

Opinion

MUSKOKA MOSAIC

Introducing John Krochak

When John Krochak started a self-help group for people with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), he made sure the meetings were not pity parties.

"There's always something positive about every negative situation," he says. "I wanted to help others adapt to having MS. It's a hard diagnosis to accept, but once you truly accept it, you can move forward."

Krochak, who was born in Chatham and has a degree in biology from the University of Guelph, was diagnosed with the degenerative disease in 1979 at age 26.

At the time of his diagnosis, Krochak was living in Vancouver. His mother's death afterward and the wet weather affected his health, and in 1980 he moved back to Huntsville, his home since 1976.

Krochak got a job managing a bar at Deerhurst, but the next decade was often rocky. He married in 1985, had to leave the workforce in 1987 due to the progression of his illness, and was divorced in 1990.

The bright point during this tumultuous time was his daughter, Nicole, who will turn 20 this year. "I had her on weekends and during the summer, and I loved watching her grow and learn new things," he says.

When Krochak couldn't work anymore, he looked for something different to do. "The MS Society has helped me immensely," he says, "and I thought of the self-help group as a kind of thanks."

The first meeting was in 1990, and the group was a resounding success for over 12 years. Many people from across Muskoka attended for the informative guest speakers and the support of others who understood their situation. "We became like sisters and brothers," he says.

In 1998, Krochak received a Citation of Merit from the MS Society to recognize his contributions.

A few years later, Krochak decided to branch out with his efforts to help others and co-founded Huntsville's Accessibility Advisory Committee with Michael Yale in 2000.

In the beginning, the committee addressed the immediate concerns of the disabled. "The demographics were changing and nothing was being done about that," he explains. "Huntsville didn't have its eyes fully open toward the disabled and needed some education."

Krochak's background in research was useful in validating the committee's requests to the town. "I knew how to write reports," he says.

Looking back, Krochak is proud of the committee's accomplishments. He says he's glad Huntsville is now more open to everyone. "I've lived across Canada, from Montreal to Vancouver, and I still like Huntsville best," he adds.

Because MS is a degenerative disease, Krochak says, he regularly thinks about what his abilities are and how to maximize them. "I try to be as able as possible, but I recognize that I have a disability," he says. "Sure, I have problems, but who doesn't?"

Krochak says some people see his situation and wonder how he can keep smiling and why he's such a happy guy. His answer? "Laughter is necessary."



Four attendants come to his home daily and help Krochak, who has been using a wheelchair for years and now has use of just one hand, for active living. "They're the best resources to keep me in my home," he says. "I feel sad for people who don't have that support."

On the topic of support, Krochak notes, "MS is one of our most misunderstood diseases, and persons with it have consequently been unnecessarily stigmatized and isolated."

New research on the social aspects of MS is being conducted by those with MS, including Krochak himself, who contributes to a website created by Jerry Ford at www.msliving.org. Krochak encourages all those whose lives have been touched by the disease (including family members) to complete the survey on the site as part of an ongoing study with the aim of helping anyone with MS.

Over the years, Krochak has made a difference in many people's lives, whether it be through the self-help group, accessibility advisory committee or just lending an ear to those who need to talk.

"I get a genuine feeling from the heart I've accomplished something," he says. "When people ask what they can do in return, I just say, 'Pass it on.'"

Thanks to Doug Millman for suggesting that John Krochak be profiled. If there is someone you'd like to see in this space, please call Paula at 789-5541 or e-mail pboon@metrolandnorthme-dia.com.

LETTERS

Paul White: part of a Lake of Bays past to remember

Paul White passed away last month, following his 105th birthday party. For 104 years, Paul lived on Lake of Bays in his own house. Needing extra care, he moved into his caregiver's, still on the lake.

At 105, you know the clock is ticking. Yvonne tells of her own father, 94, graveside at a funeral. Paddy, 104, turned to him. "Do you think," he asked, "with the time we've got left, it's worth going home?"

"I don't know about you, I got a lot of living left!"

So did Paul. He told me stories. He knew my grandfather, knew my father, knew the lake. His father founded Britannia, one of the great Muskoka resorts, with tennis, curling, riding, theatre, gardens, boats, golf. My golfing grandfather took the steamer in 1926, playing the front nine on Jan. 16, writing in his diary, "extraordi-

nary weather."

Britannia hosted the world's elite. Margaret Hamilton, of *The Wizard of Oz*, bet young Paul he couldn't jump off the bridge of the lake steamer, SS Iroquois. Paul beetled down to the lake, clambered onto the steamer, and — as she pulled away from the dock — dove. Margaret was delighted. The captain, less so.

He told me about sailing to England, eight years old, waving at a passing ocean liner. Remembered her lit from bow to stern, dazzling, new, music playing, her passengers waving back. Remembered coming about later that night, returning to pick up survivors and debris from the Titanic.

He knew, at 105, the clock would run out. He sorted his taxes, wound up affairs, completed his memoirs. Typical of Paul, the title was hopeful. My

First One Hundred Years. He promised to autograph my copy, but at the end his handwriting was too shaky. I treasure it, even so.

While Paul was preparing to leave his lake, another piece of our history was also packing up. The Rotunda, at Bigwin Inn, was demolished this May.

During the era of the great hotels, Bigwin stood with the world's very best. Opened in 1920, her first 20 years never showed a business loss. The Rotunda was the centerpiece, anchored on either side by the Indian Head Dining Room and the Dance Pavilion.

Arriving by steamer this greeted you, rising from foundations of local stone to vast redwood ceilings. Its eight fireplaces burned logs five feet long. The end fireplaces had seats worked into the exteriors, inviting guest to sit outside.

Inside a buffalo head stared across at a moose. One was a local, the other, like the guests, a visitor. The 26,000-square-foot area housed the reception desk post office, telegraph, switchboard, nurse and doctor's offices, hairdressers, barbers, salons, gift stores, offices.

From the Rotunda covered walkways — cloisters — connected all the buildings, allowing guests to ramble without overcoats. These were built by Second World War prisoners of war. Not a bad gig: while allied PoW's were behind barbed wire on short rations in Europe, these laboured at one of the world's most beautiful islands. A quick swim after work, and off for a meal and bed. With its own farm, Bigwin had no food shortage. On the down side, there were plenty of mosquitoes and blackflies.

It was not all fun. The

100,000-gallon water tower was built from cement, like the dining halls and the cloisters. To get cement to the top of the hill was a task. The gravel came from Bondi, my grandfather's farm in Haystack Bay. Gravel moved by hand to a barge, and was towed to the island. Here, barges were lashed together. Lakewater and gravel mixed with cement delivered by the steamships. The result moved up to the water tower in five-gallon buckets, on a pulley system. It kept men busy.

From its opening, Bigwin was the place, attracting people like Billy Bishop, Franklin Carmichael, Glenn Gould, Ernest Hemingway, Donna Douglas, Clark Gable, the Rockefeller's, various Prime Ministers. During the Second World War, after the Netherlands fell, Her Royal Highness Princess Juliana spent

her summers here. The Constitution of the Netherlands came with her, and stayed in the safe.

The Rotunda has left the lake.

The new owners restored the round dining rooms, rebuilding the golf course into one of Canada's finest. The dance pavilion fell to weather and neglect one year before plans were finalized to stabilize and preserve it. This is how we lose our past, a little at a time. And how we remember.

A ship in the night. A dive from the Iroquois. Chimneys alone against the sky.

Paul's book, unsigned. The tea room, to be restored.

The lake is quieter with these characters gone, but still hopeful.

Nancy Tapley
Dwight

Bylaw idea ridiculous

In response to both the Sept. 26, 2007 and June 11 articles regarding a proposed beaver dam bylaw, the notion of imposing a law over a natural feature of the Huntsville area is ridiculous.

Rather than expecting landowners who are already faced with rising property taxes to fight a never-ending battle against the beaver population's natural habitat, why not build and maintain roads correctly in the first place?

In our family's own neighbourhood, a large marsh area which has been a concern of the public works department for years could surely have been found in the same spot long before the road was ever built

there. The solution? Build the road higher than water level. This was never done to begin with. This is not rocket science.

Make use of the town's expensive Gradall equipment to keep the ditches opened up, perhaps once every five years, and the water will have a place to go.

The Forester reported last fall that Sara Brown, former director of public works, could not find an instance of a municipality instituting such a bylaw. Surely the director of public works at any given moment, whether it happens to be Ms. Brown, or Peter Brown, current director, does not expect that removing a beaver dam is

going to drain an entire marsh, pond or waterway and solve all of the town's road problems? If that is the case, however, then the proposal is merely irresponsible, for environmental and practical reasons.

Who is qualified to decide what is a problem dam? Who will come and break it when it is deemed a problem? And where will the water go when you send it moving elsewhere? Into your yard? Into my yard?

The Huntsville area is not about to run out of beavers anytime soon. Perhaps the town should rethink this plan and ask some of these questions.

Thomas Spivak Jr.
Huntsville

Are neighbourhood associations the answer to development woes?

Re: Only the opinions of 'professionals' count, letter to the editor, Huntsville Forester, June 11.

In response to the letter of John Boysen, June 11, 2008, I agree that the deck seems to be stacked against mere citizens.

It has occurred to me that the developers have an advantage in small towns because of a

lack of neighbourhood associations. In the cities and suburbs, there are organized associations of neighbourhoods with strength in numbers and political will to fight developers.

Huntsville, like many small towns, relies on individuals and they need time to get up to speed. Meanwhile, the development is already proceeding.

I like the individualism of a small town, but perhaps it is time for something to exist to counter the professional credentials that seem to sway the government.

One doesn't need a college degree to recognize a potential eye-sore when one sees it.

Marilyn Laycock
Huntsville, Ont.

Town's landscaping looks beautiful

I am writing today to mention how wonderful the main street downtown and King William Street look now that all the new landscaping and gardening has begun.

As I drive to work each morning I see the crews out working and I have to say what a great job that they are doing. Huntsville needed a little pick-me-up along the main drag!

Kudos to Kristen Suddaby and her group of hard workers on a wonderful job making our town beautiful!

Kate Fisher
Huntsville



HEALTHCARE HEROES

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Gore Mutual Insurance

Rob Payne, Foundation Board vice Chair and co-owner of McIlroy & Payne Insurance makes an annual request to Gore Mutual Insurance Company Foundation to support his hospital. This year Rob was successful in receiving \$5,000 for the major renovation and digital equipment installation project underway in the imaging department at Huntsville Hospital. Gore Mutual Broker Relations Manager, Mark King, made the presentation.

"McIlroy & Payne Insurance Brokers is actively involved in their community and it is a pleasure that Gore Mutual has been given the opportunity to help support Huntsville Hospital," says Mr. King. We agree, thanks gentlemen.



Huntsville District Memorial Hospital Foundation continues to support:

- Huntsville District Memorial Hospital
- Fairvern Nursing Home
- Burk's Falls & District Health Centre



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