

# Opinion

## MUSKOKA MOSAIC

### Introducing Debbie Kirwin

BY PAULA BOON

Debbie Kirwin may be known for helping to make Huntsville more accessible for people with disabilities, but, as she puts it, that's not what she's about.

Since she and her husband Ross took early retirement four years ago, Kirwin has been focusing on enjoying life.

Her Lake Vernon home with its spectacular sunsets provides the perfect backdrop for entertaining family and friends. There are pontoon boat tours and a houseful of visitors in the summer and wildlife-watching and snowmobiling in winter.

No matter what the season, Kirwin enjoys Huntsville's small-town atmosphere. "You always bump into someone you know," she says, "and everywhere people say, 'Have a good day.'"

Kirwin grew up in Ancaster and graduated from the University of Western Ontario. She met her husband Ross at Cleavelands House on Lake Rosseau, where they were both working at summer jobs.

"I grew up cottaging in Muskoka and always wanted to work there," she says.

They were married about a year later. After having two children, Jay (now 32) and Andrew (now 28), Kirwin taught at Sheridan College, first part-time and then full-time.

Then, 16 years ago, a car accident sent her life in an unexpected direction.

"I lost control on Hwy. 400," she says. "My husband had a few bruises and I broke one bone. Unfortunately, it was vertebrae in my neck."

Kirwin spent six weeks at Sunnybrook and almost a year at Lyndhurst, a rehabilitation centre, learning what it was going to take to become independent again, while waiting for her new home to be built.

"I look back and think, 'Wow a whole year,'" she says, adding that she attributes her success to Ross, who visited her daily, and her children, family and friends, who inspired her.

After living in North Toronto for 30 years, the couple started searching for the perfect piece of property in Muskoka.

Building began at their Lake Vernon site early 2003 and they moved in a week before Christmas of that year.

It didn't take long for Kirwin's schedule to fill up. She joined both the town and the district's accessibility advisory committees and has been chair of the former for several years.

"I do it for purely selfish reasons, to improve the quality of my life," she says, noting that when she first arrived in town she could only get into about half of the stores on Main Street. "As a result of the yellow ramp project, there are only a few stores left that are inaccessible."

Kirwin was also active on the bid and organizing committees for the 2006 Paralympic Games, which were held in Huntsville.

"It was a huge success," she says. "We had more volunteers than we knew what to do with. The volunteer base in this community and fundraising that goes on is unbelievable."

Bringing the Paralympics to town was a great experience. It brought an awareness that resulted in a huge change in attitude, says Kirwin. At first there were lots of naysayers protesting that Huntsville was not an accessible town, but she challenged them to name her one community in Ontario that is. Eventually they saw the light.

"The way you approach people is important," she notes. "You have to offer reasonable solutions that aren't going to cost an arm and a leg. You need a glass-half-full approach to accomplish things."

Kirwin, who is adamant that her disability doesn't define her, uses that same approach in her own life.

"Perfect strangers stop and ask why I am in a wheelchair," she says. "While I don't mind answering, they always respond with a pained look on their face and say things like, 'I'm so sorry,' 'You poor thing,' and, 'How do you manage?' I am not 'confined' to a wheelchair, it just happens to be my mode of travel."

Kirwin says the biggest barrier she has faced over the years is people's attitude that she is disadvantaged.

"If people could only look beyond the disability, they'd find a very happy person who is enjoying life to its fullest," she says. "I



DEBBIE KIRWIN AND BEN

consider myself fortunate to have family, friends, independence, love and good health. What more could a person want?"

Thanks to Glenn Boon for suggesting that Debbie Kirwin be profiled. If there is someone you'd like to see in this space, please call Paula at 789-5541 or e-mail [pboon@metrolandnorthmedia.com](mailto:pboon@metrolandnorthmedia.com).

## LETTERS

### A town council meeting is not a one-man show

A large gathering of residents appeared at the regular council meeting last week in support of a delegation by the green plan task force.

This citizen task force was requesting council's support for the creation of a green plan for Huntsville. The presentation was well prepared, well presented and courteously received by council. It was unfortunate that most of the residents and presenters who attended had to leave early rather than wait for council to discuss the matter and vote on the resolution.

The reason is that the delegation's motion appeared under new business much later in the meeting. As a matter of courtesy, and as a tool to include more residents in the municipal process, most councils in Ontario will move an item forward on the agenda when it is apparent that the majority of residents in the audience are there to hear debate on one particular item. Why not consider that courtesy here in our community?

A second delegation re: "Matters touching on the budget" was made by Huntsville resident Terry Russell. Mr. Russell commented on what he perceived to be a sloppy budget process this year and made some suggestions for improvement. As the 2008 budget was approved later in the meeting Mr. Russell's suggestions were not accepted.

Mr. Russell also questioned the appropriateness of the mayor criticizing former employees for the financial problems facing the town. Mr. Russell offered the mayor a chance to respond. Mayor Doughty's response was that he will do so sometime in the future. The Forester, published the next day, did not have such a response. Hopefully he will choose a forum as public as the one

he chose to criticize former employees who are in no position to defend themselves.

Herein is the problem. The mayor speaks for council when discussing town business. Every decision, whether it be to hire and fire staff or to pass a budget, is a council decision, not a mayor's decision. The unfortunate conclusion here is that in criticizing former employees the way he did, Mayor Doughty was speaking for council under their direction or with their support.

If this is not the case why don't individual members of council say so? Actually, Mr. Russell offered councillors that opportunity during his presentation but only Councillor Beatty offered to do so. Incredibly Mayor Doughty, as chair, refused to recognize Mr. Beatty's wish to speak even though town staff brought the request to his attention as is quite evident on the video tape of the meeting.

Are councillors not allowed to speak at council meetings? Why then is there a confirmation bylaw passed at the end of the meeting confirming that this meeting took place according to an established procedural bylaw? Such bylaw guarantees the right of each councillor to speak at least once on any issue. Councillor Beatty and every councillor treated in this manner should demand a "Point of Order" every time they are not recognized by the chair.

Every man and woman we elect to council is equal around that table. Each has one vote and each an equal right to participate in debate under established rules. A council meeting is not a one-man show.

Peter Healy  
Huntsville

### Play a reminder that prejudice and racism affect us all

On Sunday, April 20 I saw a presentation called *Skin Deep: The Story of Martin Luther King Jr.* It was presented at Trinity United Church to honour the 40th anniversary of the death of King.

It was a powerful, affecting and haunting reminder of the non-violent struggles to overcome prejudice and racism that continue to affect us even today, in Huntsville.

The local cast was great and was highlighted by Brian Smith, who strongly portrayed the part of King.

While the story represents the efforts for freedom and emancipation for African Americans there is a profound connection, to today when

racism and intolerance against many other groups persists and demeans us all.

The message that the play gave me was that when one person is condemned through intolerance, ignorance or unexamined unreflective beliefs then we all have a burden to bear.

Thank you to Marion and John McTavish for writing and staging and for the actors Brian Smith, Alison Bailey, Shelley Welch, Martha Lapp, Doug Vandenbroek, Jennifer Simpson, Winston Watson and Peter Gelderbloem.

This play deserves to be seen again and again.

Robin Mautner  
Huntsville

### Those who feed deer need to be more responsible

It has been a hard winter and some persons have chosen to feed the deer to help them out.

Indeed, it may have ensured that some more survived during the coldest months. Being deer, the animals would have bred to expand the population. With a supply of winter food they will produce young in the spring. Unfortunately those who fed the deer when the snow was on the ground stopped feeding them as soon as bears came out of hibernation. That is tantamount to giving food to a pregnant woman who was starving and then cutting her off in her eighth month of pregnancy or cutting her off just after she has given birth to one or two children and needs all the nourishment she can get. It is not the fault of deer that bears come out of hibernation.

I do not suggest that people put out food to attract bears and create a problem that could cause injury to others. As of April 18 a walk in the forests and wooded areas would have shown any observant party that half of the areas still had snow on the ground and there was no green showing.

All the lower branches of trees and their related buds had been trimmed. In fact they have all been trimmed to a height equal to a deer on hind legs standing on the snow pack so there is no hope of reaching anything now. In spring those who fed the deer while snow was on the ground stop and thus instead of an adult deer dying of

starvation a mother and one or two fawns can die that way.

Maybe people who feed the deer should have to put out a disclaimer that says, "While I am feeding you now I will cut you off before enough natural food becomes available in the spring. Eat at your own risk." If someone still wants to feed the deer I have some suggestions to use once the bears are out. Purchase some hosta in pots from a nursery and place them out when it is above freezing. The deer will love it. If you cannot keep up with the demand for the hosta because your nursery is running out of forced hosta then put out some potted evergreens. I can recommend a weeping decorative spruce that is described as deer resistant and that might slow the deer down a little while still providing sustenance.

Purchase juniper and spruce from nurseries and put them out in the area where you fed deer and give more to friends who complain that their gardens are being eaten. Nice fresh young potted cedars would be welcomed by the deer and would not attract too many bears.

If you insist on feeding the deer in the coldest months don't just cut them off. There are ways you can still provide until there is sufficient natural stuff in the woods for them if you really care about them.

Ann Jeffrey  
Huntsville

### Time to thank Muskoka's volunteers

Canadians have a rich history of volunteering and community involvement and Muskoka is no exception. Volunteers are on the front lines of all of our community services: community health care, heritage and arts, maintenance of green space, disaster relief, volunteer firefighting, minor sports, the list is endless.

The work of the volunteer is essential work. Muskoka Seniors pays tribute to their many volunteers who so willingly donate their time and energy. Last year, 123 volunteers provided 17,215 hours of service to seniors in our community.

Volunteerism is an integral part of many Canadians' lives. Volunteers read, coach, mentor and train. They donate, give, chair, befriend and lend

a helping hand. They plant, feed, soothe, visit, sew, plan, coordinate, paint, clean, sort and prepare. They are the young and old and the in-between and they are everywhere across this nation. According to the 2004 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, volunteers contribute two billion hours, the equivalent of one million full-time jobs.

Join with Muskoka Seniors this week, National Volunteer Week April 27 to May 3, and say thank you to the many volunteers in Muskoka who have turned their compassion into action.

Karen Waters  
volunteer resource manager  
Muskoka Seniors

### Speeding trucks are a danger

I live on Brunel Road close to Riverside School.

I would like to thank the heavy equipment operators of Hydro One and their fellow drivers for their respect of the posted 60 km/hour speed limit.

With the warmer weather we see many of the Riverside students bicycling or walking to school and much of the traffic, including heavy

machinery, is still moving faster than the posted 60 km/hour.

Please take the extra little bit of time to make Brunel Road a safer place for our children.

Again thank you Hydro One for your safe and courteous drivers.

Jason and Janice Wilkin  
Huntsville



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