

The Madawaska Valley Current

FRIDAY MARCH 5, 2021

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Re-imagining Madawaska Valley Public Library

PETER FRIGHT
MADAWASKA VALLEY

Peter Fright, Vice-chair of the Board of Madawaska Valley Public Library, reports on the Madawaska Valley Public Library's Strategic Plan.

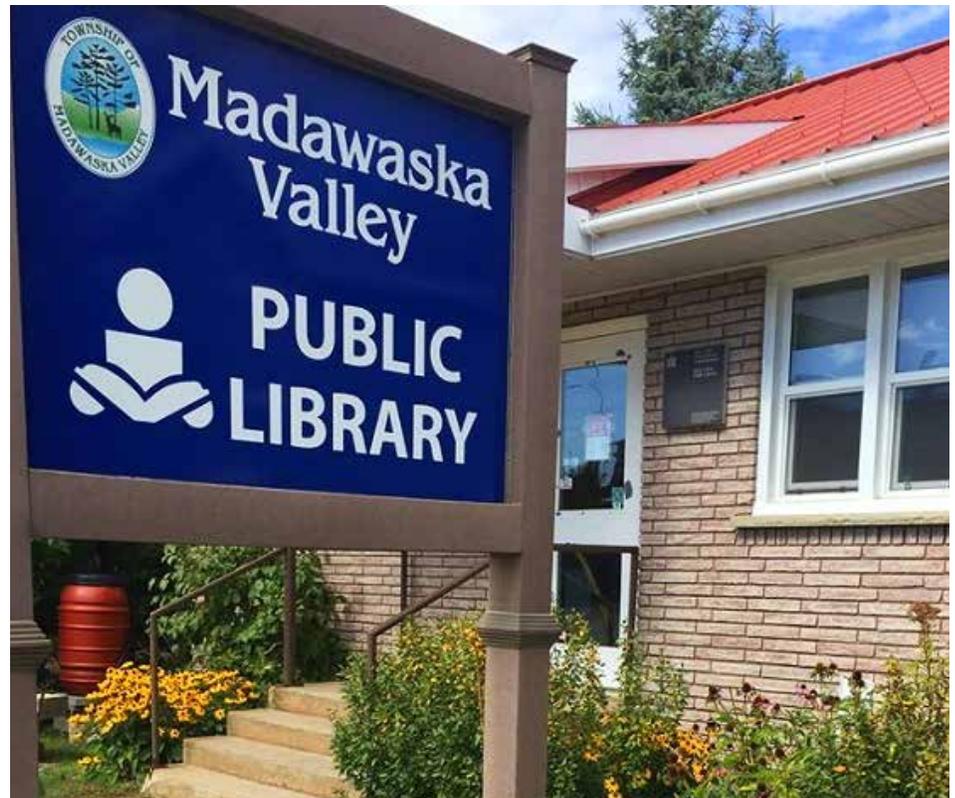
Madawaska Valley Public Library has always evolved to meet the changing needs of the community. Its success is reflected in a 27 percent increase in membership over the last 10 years, a substantial achievement for a small rural community library. The Board of Trustees, CEO, staff and volunteers are committed to building on this success and a new five-year strategic plan was approved by the board in 2020 with the aim of developing a facility fit for the this decade and beyond.

During 2019 a great deal of work was undertaken by the board and CEO to prepare the plan. This included a survey of library users, residents and visitors covering a wide variety of issues ranging from library opening hours and program content to the choice of loan collections and the building itself. We also hosted a well-attended community forum which provided an opportunity for people to discuss ideas and proposals for enhancing library services. In addition, the board consulted with other public libraries and used the resources of provincial and county library networks to gather information about how to identify ways to make improvements.

An analysis of the information gathered was undertaken with the resulting strategic plan developed as a 'living' document to be used as a guide to making improvements to library services in the coming years. Three core strategies were identified:

EVALUATE THE POTENTIAL FOR A COMMUNITY HUB

The concept of providing a safe and comfortable space combining a range



of services and amenities for the community is not new. In fact, the idea has been around in Madawaska Valley for at least a decade and is a reality in townships within our region, the facility in Maynooth being a familiar example. During the preparation for the new strategic plan it was clear there existed widespread support for the idea of transforming the library into a community hub.

Consequently, it was agreed to investigate how this could be achieved while accepting that it would not happen overnight. Actions to support this objective include identifying the type of services and resources a community hub could offer, evaluating the capacity of the existing building and determining the amount of space required. The need to identify and engage with partners—not the least of whom is the

Township of Madawaska Valley—was seen as critical to the success of such an enterprise in terms of technical and specialist expertise as well as fundraising. A business plan will be developed to assess costs, benefits and future growth with sustainability as an underpinning principle.

ENHANCE THE PROFILE OF THE LIBRARY IN THE COMMUNITY

MV Public Library is a well used and much loved resource amongst residents, summer cottagers and visitors. Since the library wants to ensure that current and potential patrons are fully aware of the diversity and ever-changing services provided, it was agreed that ways will be explored to improve and enhance its profile in the community.

The action plan for this core strategy includes —*Continued on page 2*



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Continued from page 1— the adjustment of opening hours in response to user feedback, determining how to use social and conventional media more effectively and improve the library website. A theme which links the three core strategies is the continued development of partnerships. In this instance, the highlighting of joint projects is seen to be important in showing how the library works well with businesses, agencies and individuals within the community.

ENHANCE LIBRARY PROGRAMS

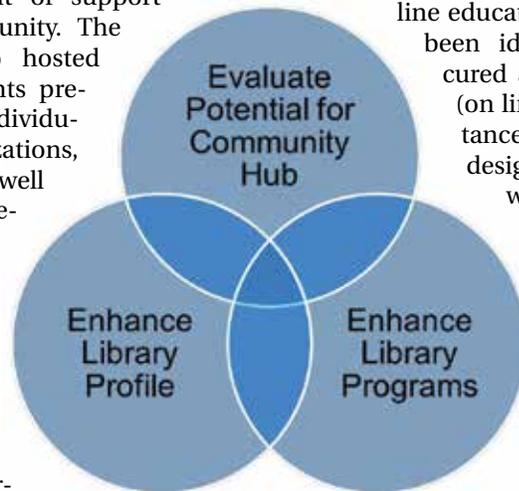
A wide range of programs have been provided by the library over the years and they continue to attract a considerable amount of support from the community. The library has also hosted a variety of events presented by individuals and organizations, which have been well attended and resulted in positive feedback from participants. Building on this strength will result in even further improvements in this area of service provision.

These will include developing and expanding children's and youth programs, the delivery of participative workshops on a variety of subjects, the provision of a range of educational programs and presenting events which reduce social isolation, especially for more vulnerable members of the community. Again, the aim is to do this within a partnership framework.

PANDEMIC

All strategic plans, of course, need to be flexible and take into account changing circumstances and the library is no exception. The emergence of the current pandemic occurred just after the plan was approved and it appeared that everything would have to be put on hold. In fact, nothing was further from the truth.

Everyone involved in the library stepped up and ensured that not only would services continue in one form or another (curbside pick-up for instance) but most activities involved in the plan would be carried forward. Work continues in evaluating the potential for a community hub, on



line educational courses have been identified and procured and new programs (on line and socially distanced) were creatively designed and delivered with a very encouraging response.

The constructive and energetic way the library has adapted to the 'new' world has elicited positive feedback from many in the community and the whole experience has enhanced its image in general. So, despite the challenges posed by the COVID situation, there remains an optimism about the library's future path.

The full strategic plan is accessible at the library itself and on its website. The board and CEO (Karen Filipkowski) welcome anyone with an interest in helping to make improvements. Please contact Karen to discuss ways to contribute.



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Representatives from two grateful agencies who shared in the pet food bounty

MV Food Bank distributes huge pet food donation

TERRY NEWCOMBE
MADAWASKA VALLEY

New volunteers to an organization don't just bring new hands, they also bring new ideas. When Jenny Fitzpatrick joined the MV Food Bank, she noticed that there was seldom enough pet food available for the amount of requests coming in from clients. Knowing how valuable pets are to people's happiness and health, especially in this pandemic, she reached out for a solution. She found it in British Columbia, and she found it big. Petcurean is a Canadian company making organic and sustainable cat and dog foods. They have very generously shipped us 6,400 pounds of top-quality pet food—that's over three tons!

Which of course is way more than we can use before it eventually expires. So Jenny reached out to neighbouring food banks and animal rescue centres to share the bounty. As a result, over fourteen agencies across the Ottawa Valley and beyond have picked up car- and truckloads of healthy pet foods.

Why would a company make such a huge donation? Petcurean representative Christine Mallier explains: "I'm so happy that so many pets and people can be helped with the donation. It's really awesome that you've got so many contacts and connections. With us being in BC, it's much harder to know and find all of these groups that need help in other provinces. There's only so much we can find online, and often the smaller groups who really need help

don't have much of an online presence so they're hard to find."

We and all our fellow agencies receiving this gift are very grateful to Petcurean. As Jenny puts it, "This is the most generous of generous gifts and will result in helping so many out there in desperate need."

Sometimes a pandemic brings out the best in both people and businesses. You can show your thanks too by buying local—Petcurean products are sold at Cat Nap & Lazy Dog Pet Outfitters, Barry's Bay.

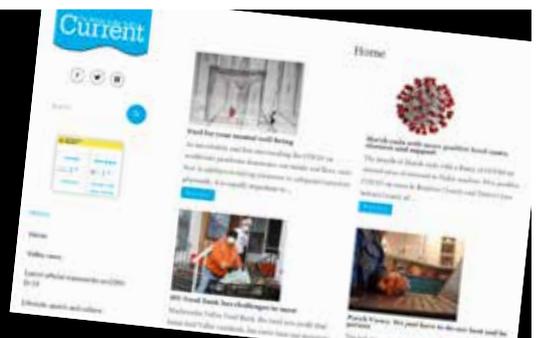
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For some of us, self-isolating doesn't mean "our home is safe."

Valley to welcome Dr. Erin Murray in 2021

DANIELLE PAUL
MADAWASKA VALLEY

In February a formal announcement from the Joint Municipal Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee (JMPPRC) advised that Dr. Erin Murray will set up a practice in Barry's Bay this summer following her final exams.

After an undergraduate degree in biology at Queen's University, Erin knew she wanted a career in Science. "I did some bench work research in the lab, and also some clinical research interacting more with patients. That's what I really enjoyed and what led me to pursue medicine."

It was at Queen's that she met Barry's Bay native (now her husband), Gaelen Murray. Having grown up in Burlington, Erin admits she wasn't too familiar with the Ottawa Valley but she has come to know and love the area from frequent visits over the past ten years.

About her two-year residency program through the University of Ottawa at Pembroke Regional Hospital (PRH), she said, "I'm really enjoying it. We've got some off-service rotations rotations like internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, general surgery... and the majority of time [is] spent in family clinics. It definitely prepares us well for rural family practice." Because of her PRH residency, the couple have been living near Pembroke and Gaelen has commuted to work at Murray Brothers Lumber, the family business.

She explained, "I'm looking forward to what Barry's Bay offers. It allows me to achieve my professional goals and have the full breadth of family practice that I envision for myself I'm looking forward to the next step." She added that the Valley offers a "balance for a good quality of life. It's a beautiful location with access to all the hobbies I enjoy and the outdoors, so it really suits me." She described her interest in cross-country skiing, hiking, "a lot of" cycling, camping, and being near Algonquin Park. She expressed disappointment that the pandemic delayed plans for an introductory paddling weekend on the river in 2020.

Dr. Jason Malinowski spoke about his



Dr. Erin Murray. PHOTO SUBMITTED

new colleague: "We are very excited to welcome Dr. Erin Murray to our medical staff in 2021. Dr. Murray trained with me during her residency, and has an excellent grasp of the medical landscape here in Barry's Bay, at the Madawaska Valley Family Health Team (MVFHT), St. Francis Memorial Hospital, and the Valley Manor. She cared for patients at all three places when she was here with me. I really enjoyed working with her, and my patients felt very confident in her care of them."

He continued, "My staff and I are extremely excited to welcome her back! She will be taking on unattached patients from the list that we centralized through the MVFHT a few years ago."

PHYSICIAN RECRUITMENT IS GOOD NEWS

The Current spoke with South Algonquin's Mayor Jane Dumas who chairs the JMPPRC who said, "Primary care is in dire straits in Ontario and Canada and the lack of primary care physicians is a huge issue. That's why this is a really good story right now."

"We've had some physicians [who] wanted to be here so badly because of the beauty of the area, the four seasons playground, the sense of community. And we have an incredible healthcare system here... The diversity of healthcare, interdisciplinary teams that are practising medicine throughout this area. This medical community works together cohesively—there's no posturing, there's support."

With Drs. Dan and Teresa Ostapo-

wicz having taken over Dr. Atfield's practice in late 2020, Dr. Murray is the third new doctor to come to this area recently. Of the role played by the JMPPRC, Dumas said, "We have two of the founding members of the original committee still involved with physician recruitment (Janice Tiedje of Killaloe Hagarty Richards and Desmond Quade from Brudenell Lyndoch & Raglan). You can imagine how they feel and the accomplishments that they can pat themselves on the back for."

Dr. Malinowski expressed his appreciation of the JMPPRC, "The support of the multi-municipality recruitment committee has been instrumental in filling the practices vacated by the retirements of our beloved long-term physicians."

CHOOSING RURAL FAMILY PRACTICE

Contrasting urban primary care with rural medicine, Dumas said, "Look what our doctors do—they go to Emergency, they look after Valley Manor patients, they're involved in hospice palliative care, they look after individuals on home care in the community. It obviously takes somebody that's looked at the whole situation and said, 'I'm up for this, this is how I want to practise medicine and this is where I'm going to come.'"

Mayor Dumas emphasized, "They chose us. They chose this community to come to, so we are very fortunate."

Dr. Erin Murray's message for Valley residents: "I'm really looking forward to starting my practice and getting to know the community."

Barry's Bay Legion congratulates Valley youth for posters, poems, essays

THE CURRENT MADAWASKA VALLEY

Congratulations to the following students who won prizes at the Zone Level Competition. The two first place winners' entries have gone on to the next level of the competition. Good Luck to Nash and Ryleigh.

Primary poster, colour, first place:
Nash Dombroskie, St. John Bosco School

Junior poster, colour, third place: Lily Etmanskie, St. Martin of Tours School

Primary poster, black and white, third

place: September Eagles, St. Martin of Tours School

Junior poster, black and white, third place:
Olivia Byers, St. John Bosco School

Intermediate poster, black and white, third place:
Ava Brown, St. Martin of Tours School

Intermediate essay, first place:
Ryleigh Foy, St. Andrews School

Junior poem, second place:
James Shaw, home schooled

Intermediate poem Second place:
Peter Shaw Home Schooled



Nash Dombroskie, St. John Bosco School, first place, primary poster, colour.

HERITAGE PHOTO

The Sisters of St. Joseph

BOB CORRIGAN | BARRY'S BAY

In 1921, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in Pembroke and, from there, sent nuns out to various communities to teach children as well as to work in hospitals. As far as Barry's Bay was concerned, a convent was built across the street from the St. Hedwig's priests' house in 1928. The following year, an elementary school was built, staffed almost entirely by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Because this year marks the Sisters of St. Joseph 100th anniversary, I am providing a couple of pictures of some nuns who were living in Barry's Bay in 1959 and 1960 respectively. Sr. Raymond, Sr. St. Paul (the principal), and Sr. Marina are featured in the first picture. Sadly, Sr. Marina passed away in February.

Thanks to Sr. Rosenda Brady who responded to my online appeal and identified the Sisters of St. Joseph (1960) in the second picture.

Heritage Photo: If you are interested in having a picture and story featured in The Madawaska Valley Current, please submit the information to Bob Corrigan at madvalleycurrent@gmail.com (subject Heritage Photos) or mail your photo to Bob c/o The Current at PO Box 1097, Barry's Bay KOJ 1B0 (originals will be returned).



Sr. Raymond, Sr. St. Paul, Sr. Marina, 1959. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



From left: (back row) Sisters Martha Prince, Anita Levair, Mary Emma Varney, Mary McGuire; (front row) Sisters Imelda Coyne, Marina Lynch (Sr. Marina), Edna Prince (Sr. Hedwig). PHOTO: SUBMITTED

Imagination takes flight — watch out

GIL GLOFCHESKIE | BARRY'S BAY

As an entrepreneurial young lad always in need of pocket money, I worked at many odd jobs in our small town, usually for a dollar an hour. I would catch and sell worms and frogs, split and pile wood, dig trenches in the rocks and sometimes into the lake, and whatever else needed doing. My best paying job was skinning for some lodges, especially when the wealthy Americans came to hunt bears. They would pay me \$5 per bear and a little more if I quartered the bear for them. This process took me about an hour and a half to do a good job. Sometimes I got a generous tip as well.

One day after coming home from school, Mom said, “The Lodge is picking you up. They have a couple of bears that were shot today and needed skinning.” The Lodge sent the brand new white Bonneville Pontiac to pick me up, and best of all, the driver was the owner’s daughter — sweet, charming and a beautiful young woman. Life couldn’t get any better.

We arrived at the Lodge, where I saw two dead bears hanging. I immediately got to work. As I was lowering a bear down onto the skinning table, the hunters walked over to me. “You look pretty young to be a skinner; think you can do it properly?” “Yes, sir, I’ve been skinning bears since I was 13 years old,” and with that sorted out, I went to work on the first bear.

The hunters watched me for a while, but when I proved to be up to the task, they left me to my business and went back to their cabin for more refreshments.

As I was working, a slight breeze stirred the air and scattered the leaves. Occasionally it sounded like something was walking in the nearby bush, and I would glance up. As the sun slowly sank and the shadows grew longer, my imagination took flight. I thought I saw movement in the brush and recalled some scary bear story I had read. My mind began to run rampant; I wondered if a bear would approach due to the smell of fresh meat. Suddenly I heard a rustling of branches and nervously glanced over my shoulder towards the bush edge — nothing there



PHOTOS: TOP RT IMAGES, BOTTOM ROGERS AR

— but as I turned back, the bear that was hanging swayed towards me. That was all it took. I bolted, heading straight to the front door of the Lodge as fast as I could pump my legs. As I reached for the door handle, it hit me. It was the wind that had moved the bear, and my imagination had set my legs in motion.

Somewhat abashed, I quickly looked around, hoping no one had noticed my mad dash. As I turned to head back to start the last bear, the door opened, and a sweet voice said, “Can I help you?” It was the lodge owner’s daughter. My face flushed in embarrassment; had she seen me run? My brain went into overdrive, “I was just going to ask you where the light switch is, and then I remembered that it was in the fish cleaning shack, thanks,” I stammered. That beautiful smile of hers got me every time. I went back to skinning, laughing at myself for running from a dead bear. A person’s imagination can make you do funny things, but at least no one had noticed me.

SOME SAGE ADVICE

It was my fault; as a young kid, I would run over to my Grandpa’s house to insist on hearing him tell the latest bear tales from the logging camp. Camp Odenback was in the middle of Algonquin Park, and there seemed to be plenty of bears wandering around camp. The delicious smells of camp cooking brought the bears in hoping for a meal, or they might wait and try to break into the camp larders at night.

Now Grandpa could tell an exciting story, and I was a sucker for the excitement. Looking back, Grandpa might have stretched some of the stories; but as far as I was concerned, it was the truth, and I took them seriously. I had many bear nightmares, and even when awake, I would sometimes hear a bear outside my bedroom window at night, just waiting to rip out the screen and attack me.

Finally I decided to get help in solving my bear dilemma. Come Friday I went straight to my Grandpa for advice.

Grandpa was a wise man, so surely he would know what to do. I asked, "What should I do if a bear is after me?" I looked up at him; he had that serious look on his face even though his eyes twinkled. "Well," he said with a solemn pause, "if a bear is after you and closing in, reach in the back of your pants, take some of that bear deterrent and rub it on the bear's nose. That'll fix him." "What bear deterrent?" I asked. With a smile, Grandpa said, "If the bear is close enough, the deterrent will be there, guaranteed, don't worry." I finally figured out what he was saying. Thank goodness I never had to use that secret weapon.

BACK TO WORK

I continued skinning but got to thinking. Now, I could have run from nothing and made a fool of myself, or I could have stayed and possibly wrestled a bear. What would you have done?

Finishing up that last bear was worrisome, even if I knew there were no bears nearby — or were there?

I was carefully checking the hide when a voice said, "How is it going?" I almost jumped out of my skin. George, one of the hunters, had walked over and I had not even heard him. He just chuckled.

"Almost done," I said. At that, he went up to their cabin and got his fellow hunters. They gathered around and seemed pleased with the skinning jobs. "Great work, son. What do we owe you." "Five dollars a bear," I answered. They paid me the money then handed me an extra five American.

"Thank you very much; you guys sure did well with your hunt."

George spoke, "Your Dad knows bears; we hunted for four days this week and hadn't seen a bear. This morning we went out with your Dad and shot two. By the way, we will be coming back in November for deer hunting. Your Dad says you're the dog handler, so I imagine you will be hunting with us." That was great news for me. I was looking forward to it, two weeks off for deer hunting. I wrapped the hides and stored them in the freezer. I thanked them and said, "Goodbye, see you in November."

I was thrilled but a little embarrassed as the lodge owner's daughter drove me home. You see, bears have a distinct odour, mostly if they are hanging in the sun for a few hours. Even on a cloudy

day, they start to smell. It gets on your clothes and, well, you stink. I had showered and changed clothes, but I could still smell that bear odour — or was that also my imagination? Hopefully, it was. On the other hand, I had made some serious cash and some new friends.

Years later, I was talking to the lodge owner's daughter, and she mentioned that particular evening, "I don't know how you could stand the odour of the bears." So it wasn't my imagination.

After high school, I moved to the city, and my buddy took over the skinning job. Years later, we were telling stories from the old days. He mentioned an incident where he was skinning a couple of bears; it was near evening, with a

slight breeze rustling the leaves. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something and turned, one of the hanging dead bears moved. He was off, high-tailing it for the lodge door. I smiled, "I can relate," and we had a good laugh.

The experience of meeting and spending time with people from different walks of life is priceless. Time at the Lodge allowed me to learn about other people and have fun at the same time. Life in the Madawaska Valley brings back many fond memories from my youth, good times, good friends, and adventure. Visit us someday; you won't be disappointed, the memories will last a lifetime! But watch out for your imagination; you never know what could happen.



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OPINION • PORCH VIEWS

The Madawaska Valley — hub of the universe?

MARK WOERMKE
BARRY'S BAY

A Sunday afternoon walk last month took an unexpected turn, when I spotted a group of demonstrators at the intersection of Opeongo and Bay Streets in downtown Barry's Bay.

As I got closer, I was able to read their homemade signs which had slogans like "End Tyranny," "End the Ontario Lockdown" and "Stop Living in Fear: 'Do not fear for I am with you (Isaiah 41:10)'" and I noted they were not wearing masks or social-distancing.

I kept my distance, but asked one young man a few questions.

Because I didn't recognize him (but then I don't recognize very many people in my hometown anymore), my first question was, "What is your connection to this community?" I don't know if he interpreted my sweeping hand gesture as meaning the village or the group of protesters, but his immediate, enthusiastic and unprompted response was that his sister had attended Seat of Wisdom College and that his parents and grandparents have been visiting the area for years. He declined to confirm whether he, himself, was a student at the college, and he preferred not to comment when I asked him if the demonstration had been organized by the college.

He was the only individual I spoke to. The folks I saw appeared to be young adults and I estimated twelve to fifteen of them, but other Valley residents who passed by and took photos or videos have suggested on social media that there may have been as many as twenty demonstrators including those they identified as college students, children and, alarmingly, health workers.

Some of those residents have contacted the municipality's bylaw officer, the Renfrew County District Health Unit, the OPP and Seat of Wisdom College. The College has responded with what is becoming its stock answer: they "do their best to enforce all COVID-19 protocols on campus" and they "encourage [their] students to obey all civil laws and protocols off campus"

and take no responsibility for their off-campus behaviour.

Based on my encounter, I knew only that the brother of a former student was part of Sunday's demonstration. I didn't know if, in fact, there were college students or former college students involved. I did know, however, that for several months, there have been complaints and comments made in the community and reported in two local news sources that Seat of Wisdom students have been refusing to wear masks in local stores.

At the very least, the College administration should convince its students that their failure to support and follow provincial and county COVID-19 protocols is upsetting the "townies" and creating a public relations headache for the College. This isn't just an unauthorized bonfire on the hill across from St. Hedwig's church or a boisterous house party in a quiet neighbourhood. It's a bit more serious.

In the last three months, Renfrew County's COVID-19 numbers have grown from 30 to 306 and the Madawaska Valley's from 1 to 21. On February 8, we had two active cases in the municipality. These numbers are low when compared to other parts of Ontario, but they indicate that life in sheltered valley in the hills does not make us immune.

As of Wednesday February 10, Renfrew County returned to the green level of the province's COVID-19 Response Framework. That's good news, but with our three-month increase and the spectre of more transmissible variants, all permanent and non-permanent residents of the Madawaska Valley and Renfrew County owe it to their neighbours and hosts to abide by provincial and county protocols.

No one wants to wear a mask and no one wants to limit their interaction with family and friends. Working and studying from home is very challenging. No business owner wants to close, lay off employees or impose rules on customers for any period of time. Shopping for groceries or visiting the LCBO alone is not much fun. It is inconvenient to



Demonstrators in Barry's Bay.

PHOTOS: MARK WOERMKE

limit our visits to the post office once a week or to order ahead and pick-up hardware or building supplies. People are feeling isolated and lonely. Life has become difficult for all of us. Instead of fabricating conspiracies and railing about tyranny, suck it up and do your part for the good of your community. Or, if that doesn't appeal to you, take the advice my mother gave me when I was "whinging" about some unpleasantness or suffering. "Offer it up for the souls in Purgatory."

LOCALLY-CONNECTED PUBLICATIONS

Sadly, Sunday's demonstrators are not alone in the Madawaska Valley. Comments posted on social media reveal that there are a few other anti-maskers, anti-lockdown activists and conspiracy theorists. There are also two right-wing

Catholic publications with local connections which encourage them.

Readers have already learned about an online publication called *Catholic Insight* in an article published by *The Madawaska Valley Current* in September 2020. That is when readers were introduced to *Catholic Insight* and its editor who is a founder of Seat of Wisdom College, teaches there and is a resident of the Madawaska Valley. At that time, *The Current* questioned whether his views on facemasks might have influenced some College students to disregard requests to wear masks in local stores. He and the College both rejected the possibility that what a professor writes in his spare time could influence students. Hopefully that is true, because this comment published in *Catholic Insight* after the storming of the U.S. Capitol by protestors in January is downright alarming. “If words and honest debate and freedom of expression, and now freedom of assembly, if any recourse to changing the regime and its laws, are more and more verboten, or perceived as such, what recourse do the people have, except violence?”

No doubt many Madawaska Valley residents followed those distressing events at the United States’ Capitol. Usually, I don’t pay much attention to American politics, but that day, I was following up on a local connection – another online publication, Lifesitenews.

Lifesitenews says it is “dedicated to issues of culture, life and family” and it produces US and Canadian editions. Judging by its successful fundraising campaigns, I suspect it has tens of thousands of readers across North America. Lifesitenews’ co-founder, some of its editors and writers live in, or have ties to, the Madawaska Valley.

In the weeks leading up to January 6, articles in Lifesitenews promoted the notion that the US election results were fraudulent and encouraged its readers to join a march on Washington to support Trump. As a matter of fact, as I followed the storming of the Capitol on CBC Newsworld, I was also checking Lifesitenews because it also had a reporter on the ground in Washington. That very day, Lifesitenews posted an interview with a young man who had been part of the mob that forced its way into the Capitol. He has since been ar-

rested. Two days later, Lifesitenews was seeking tips and videos from the Capitol protest in order to get at the supposed truth that was being ignored by “a one-sided, general condemnation and narrative by the mainstream media and social media conglomerates.”

A quick survey of the site reveals its writers reject masking; question the authenticity of the pandemic; attribute the pandemic to China’s development of biological weapons; promote the notion of “The Great Reset” conspiracy; oppose COVID-19 vaccines because they are developed from a cell line obtained from an aborted fetus; and consider Pope Francis (who along with Pope Emeritus Benedict has been vaccinated) as dangerously liberal if not heretical.

WE ARE THE CENTRE OF SOMETHING

When I was about ten years old, my dad took me shopping for new clothes at Michael’s Shop for Men. It was located on Barry’s Bay main drag where Rural Outreach Employment Services is now, close to the scene of Sunday’s demonstration. The only item I recall was a T-shirt, likely produced by the local tourist board, which proclaimed “The Madawaska Valley: Hub of the Universe.” I remember it because the first time I wore it to school, a smart-aleck quipped: “That should say ‘Arsehole of Canada.’”

Like most folks in the Madawaska Valley, I appreciate “a good one” and that comment made me laugh, even though I disagreed with it. I still disagree with it, and I believe most readers would disagree with it too. Our residents have made substantial contributions locally, provincially and nationally in a variety of fields; our communities are generally close-knit and supportive; our culture is unique and we live a beautiful natural setting. We Valley folk are fiercely proud of our home, and even though there might be a few among us who reject Copernicus’ theory, I know most of us realize that we aren’t the centre of the universe.

No, the Madawaska Valley is not the hub of the universe, but it is quickly becoming a centre of something—something more disturbing and damaging to our reputation than a child in the 1970s could have ever imagined—a centre of right-wing conspiracy theories.



OPINION

Lockdown forces us to listen to ourselves

JAMES DI FIORE
KILLALOE

Hi.

I met someone recently. Me. Listen, don't worry, I'm not going to endlessly drone on about what sort of impact this pandemic is having on all of us. I've done that before, as have many others, and frankly the idea of dwelling on the virus and its impact on our society has been saturated, satirized and recycled, probably because it is such a flexible topic, or maybe because none of us has any answers and ends up just talking past each other.

Question: do you think we missed out on a set of experiences and with that instances of growth over the last year, and perhaps more astonishingly, can the first domino towards substantive personal growth really be a deadly virus? Further, have we unknowingly messed with the concept of synchronicity? Also, who has the time to sit there and philosophize about all this? Oh ... right. We all do. Also, this paragraph is what it sounds like in my head almost all the time. I am constantly scrambling, trying to find "the meaning" or some sort of pattern so I can finally relax a little.

Everyone keeps talking about not being able to be around other people, and I think this new reality has finally given us what we probably need the most; the opportunity to really get to know ourselves. Also, I think it may have catapulted me into an unexpected midlife crisis. And I am not alone.

But hold on; I don't know anything about what a midlife crisis really is, let alone if I am in the midst of one. It is entirely possible I am just reacting to not having many choices or that I am just experiencing the stressfulness of the unknown, but the past year has been eye-opening. This treading water effect where you are exhausted from not getting anywhere, or the eggshells you walk on have stopped making noises. Yes I realize how peculiar that sounds. No, I don't mind sounding peculiar. It's about the only thing we have left that this virus can't touch.



PHOTOS: JAMES DI FIORE

I feel like we're all in the book *Walden*, a bunch of rag tag Henry David Thoreaus, only this time the solitude came to us, and instead of being fiercely self-reliant we are beholden to all levels of government in every you can imagine. Wait, I promised myself I wouldn't touch politics in this piece, meaning if I was writing this on paper, that last sentence would have been where the pencil snapped. Yes, in a way I am also the pencil. More on that never.

Mental health is a cunning adversary, and not without a sense of timing. Long bouts of depression, wicked anxiety, break-ups, lost job/income, new job requirements, personal bankruptcy, failed small businesses, a rise in suicide—all of these issues are impacting us or someone we know—the ramifications of which we might not fully understand for decades, if ever. Meanwhile, we seem to have little choice but to allow something called COVID-19 to define who we are right now, and I can't shake the gut sensation that something

behind the scenes of this crisis feels off. The spokespeople on television, the contradictory news, the ideologues who mock people in masks, the mask-wearing folk who swarm the maskless inside grocery stores, the grandma who dies without seeing her family for the last six months of her life—all of it feels unnatural, like we know there is a curtain somewhere that requires lifting, but we don't know where to find it.

Most people I know feel something similar. We all have a different way we define it, if we attempt to define it at all. For most of us it might just be a feeling we get when our pattern-seeking brains are attempting to find normalcy embedded in the lifestyle shift. This pandemic is as pivotal for the planet as WW2, the difference being WW2 caused people who would have never met to cross paths, while COVID is keeping us isolated from everyone except our friends and family members inside our bubbles.

As a fun thought experiment, I try to imagine all those personal connections

lost, simple interactions that would have inevitably led to relationships, and cohabitations, and new human beings. Fate seems malleable as pivotal moments fall outside our control as we wait out the crisis, our hopes and worries wrapped and beribboned like the Amazon-delivered gifts last Christmas. By looking inwardly to fill the void from not moving freely, I think we are also taking inventory of our entire society, reassessing our views on everything from nutrition to celebrity culture. While our collective lens appears tinted with uncertainty for some, others are experiencing definitiveness, where all of a sudden your own transformational life choices arrive early.

For example, I have spoken with dozens of individuals and couples who used COVID to springboard themselves into early retirement. Many other couples, including young millennials, have abandoned their urban, shoebox-ridden lives for century homes in less populated areas, including places like the Madawaska Valley, just so they can finally escape the city.

As for those of us still years away from retirement, with kids, a modest income, household debt and typical family issues, a midlife crisis seems almost compulsory. And hey, my version of midlife has everything you might think it would have—relentless anxiety, insomnia, a tendency to be almost completely non-communicative with friends, family, and colleagues, and an overriding sense that I have fallen short of attaining most of my life goals. Oh stop I'm fine, and in my blind acceptance that this is my midlife crisis, my mental health Mardi Gras, if you will, I recognize an intense longing to revisit the things that have lingered since my teenage years.

These are not just creative pursuits, ladies and gentlemen, they also happen to be the easiest kinds of creative pursuits to mock.

The following statement is 100 percent true: I am a 44-year-old man who now specializes in taking photos of snowflakes, as well as an apparent preference for strong, phallic symbolism, usually in the form of a picture of an icicle. Furthermore, I have come out of retirement and (now behave ladies) am once again a dope ass white rapper.

Come on, how can that not be a clear list of midlife-related symptoms?

A thought just occurred; maybe I am wasting this endless COVID chapter, even though I am finally fulfilling those parts of me that were pushed aside all these years, dormant dreams shaken awake for selfish endeavours that will hopefully translate into a better me. Or maybe not. I really don't know anything except that I love taking those photos and spitting those lyrics.

If approached the right way, maybe the stresses of this pandemic can be re-directed, resulting in me being a better father and husband. Oh crap, I just did what I said I wouldn't do—drone endlessly about the impact of COVID, so I'll just end this paragraph by saying I'm a better rapper at 44 than I was in my 20s (no—for real, it's true. I know).

I spend a great deal of time meandering through my memories, immersing myself in taking photos and writing words, or singing with my daughter. These things just feel like therapy to me, and I think what I am really trying to do is build something for my kids so they can get to know a side of their dad they hadn't really met before.

When I am dead, the recorded songs, the photos, the video rants where I only record my eye darting as I rant about stepping on Lego—these creations are an insurance policy in case they never meet this version of me.

It's been a tough 12 months. My marriage is a little strained, financial problems remain, and I'm having trouble keeping that anxiety at bay. Admitting that kind of detail isn't easy, by the way, but I think that's the point. I wish I did have some sage advice to give, but I think we are all better off just listening to ourselves for once; that thirsty, relentless, omnipresent voice inside, begging us to start filling the well again. It could be taking photos and writing songs, or refinishing furniture, or tending to indoor gardens, or culinary arts, or voraciously reading, or reaching out to an estranged friend or family member, or even becoming happily withdrawn from the world and the people who live here. Maybe the best advice is to just be you, even if that means meeting yourself for the very first time. It isn't easy to look in the mirror, I know, but that is precisely the point.

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*Watch for upcoming
events in local media
and on our FB page.*

MKC celebrates 50th anniversary

DANIELLE PAUL
BARRY'S BAY

Stefani Van Wijk, the third generation of her family to serve as director of Madawaska Kanu Centre talked about celebrating MKC's 50th anniversary year. Her goal in 2021 is to "honour this amazing legacy – this seed that my grandparents planted, that my mom and dad nourished for so many years." She said, "It's a long time for a company in such a small niche market as the paddling industry. We're really excited."

Three years ago when Stefani assumed responsibility as MKC director, her mother, Claudia Van Wijk, told The Current about the history of the family business. Her parents, Canadian champion paddlers Hermann and Christa Kerckhoff, adapted the model of European commercial ski schools to whitewater paddling to encourage more people into the sport. In 1972 they opened Canada's (and the world's) first commercial paddling school on the Madawaska River—an opening delayed until August of that year to preserve Hermann's amateur status so he could compete in the Olympic Games. By 1981 they had also opened OWL Rafting on the Ottawa River. Through a combination of hard work and careful planning the family developed their whitewater business into one of Destination Canada's 'Canadian Signature Experiences.'

And it has been a family effort. Dirk Van Wijk joined the OWL Rafting side of the business, he and Claudia married. Both their daughters, Katrina and Stefani, have competed or taught paddling and remain active in the family business. This family experience echoes one of the MKC themes - an opportunity for all ages in a family to experience the river—at a level appropriate to each individual.

This spirit of family and community spills over when it comes to celebrations. While the pandemic means some plans are not yet firm, Stefani points with pride to the 50th Anniversary logo designed by her sister Katrina, which shows the 50 "exploding with a kayaker, rafter, river, trees." You will see this on commemorative T-shirts, as well as on commemorative anniversary plates



#couchsurfing contest (clockwise from top-left): Three-year-old Megan. PHOTO: MARIE-EVE GIGNAC, MKC Facebook, Stefani Van Wijk explains winter kayaking.

made by local potter Jamie Turnbull (Whiteduck Pottery) which will be prizes during the paddling season. Stefani says her mom Claudia is putting together a webinar with MKC history that will feature some footage of "my granddad interviewed about the history of whitewater paddling in this area."

Stefani said, "A dream of mine (if COVID allows) would be to have a "River Knowledge and History Educational weekend, as well as an entertainment weekend. We're loosely looking at Labour Day weekend for that."

FULL-TIME, YEAR-ROUND

Referring to her new permanent home in Barry's Bay, Stefani said, "This is the first time in 50 years that MKC has been open all winter long. My grandparents lived in Toronto from September to May and my parents were in Ottawa. When I started as Director I extended the season, making it earlier



in the spring and later in the fall."

She said, "It's so nice just to be on the river and know what the river is up to in the wintertime. We're doing lots of cross-country skiing next to the river, and even paddling because there's no ice formed on the river yet. Other than just being cold, it's still relatively safe to paddle down the Mad."

Followers of MKC have seen a recent Facebook video that de-bunks winter paddling. In it, Stefani explains how experienced paddlers can paddle safely in winter.

PADDLING PAST THE PANDEMIC

"People associate paddling with their identity," said Stefani. During the coronavirus pandemic, Stefani and her team found a creative way to stay engaged with the paddling community, have fun and make sure they didn't "lose that part of themselves." MKC launched an online #couchsurfing photo competition with the prize being a free MKC paddling experience.

When last spring's lockdown ended, Stefani explained that many people turned to MKC for an outdoor adventure because it is "a really accessible and facilitated experience." People "create their own river journey outside of MKC. We ... fill them up with knowledge about rescue and river stewardship, how to care for the watershed, [and] give back to the river community."