

Opinion

MUSKOKA MOSAIC

Introducing Ruth Wagner

BY PAULA BOON

Ruth Wagner's life has been a musical love story.

As a child living in Toronto, Wagner became enamoured with violins when she went to the symphony for the first time. Because her parents were only prepared to pay for piano lessons, she anxiously awaited Grade 5, when she would have access to violin instruction at school.

When that day finally came, she learned there was no available instrument for her. "It was the most horrifying thing that had happened in my life," she says. "I didn't have a handkerchief, and I had to blow my nose on my slip because I couldn't stop crying."

When Wagner's grandmother heard what had happened, she sent Wagner a violin that had been tucked away in her attic. The little girl emptied her piggy bank and went in search of someone who would fix it up.

At the first two shops she visited, she was told she would have to leave the instrument behind and come back for it later. "But I couldn't do that because I needed it Monday morning," she says. Seeing her distress, the man in the third shop she visited put his other tasks on hold and did the work right away.

"He told me my bow was only good for staking tomatoes with," she says with a chuckle. "Then he picked out a new one and showed me how to take care of it." When he was finished the man told her to keep in touch, adding, "I think you'll make a good violin player."

Although Wagner studied piano to the highest level possible with her parents' support, the violin remained her first love. She won violin scholarships, earned the highest possible level in violin performance, and played the instrument in several symphonies in Toronto.

All that time, the man from the shop came to her concerts. Then the violin-maker moved away, returning to Toronto once a week to pick up repairs at another music store.

Wagner married, had four children and moved to a farm outside Bracebridge, and one day while shopping in town she was surprised to meet the violin-maker. It turned out he now lived in Beatrice, near Utterson.

Later, Wagner returned to the city to care for her mother, who had Alzheimer's. She also completed an honours program in instrument-making from the Ontario College of Art through six years of night school.

Much later she returned to Muskoka to live with and then marry the violin-maker, whose name was Sieg Wagner.

"I admired him so much as a person for years. Then I fell in love with him," she says. "He was an amazing man. I was blessed to have him in my life."

Sieg, who had started his business in 1934 in Antwerp, Brussels, taught Wagner a new and different way to make



violins, and most valuably how to repair and restore old instruments and re-hair bows. They worked together in the studio he had built. Since Sieg's death in 1999 Wagner has continued to serve the same clientele, which includes symphonies from around the world. There is a two-and-a-half-year waiting list for her instruments.

It is not unusual for security guards to show up at Wagner's home bearing valuable instruments. "You don't just send those by courier," she says, adding that she has dogs and an alarm system to satisfy insurance companies.

Last year, in homage to her Metis heritage, Wagner built a fiddle of Canadian maple and spruce with f-holes shaped like the infinity symbol found on the Metis flag.

Wagner also teaches music to a few children and does repairs for those who live in the area. "I never know what will come my way," she says, giving the example of a filthy, battered violin that had originally been acquired in exchange for a fig tree. When Wagner cleaned it up, the instrument turned out to be worth about \$53,000.

"Every day is a surprise," she says. "It's never the same old thing, which makes coming into my workshop a real joy."

Thanks to Verna Porter for suggesting that Ruth Wagner be profiled.

LETTERS

Time to focus on the first two Rs

Finding a market for used plastic can be challenging during the best of times, but the current economic climate has compounded the problem.

Our local recycling company goes to great lengths to prevent the dumping of bales of plastic into our landfills that would ultimately lead to toxic contamination of our soils, water sources and wildlife. Muskoka Containerized Services are doing their part and now with recycled materials piling up at the plant due to poor market conditions the citizens of this district need to step up to the plate to reduce plastic waste, big time.

We can no longer justify taking that new plastic bag at the grocery store (or any store) by thinking it will get recycled; it may not. Consumers, retailers and cashiers need to

start aggressively practicing the other two R's: reduce and reuse.

Reduce your use of plastic bags by being part of the BYOB (Bring Your Own Bag) movement and extend the life of plastic bags by reusing them.

Many people have reusable bags but forget them at home or in their car. Hang them on the door knob of your exit door, add them to your grocery list, ask your children to remind you and if you forget them in the car, turn around, go back and get them.

These are little steps but if we remain committed to making the change it will go a long way toward solving the problems of plastic waste.

Wanda Roberts
Huntsville

Young driver legislation is 'just nonsense,' says student

My name is Shauna Jensen, and I am a young driver. I am 20 years old and have had my licence since the day I turned 16. I have never had a speeding ticket or a parking ticket and have never been in an accident. This new legislation tells me that if I am going 10 kilometres over the speed limit, which most people do, I run the risk of losing my licence? Honestly, no one drives the speed limit. And when you are in driving school they teach you to go with the flow of traffic.

If nobody goes the speed limit, am I supposed to go 90 kilometres per hour on the highway while everyone else goes 120 km/h? And what about when I get down to the 400-series highways? The speed driven there is at least 20 to 30 km over the speed limit all the time.

I think this legislation is discriminatory against young people. What about some of the older people who can barely see the roads? They are allowed to drive over the speed limit and often recklessly cause accidents. They get to drive like normal?

I am a nearly perfect driver, with a perfect driving record, and I am the one who has restrictions? Some older people have so many more bad habits on the roads than younger people who are just getting out there.

With the environment in such a disaster right now and with the economy in the hole, people are carpooling to save money on gas and emissions. But with this new legislation, people now have to spend more money and exhaust more emissions just to get anywhere. What kind of message is this sending?

I was understanding about the rules that were applied to G2 drivers before now. But to apply more rules to people that have been successful and have got their full licence, which includes taking two different driving tests, is just nonsense. Look at the all other preventable causes of death in this country. What about them? It's not all just young people. Young people are always blamed for problems and issues. When will someone give us a break?

Shauna Jensen
Bracebridge

Helmets save people's lives

As a grandparent of teenagers I would not want to go through what a close family friend has just gone through in Michigan.

Michigan has no law for wearing helmets, not for bicycles, 4-wheelers, or motorcycles. This did not stop two teenagers riding dirt bikes and tragically losing their lives.

I urge all you young people to listen to your parents, grandparents and friends. Play it safe when having fun, or fun will end up costing you your life and leaving others feeling the emptiness of that loss.

Marian Gilbert
Huntsville

Voice concerns over new bylaw at public meeting

I am concerned over this new tree-cutting bylaw the district is trying to push on us landowners. This letter is to hopefully draw people out.

If you have a wood lot greater than 10 acres, you will be forced to get a permit to harvest a tree. So, if you have the need to burn wood to heat your home and own your own wood lot, you are going to need the permission of the district to harvest trees.

If you buy your wood to heat your home, the price is going to go up, as the loggers and foresters must submit in writing an application to harvest the trees. Say you have a wood lot and wish to have it harvested to help pay the taxes. You guessed it, the district could say no! You will have to apply for a permit and pay.

People, I ask you to get out to the public meeting on Dec. 8 at 7 p.m. at the Algonquin

Theatre to voice our concerns. The district already gets our money through taxes, landfill, water and sewer, development fees and more. They now want it for the trees in your wood lot. Write your councillor, call the mayor. We can't let this bylaw go through the way it is.

There need to be some changes. If you didn't know this, wood is a renewable resource and yes, if managed properly, will be there for years to come. Harvesting trees allows for new life and brings animals into areas to take advantage of new growth. To get a copy of the bylaw go to the District of Muskoka's website, www.muskoka.on.ca, and go to Hot Topics. You will find it an interesting read. Get informed about what your councillors are doing to you, the taxpayer.

Scott MacKinnon
Baysville

Proposed tree-cutting bylaw will hurt small operators

It has been stated by town and district staff that Muskoka's proposed forest health program and draft tree-cutting bylaw is not intended to impact the "little operator" or the "little guy" rural landowner.

Furthermore, it has been said that there is surprise and confusion at the opposition to the bylaw, because the intent of it is to ensure forests for generations to come.

Our community is known for its enduring forest industry, which was founded in the 1800s. This industry has been long established and its time-honoured practices have served generations for 200 years.

We would like to know how the proposed bylaw will not impact us when there will be a 200 per cent increase in fees, which will catastrophically change our current practices and our economy.

There have been immense oversights in the process of gathering information for this bylaw.

Legitimately recorded statistics are absent.

Neither horse loggers nor rural landowners were represented on the focus group for the proposed bylaw in its beginning stages.

Please leave the existing bylaw as it is,

with a 50-acre maximum and no permit fee.

If the proposed bylaw is passed, additional expenses will be 20 times greater than those in the existing bylaw.

Cutting that same 50 acres would see additional fees exceeding approximately \$2,000.

Most of this is laid out in the 25-page proposed bylaw. In comparison, the existing bylaw consists of five pages.

This proposed bylaw would place further restraints on an already laboured industry. This bylaw encroaches upon two select factions: firstly, the forest industry specialists who obtain raw material; and second, the landowners.

It is our hope that elected officials will vote against the changes to the proposed tree-cutting bylaw because of how substantially it does indeed affect all of us.

All are encouraged to attend the public meetings taking place on the bylaw in Huntsville at the Algonquin Theatre Centre Dec. 8 at 7 p.m. and in Bracebridge at the District of Muskoka council chambers Dec. 9 at 7 p.m.

Mark and Carey-Anne Oke-Cook
Bracebridge



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