

# Muskoka Mosaic: Introducing Bev MacWilliams

By Paula Boon

Bev MacWilliams' tie to Huntsville is so strong, he's been able to package it in a business. "That's what helped drive the business: my love for this town," says the co-owner of Muskoka Language International. "Huntsville is a pretty magical place."

In 1995, MacWilliams and his Huntsville friend Michael Ruby brought their first group of 53 Japanese girls to town so the students could practice their English and experience life here. "At the time we were thinking it was just a neat summer thing to do," he says.

Now, Muskoka Language International arranges short-term and long-term stays in small towns across Canada for thousands of students from more than a dozen countries each year. The company has offices in Toronto, Vancouver, Tokyo and Seoul.

Born in Huntsville, MacWilliams attended Pine Glen Public School and Huntsville High School. He was always into sports and outdoor activities.

MacWilliams began dating Katie, his wife of 28 years, in high school, and they both attended York University. After graduating with a degree in history and political science, MacWilliams went to Nipissing for teachers' college. At the end of the year, he was offered a teaching job in a remote fly-in native community on Lake Athabasca in Saskatchewan.

He and Katie were married and she joined him for the last two of his four years there. "It was probably the best thing I ever did," he says. "It gave me a solid foundation to build from. I had to be flexible and adaptable to change."

Learning about and living in another culture also had a profound effect on MacWilliams. "I think everybody should experience living in a different culture," he says.

MacWilliams and his wife spent their summers in Huntsville. Then, when they began to think about starting a family, it

was time to return for good. "It was never a question for us: we had to raise our kids in Huntsville," MacWilliams says. They moved back in 1983, and their two daughters were born in 1986 and 1988.

After several years teaching at various

schools in the area, MacWilliams became principal at Irwin Memorial in 1990. Two years later moved to Watt Public School as principal. "I loved working at these schools," he says. "Rural schools really have that community feel. Any time you need something,

there's always a parent who'll step up."

As principal, MacWilliams made technology a priority. "Not just putting computers in the classrooms, but having teachers use them in their instruction," he says.

It was this interest that led to several positions with the school board. First, MacWilliams was coordinator of curriculum, and then he was put in charge of amalgamating all the computer systems when the Trillium Lakelands District School Board (TLDSB) was formed. Finally, as manager of the TLDSB's information technology department, he supervised the creation of a wide area network – infrastructure of high speed cable that could connect all 60-some schools in the new board.

Sometime around 1994, Ruby called MacWilliams with the idea of hosting Japanese students in Huntsville as a summer program. "I said, 'Great idea.' We'd both had such a great youth growing up here," says MacWilliams. "It's a small town, community-minded, safe, secure, has natural beauty and friendly people. What international student wouldn't like that?"

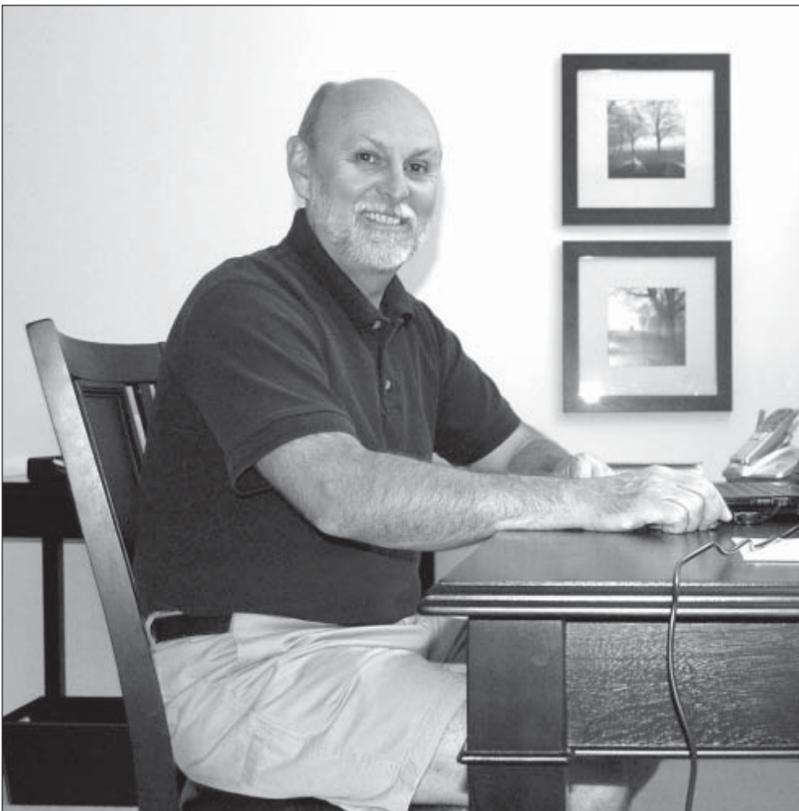
Over the next few years they built MLI into a national company with programmes operating from Halifax to Victoria B.C.

By 1999, MLI was busy enough that MacWilliams began to work at the company full-time. The most rewarding aspect of his business, he says, is seeing relationships develop between students and host families.

MacWilliams is not planning to stop working anytime soon. He says he's lucky to be a partner in an international company while living in Huntsville, where he can ski, play hockey and golf in his free time.

"You can live anywhere now as long as you surround yourself with good people and have good communication tools," he says. "The sky is the limit. The world is your office."

Thanks to Claude Doughty for suggesting that Bev MacWilliams be profiled.



A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY: Bev MacWilliams, co-owner of Muskoka Language International, attends to business in his home office. Raised in Huntsville, he translated his love for his hometown into a thriving company.

## Sunny days bolster local tourism figures Visitors increase despite economy

By Matt Driscoll

It appears the forecast trumps the financial reports when it comes to tourism in Muskoka.

Despite a lagging economy and downward tourism trends on a national level, many local tourism-related businesses are reporting a surge in visitors over the same spring/early summer period in 2008.

"We're cautiously optimistic," said Michael Lawley, executive director of Muskoka Tourism Marketing Agency (MTMA). "The year to date is better than the same period last year."

In 2008, several factors, including record-setting levels of precipitation in May and June, conspired to keep out-of-town guests from visiting the area.

"The three key factors that affected us last year were high gas prices, a strong Canadian dollar and the weather," said Lawley. "Now, fuel is roughly a buck a litre, the dollar is around \$0.88 and the weather has been far better than last year."

Discretionary expenses, such as vacations, are typically the first thing dropped in a recession and the last to be picked back up, said Lawley. However, the dismal financial picture hasn't been enough to dissuade the visitors from coming.

Figures announced by Statistics Canada last week revealed that trips to Canada from the United States and abroad have dropped over the past year. Making matters even more worrying for those who rely on U.S. tourism, June 1 marked the start of tough new regulations for those crossing the border.

Lawley said there has been a great deal of concern among local businesses regarding the new passport regulations.

But while the Muskoka economy relies heavily on tourism, Lawley said little of that comes from south of the border.

"It's a relatively small portion of our overall visitation. Six to eight per cent is likely a high estimate. On top of that, we probably get two per cent from international travellers outside of North America," said Lawley. "That leaves just over 90 per cent from domestic sources. Within 350 kilometres of Muskoka there are seven million people and those are our key markets."

Lawley said roughly 80 per cent of the local tourism base comes from the Golden Horseshoe area. For those guests, welcoming weather is the top priority.

Figures from the Bracebridge Visitors Information Centre seem to back that theory.

Staff there report a 26 per cent increase in telephone inquiries and walk-in guests for May 2009 over May 2008. Those numbers are in addition to a 12 per cent increase for the month of April and 44 per cent increase in March.

While the Bracebridge Business Improvement Area (BIA) doesn't keep stats on the number of visitors to the downtown area, BIA administrative co-ordinator Tracy Larkman reports that the anecdotal evidence is positive.

"The people I've talked to have all told me that their numbers are on par to last year and the year before," said Larkman. "People seem to be spending

when they go into the stores. Traffic might be down a smidge, but the people who do come down are spending more, so it's not throwing the numbers off at all."

Downtown Bracebridge has been plagued with a rash of store closures over the past year, but Larkman said the new businesses that have taken their place have bolstered the area's appeal on the whole.

"Everyone seems to be optimistic. You need a wide variety of stores to be successful and I think with the turnover in the last few years we've got that," she said.

Larkman said she hasn't heard much talk from the downtown merchants regarding the recession, and she pointed out that BIA customers are just as likely to be from Bracebridge as Toronto.

On Lake Muskoka, Shannon Smith, director of marketing for Taboo Resort, said business is heating up.

"We're happy with the trend we're seeing now," said Smith. "Leisure activities are just starting to pick up ... and the golf course is really ramping up. We anticipate a good summer."

With a customer base coming almost exclusively from the GTA, Smith said passport worries aren't a cause of great concern at Taboo.

The economic situation has stalled, but not stopped, guests from booking.

"(There's been) a lot of last-minute activity. People aren't booking that far ahead, but we're still finding it better than last year," said Smith.

At South Muskoka Curling and Golf Club, general manager Al Helmer said while the weather lately has been positive, overall the spring was not a great one.

"We're on par with last year, but last year wasn't very good," said Helmer. "It hasn't been quite as wet

but it's been colder. We're not off our expectations that much, but our expectations were conservative this year."

Helmer said he expects to make some of that up in July if the weather holds.



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