, then reach for it unsuccessfully. More than half the children in the test group picked up the fruit and gave it to the adult, compared to 4% of children in the control group.

What happens if adults offer material reward to children for being helpful? One study at the Max Planck Institute, Leipzig, Germany addressed that question. When 20-month-old infants received a material reward during a treatment phase, they subsequently were less likely to engage in further helping during a test phase compared with infants who had previously received social praise or no reward at all. This so-called overjustification effect suggests that even the earliest helping behaviors of young children are inherently motivated and that socialization practices involving extrinsic rewards can undermine such tendency.

Two studies, again at the Max Plank, investigated the influence of external rewards and social praise in young children's fairness related behavior. In all scenarios, children's willingness to engage in costly sharing was lessened by being rewarded for equal sharing as opposed to receiving praise, or no reward. These results provide new evidence for the intrinsic motivation of costly sharing behavior in very young children.

What can parents do to support the full development of empathy and altruism in their children? The list is long but it starts with sensitive, warm, and loving parents who lead by example. Parents should exemplify empathetic behavior and altruism in their actions and interactions. Engaging in volunteer work, sharing, or helping friends and family can instill the joy of giving without expecting anything in return. Children learn by observing.

Engage children in conversations that encourage them to see things from others' viewpoints.

Storytelling, role-playing, and discussions about emotions can assist in developing perspective-taking skills.

Teach Emotional Literacy: Help children recognize and understand their emotions and those of others. Emphasize the importance of empathy in relationships and how it shapes interactions.

Foster an environment where children feel safe expressing their emotions and concerns. Address their fears and worries, helping them understand the importance of support.

Practice inductive discipline, an approach that emphasizes rational explanations rather than arbitrary punishments. Don't yell. Explain. Avoid verbal or physical violence at all cost. Discourage your children from watching on TV violent comics or playing violent games on their computers.

Be careful with offering rewards. Studies referred to here have shown that when adults try to manipulate behavior—by giving kids rewards and even certain kinds of praise, children actually become less helpful.

Through these efforts, we sow the seeds for a brighter, more compassionate tomorrow.

* A version of this article appeared in The Globe and Mail, Dec. 8, 2023

Dr. Thomas R VERNY MD is a psychiatrist, podcaster and author of 47 scientific papers and eight books including the international best seller, *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, published in 27 countries and the recently released, *The Embodied Mind. The Embodied Mind shows how intelligence and consciousness—traits traditionally attributed to the brain alone—permeate our entire being. Dr. VERNY lives with his wife in Stratford.*

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Let me Introduce ... Jacqui Misener... Lady of the Manor



APRIL TAYLOR

Times Freelance Columnist

Christmas is a time to reflect on the past year, remember years gone by and loved ones no longer with us, and to look forward to visiting friends and family, sharing old traditions and creating new ones. It sounds so magical and special, doesn't it? What I often hear from clients and friends is, yes, this is what I want to create for my family, "The perfect Norman Rockwell Christmas," to make family memories that will bond us together in love forever. Alas, the wheels fall off our well-intended plans: work, kids to get off to school, housework, laundry, groceries, cooking, dogs, cats and guinea pigs and the list goes on... so much stuff to do! Now we are expected to pull off the perfect Christmas? What? How? We need a Christmas miracle.

Several years ago, the girls at work and I were chatting, planning our Christmas outing. My client pipes in suggesting that we stop by at her house after our sleigh ride and dinner for a cup of Christmas cheer. We arrived at her house to find a Christmas Wonderland. Gorgeous garlands dressed the mantel, and the tree! Wait, wait, I am getting ahead of myself.

First let me tell you a bit about Jacqui Misener. In Jacqui's professional career she has been very much involved in planning events. They include organizing the 100th Anniversary celebration "Funfest" for the Children's Aid Society, co-facilitating the original Stratford Culinary Festival and Stratford Women in Business as well as helping annually with START the Holi-



days. She has worked with Stratford and District Big Brothers, CJCS radio, and her greatest love, working varied contracts with Stratford Tourism. Her knowledge of the Queen of the Square even landed her a spot in the final edit of Amazing Race Canada. What fun!

Today, I want to talk about Jacqui's other talents: Style, decor. She is hostess with the mostess. She has the knack for home decor, but not just looking at the most current trend and copying it. Whether she is decorating her own home or helping someone else style theirs, she manages to allow the personality of those who live there to shine through. Who better to ask about how to create the perfect Christmas? Jacqui's home has been featured in the IODE yuletide tour of homes. She has welcomed hundreds of people to her home to share the joy of the season in her very own Christmas wonderland. Not to mention the tour that year raised 25,000 dollars for our hospice.

"December is a month full of good food, good drink, and countless festivities," says Jac-

qui. "What I learned about hospitality, I learned from my parents, the most gracious of hosts. My darling dad was a master of the well-stocked bar in addition to spinning the vinyl until the sun came up. And my beautiful mother Marianne shone even brighter during the holiday season, welcoming friends old and new to the best of holiday house parties. I learned from the best."

Jacqui and I have talked about the importance of tradition. It creates a sense of belonging binding family and friendships for a lifetime. It includes sharing stories with the younger ones of how Grandpa used to use so much tape when wrapping gifts, and Aunt Bessy always brought her famous jelly salad, etc. It keeps the family alive. Traditions don't need to be big extravagant things; sometimes less is more. On Jacqui's table beside the tree sits a magnificent stag head bowl given to her by her

husband which is filled with Quality Street chocolates every year. Jacqui shared with me that her dad always made cream soda floats during the season, now I visit her, and we sit in front of her fairy-tale tree and sip cream soda floats carrying on the tradition. Tradition reminds us that even in this fast-paced, forever-changing world some things always stay the same.

"One of my biggest pleasures of the season is setting a table. Relaxed or formal, whatever the reason; whoever it's for, I love to set the table. It is how I convey my gratitude and appreciation for friendship and family. Layering different patterns and mixing heirloom pieces with current styles fills my soul and always creates conversation around the table. While I love entertaining any time of the year, there is without doubt an elevated level of excitement during the holiday season. I lay my table with all that brings me joy. Everything tastes better served with love and a story or two," Jacqui tells us.

The Grand Dame... The Christmas Tree!

I'll let her tell you about this creative masterpiece that sits with pride in her front window.

"It's adorned with more than 400 ornaments, 1,800 lights that I string by hand, and countless stories to be told. Hanging from and tucked into her branches are photos of friends and family, hand-crafted card boxes, notes, popsicle reindeer, and Hallmark ornaments. My son has been involved with trimming the tree from the time he was a babe in arms fascinated by the twinkle of the lights, whereas my eldest revels in the sheer and utter joy of the holidays arriving home to see the tree in all its glory. One

thing remains the same year after year, Christmas after Christmas. We gather around the tree, each seeking out our favourite ornaments and we remember... sometimes the details aren't as clear, and someone jumps in to help with the telling of the tale. Most of these stories are told and retold as much a part of our Christmas as any other tradition. Best of all, my life is on that tree, as well as the lives of my children and all those I hold dear. And that is what warms my heart most during the holiday season. The tree is our biggest tradition."

"Savour the season", is Jacqui's advice. Begin with a plan and a calendar. Prioritize what you love the most, do those things and let some things go if it makes you too busy or if you don't enjoy it. Pick up some homemade goodies at the market if baking isn't your thing. Ask your family for help; get the kids to help with the wrapping, decorating, and cleaning. It's all part of passing on the tradition, it's how they learn. Start early, maybe try to have everything done the week before (I do this because I work a lot the week before Christmas) so to have time to just sit and have an eggnog by the tree instead of racing around at the last minute.

We have a 14-year-old girl who works at our salon. I asked her about her Christmas plans. Her face beamed as she told me that she and her mom were going to put up the tree and go shopping. Aww... the sweet innocence of youth. I am going to learn from Maddie, instead of complaining about all the work, crowds etc. I am focusing on the fun this year. Re-discover your inner child and the magic of Christmas. Happy Holidays Stratford!

Happy Holidays

At this special time of year we'd like to take a moment to wish our friends, neighbours and customers a beautiful Holiday Season and a Happy New Year. We're truly grateful for your support and friendship.

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Creating Meaningful Christmas Moments



IRENE ROTH

Times Freelance Columnist

Christmas is often hailed as the most wonderful time of the year, but amidst the hustle and bustle of holiday preparations, it's easy to lose sight of what truly matters. We are bombarded with images of people being social and happy. But is this really the reality for most people?

Many people struggle during this time of year. There is so much that's vying for our attention these days that has very little to do with Christmas celebrations and getting together. We are forced to focus on the basics, such as having a roof over our heads and food on the table.

Many of us have to work sev-

eral jobs to just make ends meet. I certainly see this in my friends and colleagues all around me. There's just no time for celebration. Many children won't even see too many gifts under the tree this Christmas.

So, how can we enjoy Christmas regardless and not get distracted by our cultural definition of what the season? Perhaps the best way is to avoid perfection and follow the tips below.

This article aims to guide you on how to have a Christmas that goes beyond the materialistic trappings, focusing on creating truly meaningful moments that will be cherished for years to come.

Focus on What's Most Important

Instead of following what our culture is encouraging us to buy to have the perfect Christmas, perhaps we should try to define what we want in order to have a meaningful holiday. If we don't have a lot of money this Christmas season, why not share a simple pot luck meal with loved ones at Christmas and connecting with them?

Embrace the Spirit of Volunteering

Consider volunteering at a local charity, taking part in a toy drive, or donating to a cause that resonates with you. Acts of kindness not only benefit those in need but also cultivate a sense of fulfillment and purpose, adding a deeper layer of significance to your Christmas festivities.

Choose Quality Time Over Quantity

In the age of social media and digital distractions, it's easy to get caught up in the quantity of activities rather than the quality of time spent together. Make a conscious effort to prioritize meaningful interactions with loved ones. Plan a family game night, go caroling in the neighborhood, or simply spend an evening by the fireplace sharing stories and laughter. These moments of connection are the true treasures of Christmas.

Focus on Experiences, Not Things

Instead of fixing your attention on material possessions, consider giving experiences as gifts. You may want to take a long walk around the Avon River or have a cup of coffee with a loved one. Or, perhaps you'd like to call up a friend you haven't spo-

ken to for a long time and cheer him/her up. Shared adventures and new discoveries can be more valuable than tangible gifts, fostering a sense of togetherness and appreciation for the richness of life beyond the material realm.

Engage in Mindful Celebrations

Practice mindfulness during the holiday season by being fully present in each moment. It's easy to become overwhelmed with planning and preparation, but taking the time to savor the sights, sounds, and scents of Christmas can enhance your overall experience. Mindful celebrations allow you to appreciate the magic of the season without getting lost in the chaos.

Include Everyone

Christmas is a time for inclusivity. Be mindful of those who may be alone during the holidays or facing challenges. Extend invitations to neighbors, coworkers, or friends who may not have family nearby. It doesn't have to be for a big meal. Perhaps a hot coco and cookies are sufficient. By fostering a sense of community and inclusiveness, you contribute to creating a Christmas that is not only meaningful for

you, but for others as well.

Reflect and Express Gratitude

Take a moment to reflect on the past year and express gratitude for the blessings in your life. Consider sharing these reflections with your loved ones during a Christmas dinner or through handwritten notes. Gratitude not only fosters a positive mindset but also strengthens the bonds between family and friends.

Amid the festive chaos, it's crucial to remember that the heart of Christmas lies in the meaningful connections we cultivate and the joy we share with others. When we put a smile on the face of a loved one, we are making Christmas magical for one person.

By embracing the spirit of giving, prioritizing quality time, focusing on experiences, practicing mindfulness, including everyone, and expressing gratitude, you can transform your Christmas celebration into a truly meaningful and joyous occasion.

May this holiday season be filled with warmth, love, and moments that will be cherished for a lifetime.

In the Spotlight: Themes and Variations at the Stratford Festival

JULIA SCHNEIDER

Times Correspondent

What better way to tie all the parts of a large event together than to focus them around a theme? The Festival realized the value of a thematic connection several years ago and has used it since to provide a focus to each season's offerings. There is so much going on at the theatre with all the plays, the Meighen Forum of experts speaking about them, and other associated events that it can be difficult to take it all in. One doesn't want to miss a not-to-be-missed event!

Every fall, the Festival announces the playbill for the coming season with great fanfare after much anticipation by theatre-goers. While there is no question there will be plays by Shakespeare on it, there is no way to know in advance what they will be. What other works, by what other playwrights, will be chosen? What will the annual Schulich children's play be? What new plays will emerge? Will there be any world premieres?

And what will be the year's overall theme that connects all of the above?

During the 2023 season that just ended, it was Desire vs. Duty and all the plays, from the dynamic and tearful Rent to the equally dramatic and even more tearful Casey and Diana, to Lear, Fran-

kenstein and Much Ado About Nothing and the others dealt in some way with that conflict. (Spamalot, a hold-over from pre-pandemic times, was an outlier. What is its theme? Sheer glorious silliness? It defies definition!)

In 2023, the emphasis on themes was further expanded. The Meighen Forum, the part of the theatre season that brings experts to Stratford to enlighten audiences about the plays, was given a new focus in themed weeks, with the overall theme broken down further for potential audiences. These weeks, in turn, were expanded to include the culinary/sensory, as meals evocative of plays' themes and derivations were added to the intellectual, emotional and dramatic fare presented in the weeks devoted to them. Six of them started with Pride Week in July and interspersed through the summer until the final themed week in September.

What will be forthcoming in the 2024 season? We already know the theme of the plays, as announced by Artistic Director Antoni Cimolini; it is A World Away and involves transformative voyages, both literal and metaphorical. These plays show travels from which the characters in them, and the audiences that view them, emerge with new hope and understanding – something we are in great need of nowadays, and the theatre

has always been able to provide.

The Shakespeare plays announced for the 2024 season are Twelfth Night, Romeo and Juliet, and the less frequently produced Cymbeline (it's latest of five productions was in 2012), with others being a new version of Ibsen's classic Hedda Gabler, a new adaptation of Wendy and Peter Pan as the Schulich offering for children, a dramatization of Canadian author Margaret Laurence's novel The Diviners (a world premiere), the Victorian comedy London Assurance, Edward Albee's The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?, the world premiere of Salesman in China, based on the true story of Arthur Miller and his translator's attempt to mount a production of the play in communist China, and Get That Hope, yet another world premiere, a Studio Theatre performance based on a Canadian, multi-cultural theme.

The 2024 musicals will be the promisingly titled Something Rotten! and the popular La Cage aux Folles. Based on what this reviewer has heard about the first, it should rival Spamalot in terms of audacious nonsense and the bending of history to its hilarious ends.

Voyages are not the only theme of these plays; this year, which puts them on, also involves some notable returns. Celebrated director/choreographer Donna Feore is

back to helm Something Rotten! in which returning actor Dan Chameroy, familiar to Stratford audiences for his many musical roles, will also appear. Veteran actor Tom McCamus is also returning; he will star as Arthur Miller in Salesman in China and Judge Brack in Hedda Gabler. Actor Andre Sills will put on the director's hat for Get That Hope, which focuses on a Jamaican-Canadian family's experience in Toronto's Little Jamaica on their island nation's Independence Day.

Themed weeks (Pride Week, Season Deep Dive Week, CBC IDEAS Week, Global Theatre Week, Readers and Writers Week, and Scholars and Experts Week) will again be a feature and focus of the Meighen Forum, with details to follow.

This shows that the theatre is developing and evolving, with key aims of relevance, growth and audience satisfaction. Audiences can look forward to a 2024 season that offers challenges, laughter and tears, adventure and danger, and resolutions and new understanding.

Tickets are now available through the Box Office (519-273-1600) or online at www.stratfordfestival.ca. Early bird pricing will be locked in until February 7. (Check Stratfest@home to find the many performances on this online streaming platform.)



SEEKING SUSTAINABILITY

Environmental Issues: Fossil Fuels, Fast Fashion & the Holidays

Welcome to Seeking Sustainability! This column is written by the Stratford District Secondary School Eco Club to share environmental news and initiatives with the public.

The discovery of fossil fuels brought both opportunity and consequences, particularly with our carbon footprint. During the Industrial Revolution, North America indulged in wealth, lacked scientific understanding, and ignored the harmful impacts of the unregulated burning of oil and fossil fuels. The harmful, fossil fuel-infested environment contributes to climate change, wherein the burning of hydrocarbons releases greenhouse gases, ultimately altering the climate. The toxic repercussions include radical temperature shifts, leading to wildfires and extreme storms, along with dangerous health effects from pollution and poor air quality. The solution, I propose, lies in addressing our freedom of expression and the right to criticise through peaceful dialogue. One crucial discussion revolves around the carbon tax, an implemented policy aimed at reducing emissions. While I don't believe the Liberals intend to divide Canadians, I share the criticism that the carbon tax creates divisions among Canadians, diluting the resolution of climate change and potential solutions. Given that carbon emissions still account for 80% of

the world's energy, and with a lack of diverse natural alternatives, I am sceptical about the effectiveness of the carbon tax in improving our environment and the lives of Canadians. However, I believe that over time, as we witness Perth County communities taking on initiatives to explore and incorporate more replenishable natural energy sources, as well as utilising waste to create renewable energy, we can develop more viable natural alternatives. This approach makes good use of the carbon tax by providing Canadians with the freedom to choose sustainable alternatives, ultimately enhancing our environment and improving the lives of Canadians. In response to the climate crisis, Trudeau has initiated a plan to innovate and reduce the unregulated burning of fossil fuels, intending to eliminate home heating oil, phasing this out in favour of cleaner and more affordable resources such as natural gas, which emits and pollutes less. The opposition's proposal regarding the carbon tax suggests a nationwide halt on the tax and holding a carbon tax election, where Canadians can choose between Trudeau's plan to quadruple the tax or Poilievre's plan to axe the tax. In response, the Liberals are inclined to contest this proposal in the polls. It is truly astonishing to me that, after three consecutive failed elections by Conservatives, they still wish to contest another election on denying the costs of climate change. They persist in asserting that having no plan against climate change is in the best interest of Canadians. The repercussion of our unregulated burning of fossil fuels is an action we have all played a

part in, whether we recognize it or not. We bear the consequences of climate change, and our collective accountability is reflected in the implementation of the carbon tax. Citizens of Stratford and Perth County have done great work in implementing eco-friendly initiatives. One such initiative is the Going Green in Grey Plan. The Grey County Administration's goal is to create a more sustainable, green-friendly, healthy future for communities in and around Perth County who live in urban, rural, or inclusive environments.

Fast fashion is the rapid production and retail of inexpensive clothing that keeps up with the constantly changing fashion trends and styles. As consumer demand soars and fashion trends change rapidly, fast fashion is becoming a bigger issue. Fast fashion is harming the environment in many ways. The clothing is made of cheap fabrics that are derived from fossil fuels, contributing to global warming and causing a great deal of waste since the cheap fabrics degrade quickly. In addition, the toxic textile dyes used in production make the fashion industry one of the world's largest water polluters. So, what can you do to help fix this growing issue? Instead of purchasing new, trendy clothes as a hobby, you can purchase timeless, well-made clothing that will last much longer. Timeless styles never go out of fashion! In addition, you can donate your old clothing to help those in need and help the environment, and you can consider purchasing your clothing at thrift stores instead of purchasing everything new. By doing this, you are recycling good clothing that was already made. To make an even bigger impact, you can educate others about the harmful effects of fast fashion and advocate for slow fashion, an approach to fashion that considers the resources and impacts

of clothing production and aims to make the fashion industry more sustainable.

This holiday season brings with it the joys of holiday gift-giving, delectable hot chocolate, and...garbage? If this year is anything like the past, we can expect to produce over 540,000 tonnes of waste. The worst part is, that colossal number only represents the waste attributed to wrapping paper and gift bags. According to Anthropology Magazine, the tradition of wrapping gifts still exists today because "wrapping an ordinary object is what transforms it into something extraordinary." The simple act of concealment frames any item as a gift. It isn't just some average alarm clock, it is the Jall Wooden Digital Alarm Clock, carefully selected by your dearest friend. Back to our original problem; how can we reduce the amount of wrapping paper we use? Simple—don't use any! Don't disguise your alarm clock with drab supermarket wrapping paper, use your own! Using your artistic spirit, why not decorate some lovely plain kraft paper, and turn a meaningless piece of paper into a sentimental treasure? If you like it simple, why not use last week's edition of the Stratford Times? To the hardcore wrapping enthusiasts, these alternatives may seem outlandish and outrageous. Still, I can assure you that no matter how you disguise your gift, the thought and act of concealment alone will be expressive enough. Plus, don't forget you can feel proud you are helping save the world, one piece of non-biodegradable wrapping paper at a time!

Come back in February to see what's new with Seeking Sustainability!

Written by Kieran Albrecht, Avery Durand, and Nathan Bean; edited by Elliana Morrison

Thank you!

Thank you to my family and friends for a great 90th birthday celebration.

There were people from great distances and also many unexpected visitors.

I hope you all had a great time, I certainly did.

A big thank you to my family for all they did to make this such a memorable day.

Feeling truly blessed.

George Wicke

STRATFORD TIMES

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Welcoming Ukrainians: Why I Write

VJ KNUTSON

Times Freelance Columnist

“I’m just a grandma, writing from my lazyboy,” I tell anyone who asks me how I got involved with helping Ukrainians. “It just happened.”

Really, I had no expertise, and no idea what I was getting myself involved in, but I was open to helping, knowing that if the tables were turned and my children had to flee their homes for strange lands, I would want someone to do the same for them.

So, here I am. Writing for the Stratford Times is new for me. I have been writing a column (Hosting Ukraine) for the St Marys Independent since the war started, on the suggestion of the owner, Stewart Grant. It has proved very successful in helping the general public become aware of the needs and progress of Ukrainians in our community. When volunteers in Stratford reached out to me, I agreed to add my voice to the efforts in Stratford.

I believe in, and have been witness to, the power of people helping people to make a difference. I think we all want to participate in offering a hand up, but many of us don’t know where to start. Hopefully, my articles will help.

Recently, for example, a woman from Stratford contacted me after reading my column, to offer her skills for any Ukrainian wanting to apply for a job or practice interviews. A few weeks after exchanging messages, a Ukrainian man contacted me needing just such help. I was able to connect the two, and we all now wait with bated breath to see if he was successful.



Alina ShyShviska at her recent performance. (RIC KNUTSON PHOTO)

A couple of issues ago, I wrote about 15-year-old Alina’s dream to join Cirque to Soleil, and the need for funds to keep up her training. This past Friday night, Alina’s family arranged a performance of her circus troupe at the high school in St Marys, and I am thrilled to announce that the event was a success. The family has reached their goal and Alina will be able to continue to pursue her goal.

Thanks to all who attended and especially to those volunteers who offered their time and expertise to make it happen. Mom, Nataly, is especially thankful. You will know Nataly and family from the Stratford Market, where they sell perogies and other Ukrainian specialties.

Saturday, December 16th, was a special day for the community. A local charity, Simple Dreams, offered To Stratford

with Love, a free dinner for local residents. Over 40 Ukrainians from the Stratford and region attended, amazed by the warm-heartedness of strangers, and especially the mayor, who wore jingle bells and helped to serve the crowd.

According to Ukrainian volunteer, Tabitha Cliff, Simple Dreams founders, Richard and Ruth Knieder “have big hearts for helping people in need “. Tab said when she contacted them last year about her concerns for Ukrainians needing warm clothes,

“they were the ones who approached Value Village and made arrangements for them to provide free clothes for all newcomers.”

My experience - and the counsel I’ve received from others more knowledgeable in helping those fleeing war – tells me that building community is the most important ingredient for new immigrants to be successful. No matter the age, or background, we all need to know we are seen and welcome. Events like To Stratford with Love are a perfect example. Bless the organizers for their time and effort.

If you have a story to share, a question, or want to know how to get involved, write me at english.knutson@gmail.com. I love hearing from you.

OBITUARY



IN LOVING MEMORY.

HELEN NOWACK 1947-2023

Helen was a witty, kind and devoted wife, mom, grandma, and friend who will be sorely missed.

Helen shared 54 years of loving marriage with her husband Paul. Their love raised two sons, Scott with Shannon and grandchildren Adelaine and Marshall, and Todd with Kim and grandchild Lila. Helen loved her family.

Helen enjoyed the arts, movies, and the theatre especially the Stratford Festival. Driving many summers across Canada to Victoria, B.C. were special times with her family. Helen loved people and she shared many interesting and engaging stories from everyone she met. A good meal, engaging conversations, topped up with an evening of cards was all she wanted and this brought her great happiness.

The Nowack family held a small private celebration of life. As expressions of sympathy and in the spirit of theatre for Helen, memorial donations can be made to the Stratford Festival by calling 519.271.4040 ext.2275 or stratfordfestival.ca/SupportUs/CommemorativeGifts

www.wgyoungfuneralhome.com

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New Time

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Riddles

What is green, covered in Christmas lights and Christmas bulbs, and goes ribbit?
A mistle-toad.

How do sheep say Merry Christmas to each other?
Fleece Navidad.

What is every parent's favorite Christmas song?
Silent Night!

Why did Rudolph have to attend summer school?
Because he went down in history.

How did Joseph and Mary weigh baby Jesus at birth?
They had a weigh in the manger.

Why does Scrooge love Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?
Because every buck is dear to him!

What did Adam say on the day before Christmas?
It's Christmas, Eve!

What did the bald man say when he got a comb for Christmas?
"I'll never part with it!"

Sudoku

		3			8		5	2
				9	1			
6				4		3		
			2				8	
						6		
4				5				3
	7			3		4		
						9		
3	1			7				

Solutions on page 39



Pet of the Month



DAPHNE

She has been with us since March 2023 and has a reduced adoption fee of just \$100.

Daphne has allergies and will need to take medication to keep her happy and healthy. She can be a bit shy at first, but once she warms up, she's a total cuddle bug! She's looking for a home where she can be the centre of attention with no other animals.

Word Search

CHRISTMAS

M	O	J	H	P	N	G	I	N	G	E	R	B	R	E	A	D	H	U	V
E	T	E	Y	A	L	M	M	X	R	A	F	C	G	I	W	O	K	I	P
Q	D	L	D	S	R	C	E	T	C	I	P	D	G	H	L	V	H	K	L
X	O	F	N	T	Q	V	J	R	J	M	Y	C	E	L	O	P	X	I	M
J	U	M	A	N	O	K	B	F	B	R	X	G	Y	K	X	P	G	R	I
N	Y	J	C	E	O	Q	O	D	E	I	O	Z	I	H	R	H	T	O	F
T	G	O	A	S	F	A	G	S	L	E	I	G	H	Z	T	Z	I	M	G
D	M	H	N	E	E	P	G	F	L	M	O	S	C	S	E	R	O	L	A
R	V	Q	E	R	D	N	L	I	S	O	A	T	N	S	T	F	O	J	R
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F	Z	U	N	C	H	P	O	W	E	I	C	A	N	G	I	S	A	K	D
D	B	W	D	C	X	P	U	S	P	R	Y	N	K	X	G	S	I	N	Y
B	D	B	E	T	C	E	J	G	G	X	Q	R	M	V	D	J	Q	M	X
P	N	O	E	A	V	E	S	I	H	N	H	O	K	S	S	Y	J	Q	R
N	E	O	R	V	I	D	E	D	Z	E	C	O	N	T	C	D	D	C	N
K	N	O	W	Q	I	Z	L	E	G	N	A	N	A	Q	F	Q	Y	T	R
L	L	L	R	R	B	Y	P	B	T	N	W	G	Z	U	N	U	H	L	F
S	G	B	I	P	K	G	V	B	T	J	G	F	U	P	D	I	B	H	A

- angel
- bells
- candy cane
- carols
- elf
- garland
- gingerbread
- holly
- lights
- mistletoe
- north pole
- ornaments
- presents
- reindeer
- santa
- sleigh
- snowman

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7	5	2	3	9	1	8	4	6
6	8	1	5	4	2	3	7	9
5	3	6	2	1	9	7	8	4
1	2	7	4	8	3	6	9	5
4	9	8	6	5	7	2	1	3
2	7	9	8	3	5	4	6	1
8	6	5	1	2	4	9	3	7
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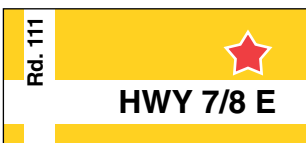
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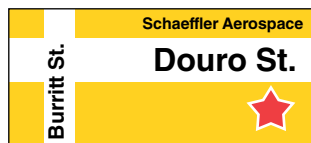
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