

STRATFORD **TIMES**

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Stratford's Black community builders get their flowers

AMANDA NELSON

Times Reporter

The Black History Project Series: Phase II, part of the permanent exhibit We've Been Here, will launch Feb. 21 at the Stratford Perth Museum.

The museum will unveil three large framed images in its indoor Co-operators Theatre during the event. Each design correlates with three powerful, local stories of historical community builders throughout Perth County. These community builders – Sylvia (Young) Porter, Joseph Harrison and Ben Sleet – will be featured along with their stories.

CBC broadcast journalist Garvia Bailey, the driving force behind the exhibit, said that after visiting the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum, she learned there were censuses from around the county of Black people, including previously enslaved men and women who came through Buxton, likely via the Underground Railroad, and settled throughout southwestern Ontario.

She said that after learning about the rich Black history that helped build Perth County, she knew she wanted to highlight some of the men and women who built communities throughout southwestern Ontario.

"I really believe that history informs who we are now," she said. "It's always a living entity. History is not something that we just look at from the rear-view

CONTINUED TO PAGE 5



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

On a particularly foggy Valentine's Day morning, Sydney Touzel began her charity run from Little Falls Public School to Optimism Place in Stratford — a run that ended with a \$12,606.25 cheque being presented to the local women's shelter. For more on Touzel's story, visit <https://tinyurl.com/yhzzat94>.

Despite sector challenges, Accumetal commits to \$9.3 million expansion

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Despite the challenges that have faced the sector this past year, Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma says there has never been a better time for manufacturing in the city.

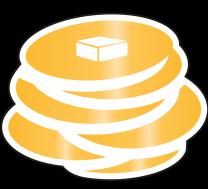
"When I think about manufacturing across Ontario, second quarter we saw a loss of 25,000 jobs in manufacturing," Ritsma said. "We didn't see that in our area. We didn't see that in Stratford and area. We have the lowest unemployment in Ontario currently, which is a curse at times, but certainly in our last numbers we saw manu-

facturing leading the way with regards to increased employment."

Ritsma made those remarks on Feb. 13, during a provincial funding announcement at Accumetal Manufacturing Inc. As the mayor said, the company is just one example of the continued success of the local sector (which makes up about 60 per cent of the city's economy).

The local metal fabrication company announced a \$9,330,438 investment to expand its facilities in Woodstock and Stratford and increase overall manufacturing

CONTINUED TO PAGE 2



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Despite sector challenges, Accumetal commits to \$9.3 million expansion



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Local politicians and the Accumetal Manufacturing team gather at its Stratford location to announce a \$9.3 million expansion investment.



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Accumetal president Bob Allen told reporters that despite challenges facing the sector internationally, they have continued to have strong business – enough to justify the expansion.

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

capacity and capabilities. Through the purchase of advanced equipment, including laser and robotic welding systems, the company will improve productivity, address production bottlenecks and broaden its manufacturing scope. These investments will enable Accumetal to serve new customers and markets, strengthening its long-term competitiveness and resiliency.

Speaking with reporters, Bob Allen, president of Accumetal, said the reason for expansion was simple.

“We’ve had the business,” Allen said. “We needed to expand our facilities so we’re able to meet our customers’ demands. Even though they’re U.S. based, we’re still seeing the business ... So we’ve had to re-invest over the next four years in facilities, equipment, people, personnel in order to meet our customers.”

Despite the ongoing tariff negotiations, the Province of Ontario’s focus on the Ring of Fire and the federal government’s commitment to defence are strong indicators for productive years to come. Additionally, Stratford’s very geography is a factor in its success, being in an advantageous trade laneway.

While tariffs, an unpredictable U.S. administration and a looming renegotiation of the Canadian-U.S.-Mexico free trade agreement complicate those positive factors, both Ritsma and Allen were optimistic about the sector’s future success.

“Being in business is a risk,” Allen said. “We just put our earplugs in and carry on.”

Matthew Rae, MPP for Perth-Wellington, announced \$1,399,438 in funding through the Regional Development Program’s Southwestern Ontario Development Fund to assist with Accumetal’s investment, helping to create 41 new good-paying jobs and protect 97 jobs.

“I’ve been proud to work with Accumetal to secure these investments and strengthen our local manufacturing sector, creating jobs in Stratford,” Rae said at the announcement. “... This is real economic impact, real opportunity and is real confidence in our communities. Manufacturing in Stratford drives opportunity and today’s investments ensures that the future continues to grow locally in Stratford and across our region.”

When asked about the city’s success as a whole, Rae said that it comes down to the City of Stratford, invest-Stratford and the Perth County economic development division working to attract and retain employers. Additionally, successful companies like Accumetal aren’t just one supplier for a large company but have a diverse client base.

Ontario is investing over \$230 million through its Regional Development Program to help manufacturers across the province grow while supporting distinct regional priorities.

To date, the province has supported more than 180 projects through the program, leveraging more than \$2.6 billion in new investments and helping to create over 5,500 jobs.

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(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

MPP Matthew Rae at the Accumetal announcement on Feb. 13.

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Editorial

A new police headquarters? Don't bank on proposed location

ROBERT RITZ

Guest Columnist

Stratford is about to make a \$14 million decision that will shape our city's financial health, development trajectory and civic identity for decades. The proposed purchase of the Scotiabank Data Centre (SBDC) on Wright Boulevard for a new police service headquarters is not simply a real estate transaction. It is a test of whether we govern with long-term vision or settle for short-term operational convenience.

There is no dispute that Stratford requires a modern, functional police facility. The question is whether the proposed \$14 million purchase of the Scotiabank Data Centre represents sound long-term planning or short-term operational thinking.

The proposed \$14 million acquisition of the bank property would remove a commercial asset that currently generates approximately \$162,706 in annual property tax revenue. Once municipally owned, that revenue disappears. At a time when municipalities across Canada are under immense fiscal pressure, voluntarily shrinking our tax base deserves serious reflection.

This proposal appears to prioritize short-term operational efficiencies over long-term strategic planning. Operational convenience, such as parking, shift logistics and storage, is important. But municipal infrastructure decisions should not be

driven primarily by convenience. They should be guided by generational vision.

Short-term thinking rarely produces lasting civic strength.

Across Canada, communities are investing not for the next budget cycle, but for the next 25 to 50 years. We often speak about strategic growth, intensification, downtown vibrancy and the responsible stewardship of public assets. Those principles should apply here.

The proposed purchase risks missing the broader picture. It is a classic case of focusing on the trees while overlooking the forest.

The Scotiabank site is more than a building; it is part of a broader commercial corridor with meaningful development potential. There are reportedly other parties interested in acquiring the Scotiabank facility. In private hands, the building would remain on the tax roll and could potentially increase in assessed value through renovation and change of use.

Equally important are the four acres of surplus land within the SBDC site. Those lands present a significant opportunity for intensification, including high-density residential development and the creation of much-needed housing. Stratford, like many communities, faces real housing pressures. Encouraging private-sector investment and densification on Wright Boulevard would generate long-term tax revenue while addressing supply challenges. Municipal acquisition of the site effec-

tively removes that opportunity from the marketplace.

We should ask whether purchasing this property inadvertently stifles private investment and housing creation at a time when both are urgently needed.

There is a viable alternative that aligns far better with Stratford's long-term interests: the purchase and repurposing of the existing YMCA facility.

With an appraised value in the range of \$3-5 million, the YMCA represents a substantially lower acquisition cost. Renovations would be required, as they would at any site, but this option accomplishes several strategic objectives simultaneously.

First, it supports the YMCA's planned relocation to the GTR site - a redevelopment initiative embedded in Stratford's long-term planning framework since the 2018 Master Plan. Diverting attention and resources from the GTR vision in favour of an industrial corridor solution risks slowing or undermining momentum for a transformative civic project.

Second, it preserves the Scotiabank site and surrounding lands for private redevelopment, maintaining and potentially growing the commercial tax base rather than shrinking it.

Third, it addresses an important civic consideration that should not be overlooked: visibility. A police headquarters is not merely an operational facility. It is a public institution that symbolizes safety, transparency and accountability. Location

matters. Visibility matters. Proximity to the city's administrative centre matters.

Placing the police service in a visible, centrally located civic building reinforces accessibility and public reassurance. It associates policing directly with municipal leadership and governance. Situating the headquarters off an industrial corridor may offer certain efficiencies, but it diminishes civic presence and public integration.

We must ask whether we are designing for convenience or for civic identity.

Removing a revenue-generating commercial property from the tax base, potentially limiting private development and housing creation and relocating a major public institution to a less visible setting may solve immediate logistical concerns. But infrastructure decisions of this magnitude should strengthen Stratford's economic and civic foundations for decades.

Stratford has long prided itself on thoughtful planning and cultural leadership. This decision deserves the same long-range lens.

Council now faces a choice: pursue the easiest solution or the right one. In my view, the Wright Boulevard location is simply the wrong choice for Stratford's long-term future.

If Stratford is serious about fiscal responsibility, housing growth and long-term civic strength, council must reject the SBDC purchase and choose the option that truly builds our city's future.

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STRATFORDTIMES

Publisher

Stewart Grant • stew@granthaven.com

Editor

Connor Luczka • connor@granthaven.com

Times Reporter

Amanda Nelson • amandajnewriter@gmail.com

Graphic Design / Sales Inquiries

Sarah Cairns • stratfordtimes@gmail.com

Business Development

Heather Dunbar • heather@granthaven.com

Billing Administrator

Cindy Boakes • boakescindy1576@gmail.com

Contributors

Galen Simmons, Spencer Seymour, Julia Schneider,
Gary West, Paul Knowles, Emily Stewart, Lisa Chester,
Fred Gonder, Sheila Clarke, Irene Roth, Lee Griffi,
Stuart Lender, Sydney Goodwin, Alex Hunt, Julia Paul,
Patrick D. Burk

36 Water St. St. Marys, ON, PO Box 2310 N4X 1A2

stratfordtimes@gmail.com | 519.655.2341 | granthaven.com

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New museum exhibit highlights Black community builders in Perth County

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

mirror. It actually forms where we're driving towards."

One of the highlighted stories is that of Porter, a Black woman who lived in the Stratford area in the 1800s after escaping enslavement and coming to Canada. Her story was significant enough to be covered in newspapers across the United States and Canada. Her former enslavers attempted to kidnap her and take her back to the United States from Stratford. However, the constabulary refused outright and warned that if they tried to take her, they themselves would be jailed.

Bailey said bringing these stories to life and learning how people like Porter

helped build local communities shows there is more to Perth County than the one-dimensional history that has often been portrayed.

"I thought, how do we tell people's stories now, but also get into the building of Stratford? because as old as Stratford is, its history has been told from a very specific perspective."

Bailey said the project is also deeply personal.

"At the end of the day, this is the place that nurtured me and my family, my mom and dad, who are now in their 80s and 90s, this is the place that nurtured us, my brothers and sisters, who have

been able to thrive and have really great lives. It's all because we were able to find community and show our own pride for who we are. So I am proud. I am proud to be doing this project, but I'm even more proud of what we're uncovering about the community that we live."

The three individuals highlighted, along with their families, contributed to the foundations of the region's settlement through industry, economic acumen, and social and cultural development.

A panel discussion on Feb. 22, directed by Bailey, will provide a behind-the-scenes look at the project and its future. The goal of the series is to explain the

development and process of gathering oral and written history and how stories become part of museum collections.

Panelists include Megan Lockhart, assistant archivist at the Stratford-Perth Archives; Bryan Prince, historian at the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum; and Megan Patterson, manager of education and exhibits at the Stratford Perth Museum. Each will offer insight into heritage research and how historical questions about the community are explored and answered.

The event is free, though donations are appreciated. Museum members are admitted free.

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Downtown Stratford BIA's Ten Bucks Back program returns

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

The Downtown Stratford Business Improvement Area (BIA) is hoping to bring some warm cheer to shoppers this February with the return of the Ten Bucks Back program.

The Ten Bucks Back program, which re-launched on Feb. 16, rewards customers a \$10 voucher for each \$100 pre-tax spent at one of the participating downtown merchants. Shoppers have until Feb. 27 to make their qualifying purchases.

Receipts can either be brought to the Stratford Tourism Office on 47 Downie St. or RBC Bank on 33 Downie St. The \$10 vouchers can be used up until April 30.

"It's been a program that has been successful time after time and I'm just excited to have it back," said Jamie Pritchard, general manager of the Downtown Stratford BIA.

Pritchard said that the Ten Bucks Back program rewards residents of Stratford for shopping local.

"It's an instant basic discount anywhere because they spend \$100 and walk away with a \$10 coupon that they can use at any of the downtown merchants," he said.

February is also typically a slower month for retailers, so Ten Bucks Back boosts sales.

"Because it's a two-week period it's going to bring everybody out shopping and when these coupons get returned back in to buy more merchandise, most people always buy more than the \$10 or \$20 that they end up with," Pritchard said.

There is \$10,000 worth of vouchers during the Ten Bucks Back program and will be distributed first-come, first serve. Customers can their purchases up to a maximum of \$500 to get a total of \$50 back. If the Downtown Stratford BIA runs out of vouchers before Feb. 27, the organization will make an announcement online on their website and through their social media channels.

More information about the Ten Bucks Back program can be found online by visiting <https://downtownstratford.ca/whats-on/ten-bucks-back-2026>.

Surge in seniors and drop in health-care workers hitting region

JOHN MINER

Times Correspondent

The economic region of Huron, Perth, Bruce and Grey counties is facing a rapid surge in its senior population at the same time as there is a disturbing drop in health-care workers.

The Four County Labour Market Planning Board called the situation "alarming" in its recently released report, "Navigating the Future of Care."

"Healthcare is definitely a flashing beacon," said Dana Soucie, executive director of the labour board.

According to the report, from 2014 to 2024 the four-county region had the largest percentage increase in the population aged 65 and older of all economic regions in the province, up 42 per cent.

It is a portion of the population that generally requires more health care and has more complex issues than other age groups.

While this population sector was surging, the four-county region experienced a 10 per cent decrease in the number of persons employed in health occupations.

Out of the 11 economic regions in Ontario, the area covering Huron, Perth, Bruce and Grey counties was the only one to see a drop in health-care workers.

"The gap between labour supply in the health-care workforce and demand for health-care services continues to wid-

en, heightening pressures on an already strained sector that is struggling to attract and retain workers," the report said.

The impacts include forced emergency department closures and extended wait times for patients.

The report cites wage differences and a higher cost of living as factors in driving some workers to leave the region.

The 2025 living wage rate – the hourly income workers need to meet basic expenses – was calculated at \$24.60 an hour in the four-county region, the second highest in Ontario just behind the Greater Toronto Area.

But the average overall hourly wage offered in the region has been consistently below the Ontario average, hitting a gap of \$5.60 an hour in the first quarter of 2025.

The rural nature of the region also presents particular challenges for attracting and retaining workers in the health-care sector, the report said.

Possible barriers include housing and other living costs, geographic isolation, increased workloads due to an older population with more complex health concerns, limited resources including outdated equipment and family concerns such as lack of accessible or affordable childcare options.

Given the shortages in the four-county region, the report concludes it is critical that attraction and retention efforts be prioritized.

Coldest Night of the Year walk set to warm hearts in Stratford Feb. 28

GALEN SIMMONS

Regional Editor

With just days to go before Stratford's Coldest Night of the Year (CNOY) walk returns to Lower Queens Park on Feb. 28, organizers say the community's compassion is once again turning into action in support of some of the city's most vulnerable residents.

The annual fundraiser, presented locally by United Way Perth-Huron and Shelterlink Youth Services, will see walkers gather in Lower Queens Park – in the Stratford Festival parking lot at the bottom of the hill – for an evening walk aimed at raising funds and awareness for youth and adults experiencing homelessness.

"Seeing someone struggle in the cold tugs at our hearts. I am so proud to be a part of a city that turns compassion into action," said United Way Perth-Huron senior manager of resource development and communications Sonya Heyen in a press release.

Shelterlink development and community engagement manager Michelle Cutts said this year's event will feature a few new, family-friendly additions to make the evening even more welcoming.

"We have a few more snacks and activities for kids to do to make it a bit more family friendly," Cutts said. "We're going to do marshmallows on a stick, and we'll have a little bit of a bonfire as well, which is really nice."

Participants will also take part in a group warmup led by Crunch Fitness as part of the opening ceremony before heading out on the route. After the walk, Soup Surreal will once again serve hot soup to participants, while Chris's BBQ & Country Style Catering will provide hot chocolate.

Registered walkers are expected to meet

next to Lower Queens Park along Lakeside Drive at 4 p.m. with an opening ceremony and official remarks scheduled for 4:45 p.m. Participants will then head off around Lake Victoria on two- or five-kilometre loops before returning to the walk's starting point by 6 p.m., at which point soup will be served.

As of Feb. 17, with just 11 days left before the event, 370 individual walkers across 66 teams had registered for this year's fundraiser, with 62 per cent or just over \$125,000 already raised.

Yet while fundraising remains a key goal – with a target of \$200,000 this year – Cutts said the event is about more than just dollars raised.

"Yes, it's about fundraising for Shelterlink and for the Connection Centre, but it's also about awareness of the issues," she said. "Awareness can be just as important."

Money raised will be split evenly between Shelterlink and the Stratford Connection Centre. According to Cutts, the money supports core operating costs, including staffing and basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter.

"For us, that really is keeping doors open and having staff ready for youth," she said. "Having someone that they can trust and they can go to and they can get help from is just as important as the basic necessities of shelter, food and clothes."

Shelterlink supports just over 100 youth each year through its prevention, in-shelter and post-shelter programs, while the Connection Centre and Warming Centre located in the basement of St. Paul's Anglican Church serve roughly 20 people each night during the coldest months.

There is still time to register, donate or volunteer through the Stratford CNOY page at cnoy.org/location/stratford.



(UNITED WAY PERTH-HURON PHOTO)

Stratford's annual Coldest Night of the Year fundraiser returns to Lower Queen's Park on Feb. 28 in support of Shelterlink Youth Services and the Stratford Connection Centre.

Redline Recovery opening Feb. 25 to help men, youth and first responders

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Alex Boersen knows just how much pressure young men are facing, having seen much of it firsthand. As he shared with the Times, those experiences are just one of the reasons he decided to get into social work.

"I never really planned to go into social work," Boersen explained. "To be honest, I kind of struggled with my mental health through high school and university. I have a lot of friends who did, a lot of friends who have passed away from suicide, actually, or overdosing. So I just felt like this was a place I wanted to go into."

Now, after earning his master's of social work, becoming a registered social worker and working in the region, Boersen is opening his own counselling practice in Stratford.

Redline Recovery Counselling & EMDR Services opens on Feb. 25 and is a service focused on men's, youth and first responders' mental health. Boersen's focus stems from the same place its name does: an epiphany he had while on the job here in the Festival City.

As part of his work with Perth County OPP and the Stratford Police Service, Boersen would attend mental health related calls. On one particular day, Boersen and a police officer were driving at great speed to get to a suicide call in time. When Boersen looked over at the officer's hands



Alex Boerson, a Perth County-native, is opening his counselling practice Redline Recovery on Feb. 25.

on the steering wheel, he noticed his white knuckles and tight grip. He realized that everyone, whether they are the health

practitioners or those needing assistance, was nearing the end of their rope.

"We're all really redlining here," Boersen said. "The car was shaking. The offi-

cer's focused in. I was as well. And then we're going to a person who's had too much, too. ... It's tough, because I think it is this role of people who help people in those situations, but it takes a big toll on them too."

As part of Redline Recovery, Boersen will provide acceptance and commitment therapy, attachment-focused therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, motivational interviewing and solution-focused therapy.

He will also offer Ketamine assisted therapy for those suffering from deep trauma.

"It's a newer method," Boersen said. "It's an interdisciplinary team with nurses, doctors who run the company, and social workers and therapists. But it kind of ranges from all of those things: those really, really high trauma methods, to even just people who are a little more preventative or regular counselling as well for anxiety, depression."

Boersen hopes his practice fills a much-needed hole in the community, pointing out that it won't just be men that he focuses on. Any first responder or nurse will find useful services behind Redline Recovery's doors.

Redline Recovery is opening at 315 Front St., unit 6 (the old Ice House) on Feb. 25. For more information, visit <https://www.redlinerecoverycounselling.com/our-story>.

UTRCA urges caution around streams and rivers

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

The Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA) expects this week's warmer temperatures and rain will melt some of the snowpack and raise water levels in local rivers and streams. It is reminding everyone to use extra caution and avoid waterways and flooded areas.

A low-pressure system has entered the region and its forecast is to remain throughout the week, bringing with it 20-30 millimetres of rain and daytime temperatures above freezing. The snowpack across the watershed contains approximately 75 millimetres of water, on average, according to the UTRCA's snow survey on Feb. 2.

The warmer temperatures and rain, with saturated ground conditions, will cause runoff into local watercourses. The UTRCA expects flood waters to spill

into low lying floodplain areas that typically flood in the spring. Flows will remain elevated into next week.

The public is reminded to use extreme caution near streams, rivers, ditches and ponds. Stream banks may be slippery and unstable, ice cover will be weakened and unstable and the water is very cold and fast-moving. Ice on flood control reservoirs is especially hazardous due to fluctuating water levels.

Stay out of any flooded areas and do not drive through flooded roadways. Caregivers are reminded to keep children and pets away from watercourses. It is not safe to take shelter along riverbanks or in low lying areas that are prone to flooding.

The UTRCA will operate its flood control reservoirs at Fanshawe, Wildwood and Pittock Conservation Areas to reduce downstream flooding. UTRCA officials are monitoring the situation and will report on any changing conditions if necessary.

Weekend Quiz

By Jake Grant

1. Which fruit is known as the "King of Fruits"?
2. A "prickle" is the collective noun for what groups of animals?
3. Which singer was known as the "The Empress of the Blues"?
4. Which company's original name was "Cadabra," as in "Abracadabra"?
5. What is the fastest-growing plant in the world?
6. What is the unit used to measure electrical resistance?
7. Which actor played the character of Jack Sparrow in the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise?
8. At what degrees Fahrenheit does ice melt?
9. Which is the only sea in the world that has no coastlines?
10. How many distinct phases make up the lunar cycle?

This week's answers are found on pg. 27

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How to make a laundry room a more functional space

Functionality is important when designing the interior spaces in a home. Homeowners who redesign their interior spaces can emphasize functionality to help reduce clutter and create a more efficient and even calming space.

Laundry rooms may not be the most glamorous rooms in a home, but they do get lots of usage, particularly in homes with children. Because laundry rooms tend to be well trafficked areas, it makes sense for homeowners to make them as functional and user-friendly as possible. With that in mind, homeowners can consider these tips to make laundry rooms more functional spaces.

- Purchase laundry pedestals with storage capacity. Laundry pedestals make useful additions to a laundry room. Many homeowners place their washing machines and dryers on top of pedestals with storage drawers, which can be used to store everything from dryer sheets to clothes irons to stain removal kits. Pedestals can be particularly useful in cramped laundry rooms where the only means to adding storage is to go up and not out.

- Install a freestanding laundry sink. A laundry sink also adds function to a laundry room by enabling homeowners to hand wash certain clothes and apply stain removal products in the same space where the rest of their clothes are being cleaned. Installing a laundry sink is a rel-

atively inexpensive job, but the cost may go up if new plumbing, venting or electrical work is necessary.

- Add a countertop work space. If you already have ample storage and won't be placing the washer or dryer atop a laundry pedestal, then installing some countertop above the appliances can add function and aesthetic appeal. A countertop workspace above a dryer provides an accessible space to fold laundry the moment it dries, reducing the likelihood that clothes will become wrinkled and ensuring you won't put off folding.

- Install floating shelves. Floating shelves won't cost a lot of money, but they can be ideal in cramped laundry rooms. Shelves provide a space to store detergent and other items that may not fit inside laundry pedestals, including baskets.

- Add hanging storage. Some articles of clothing should not be dried in a dryer for fear of shrinking the fabric or destroying the item. In such instances, some readily accessible hanging storage capacity can make the laundry room more functional. Items can be hung on hangers or over a hanging rack suspended from the ceiling if space is minimal.

Laundry rooms are heavily used spaces in a home, so it makes sense to take steps to make these areas as functional as possible.



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Stop VAW hosts community information session on intimate partner violence

AMANDA NELSON

Times Reporter

Stop Violence Against Women (Stop VAW) is hosting a series of community information sessions across Perth County. The next session will take place in Stratford at the end of April.

At the Feb. 17 session in St. Marys, host Jennifer Olenewa, Stop VAW co-ordinator, reviewed different types of abuse and how to recognize the signs of intimate partner violence (IPV). Participants also learned what to say to support someone who may be experiencing IPV, as well as about the community resources and programs available throughout Perth County.

In 2019, IPV cost \$7.4 billion and has only risen since the pandemic. Rural communities face higher IPV rates, with women experiencing IPV 75 per cent more frequently than urban women.

“More significantly, the rate in rural communities for women is 75 per cent higher than women who live in cities,” said Olenewa. “So there is a way greater risk of experiencing IPV in rural communities, such as Perth County.”

She went on to note that slower response times, caring for pets and livestock, lack of services and resources, the presence of firearms, isolation, lack of autonomy, lack of affordable transit, limited cellphone or internet access and limited safe housing options are all barriers for women living in rural communities.

Sydney Touzel, a survivor, also spoke to attendees about her personal experience with IPV after surviving an attack in St. Marys in 2020. She has since gone on to advocate for

survivors and most recently raised almost \$13,000 for Optimism Place in Stratford.

Her conversation leaned into the complexities of intimate partner violence, emphasizing that it often starts subtly with financial, emotional and psychological abuse before escalating to physical violence.

“A lot of people assume that it starts physical,” she said. “In my experience, there was financial, emotional, gaslighting and then isolation. It started off very slow, which I think a lot of people don't realize. It started with tiny things like asking for my phone, asking where I was, and then that escalated into arguments, which turned into things being thrown, then holes in walls and then things being thrown at me.”

Touzel also emphasized the importance of recognizing abusive behaviours early and connecting with police when appropriate. She noted that police were called on three occasions; however, officers can only take action when there are legal grounds to proceed.

“You don't necessarily have to disclose every single thing that's happened, but if you just give them one little bit of information that they can act on, that can make a mountain (of) difference, even just a nod when they ask certain questions. If you don't say anything, they can't do anything.”

Const. Darren Fischer, community resource and media relations officer, then spoke about how and when to connect with police. He emphasized the importance of calling 911 in emergencies and the police's role in safety planning.

Fischer discussed the mandatory charge policy, which was developed in 1986. This law allows police to lay criminal charges in



(AMANDA NELSON PHOTO)

Jennifer Olenewa, Stop VAW co-ordinator speaks to IPV survivor Sydney Touzel about her personal experience with IPV at the recent Stop Violence Against Women (Stop VAW) information session at Little Falls Public School in St. Marys

domestic or intimate partner violence incidents when they have reasonable and probable grounds to believe an offence has occurred – even if the victim does not want to press charges.

“Police will come. We provide emergency services and can be called 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If it is three o'clock in the morning on Christmas Day and you need somebody to come and talk to you about the abuse that you're experiencing, we are there. We will be there as quickly as possible.”

Fischer also noted the goal of having 30

per cent of the Stratford police force be women by 2030.

To learn more or to register for an upcoming session, including the Stratford session, visit stopvaw.ca and click on Events. Registration is required for food and drink planning only; no personal information will be stored. Food and drinks will be provided, and free parking will be available at each location.

Anyone concerned about intimate partner violence can contact Optimism Place's 24/7 support line at 519-271-5550 or 1-800-265-8598 (toll-free).

Police briefs: fatal crash investigation and indecent exposure

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

POLICE INVESTIGATING FATAL CRASH JUST OUTSIDE OF CITY

Shortly before midnight on Wednesday, Feb. 11, the Stratford Police Service received notification of a serious motor vehicle collision at Perth Line 32 and Road 125, in the Township of Perth South.

Emergency Services attended and discovered that a pick-up truck had collided with a four-door vehicle.

As a result of the collision the driver of the pick-up truck has passed away due to injuries sustained in the collision. The driver of the four-door vehicle suffered serious non-life threatening injuries and was transported to hospital, while the passenger suffered minor injuries and was treated at the scene.

The investigation into this matter is ongoing and more information will be released when available. Anyone who may have witnessed the collision is asked to contact police at 519-271-4141 ext. 2.

If you wish to remain anonymous, please contact Crime

Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS or www.p3tips.com.

MALE ARRESTED FOR INDECENT EXPOSURE

On Sunday, Feb. 8, shortly before 1 p.m., the Stratford Police Service received a complaint of an unknown male who entered the New Orleans Pizza at 231 Ontario St. and exposed his genitals to the employee inside the restaurant.

Police were advised that the unknown male entered the restaurant and walked to the back where the employee was located by themselves. Accounts claimed that the male removed his pants to expose his genitals and began arguing with the employee who directed him to leave. After a short argument, the male left without further incident.

Video of the incident was provided to police who were able to identify the suspect as a 56-year-old male resident of Stratford. The male was located and placed under arrest at Stratford Police Headquarters the following day.

The male was charged with one count of indecent act. The male was held in custody to attend a bail hearing later that day.

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Grammy-winning cinematic album has Stratford connection

ELIZABETH COOPER

Guest Contributor

At the Grammy Awards on Feb. 1, 2026, Justin Gray from Toronto became the first Canadian to be nominated and win for Best Immersive Album. An album is considered immersive when it utilizes a format like Dolby Atmos to create a 360-degree surround sound experience. The album is also available as a feature length film which was directed and filmed by Stratford cinematographer Michael Fisher.

Fisher grew up in nearby Baden and spent post-secondary at Conestoga College studying robotics and automation. He moved to Stratford in 2008 where he started a video company: Fisher Media. He has been a director and cinematographer on many video projects specializing in live performances, but this one, he admits, was his biggest.

In 2014, Fisher met Justin Gray and brother Derek Gray in Toronto, collaborating on a music video at the Canterbury Music Company in Toronto. Their creative synergy was evident from the outset, with Justin specializing in audio and Michael Fisher in video production; both are also accomplished musicians. Justin, a sound engineer and a professor

at Humber College, has remixed and mastered albums for the immersive format for artists such as Snoop Dogg, Ar-kells and Olivia Rodrigo. Approximately four years ago, Justin initiated the creation of an immersive album featuring both audio and visual elements with the advanced sound format of Dolby Atmos. Michael Fisher was his clear choice for the film production component of this project.

"Yes, Justin's resumé is amazing," admits Fisher, "and I am so honoured he asked me to collaborate on this new project where listeners' ears are in the centre of a 360-degree audio experience. But what I love is that we are growing together and discovering together. That's what's most important to me."

Fisher said yes to the title of co-director and director of photography of the video album simply called *Immersed* but admits he needed time to prepare and wrap his head around this scale of a project. Fisher spent the next year and a half transitioning to new equipment and developing new methods to prepare himself for a project intended for cinema, which included training directly from Dolby.

What is immersive audio? Most people know that "mono" has one channel/speaker and "stereo" has two. Immersive audio allows channels to be mapped in a "dome" shape and play through as many speakers as are available, creating a 360-degree sound. The listener feels like they are in the middle of the experience. To give you a better idea, Fisher said there were often 14 microphones or more on each instrument during recording.

Fisher had two assistants help him with the filming, one of whom was his 19-year-old niece who lives in Kitchener. Over a total of 30 days at the Humber College studio, they recorded eight songs with over 30 musicians, working typically between 16 and 18 hours each day. The project generated 300 hours of video footage totaling 72 terabytes, which required additional backup on external hard drives.

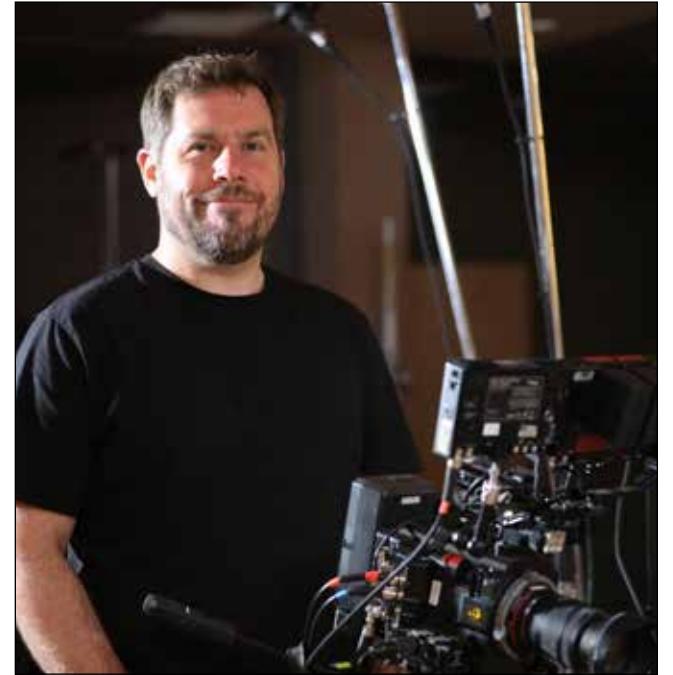
Immersed is available to experience in cinema, Blu-ray, and can be streamed on Apple Music, but you need to have the available technology and speakers to get the full effect.

Average listeners won't have Dolby Atmos sound systems which are available in some premium cinemas.

"Skywalker Sound studio in LA, which is the most prominent sound stage in North America, has asked to do a viewing of the video," Fisher says. "As well as some Dolby cinemas such as in Berlin and New York City. It's very exciting!"

So if you want to get the full effect of this Grammy award-winning album, you may have to wait a few months. Fisher said he is working on a screening opportunity for Stratford residents this summer.

Immersed is also nominated for a Juno award, set for April in Hamilton. When asked if he would attend, Fisher did not hesitate, "You bet!"



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Stratford resident Michael Fisher was the video director of the Grammy Award-winning immersive album *Immersed*.

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Stratford Poet Profiles: David Stones

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

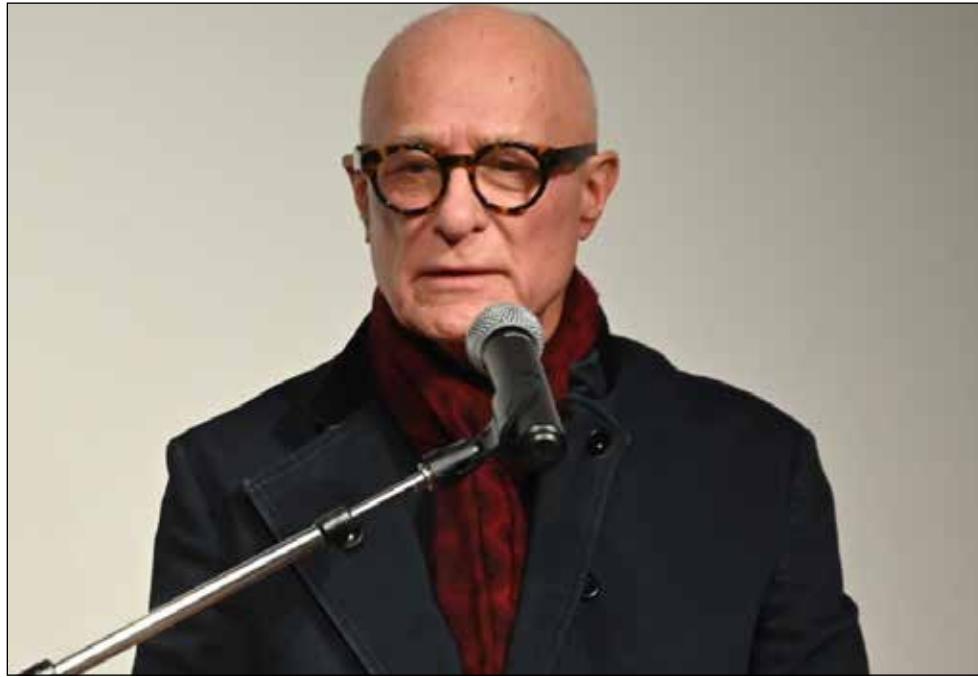
The idea of Canada can mean many different things. For David Stones, especially now, part of it is about expression.

"I think during these very challenging times, expressing your love for our great country of Canada is really important," Stones said, referring to the repeated threats to Canada's sovereignty made by American politicians last year (and continue to make this year as well). "I think that was one of Heidi's drivers in putting the (Canada Is Our Poem contest) together in 2025, was the fact that we felt, I think all of us, that even our sovereignty was being questioned, if not threatened. And it was a time to sort of collectively put our thoughts together and express our love for our country with all its quirks and all its wonders."

Stones is not unknown among Stratford's literary circles, being the city's first-ever poet laureate. Like many other poets in Stratford, he submitted works to local poet Heidi Sander's Canada Is Our Poem contest in 2025. His poem "Canadian Springtime" was one of three that were shortlisted for the upcoming anthology.

"Canadian Springtime" is a true story about Stones' youth playing hockey on Darlington Bay, as he explained.

"I remember when spring was coming we were always kind of scared," Stones



(TIMES FILE PHOTO)
David Stones was one of the Stratford poets who submitted to Heidi Sander's Canada Is Our Poem contest. His piece "Canadian Springtime" is one of three shortlisted for an upcoming anthology.

laughed. "Because the ice was frozen where we were, but beyond that ice, you could see the curling waves of Lake Ontario. And every now and then you'd miss the net and the puck would just go about a mile and disappear in the water. You didn't want to go after it, but that was the Canadian springtime."

Stones reflected on the use of self in writing. While the poem is very personally rooted in his memory, at no point does he refer to an "I" in the stanzas. As he said, that is a conscious decision to focus on the story-telling aspect of the piece, rather than the self. While he does use "I" on occasion for certain pieces, he tends to

do that sparingly.

"I don't want to write about myself, and I don't want to use poetry to express thoughts about my own emotional state or physical state. I want to use it to tell stories and to extend a lot of life's metaphors into my verse," he said.

Stones also shared that his poems often start with one idea, one title, or even one line.

"I keep in my journals, I keep lists of titles," Stones said. "Things that occur to me, odd collections of words. 'I think that would make a great title,' and I build on that," Stones said.

"... That is a feature of good poetry, that the word combinations are surprising and unusual and very poignant. They open the door to interpretation because you want to engage the reader or engage the listener if you're performing the poem. So rather than being just concrete, you're suggestive, leaving the door open, as I say, to their interpretation and that builds reader involvement in your work, which is, I think, a very important feature of good poetry."

Stratford Poet Profiles is an ongoing series by the Stratford Times, casting a spotlight on some of the Stratford poets who submitted to Heidi Sander's Canada Is Our Poem contest. An upcoming anthology with selected works from the contest will be out in spring.

Canadian Springtime

Spring for us on McLaughlin Bay
was not the metronomic drip
of sap from sleep-stirred maples

nor the metaphoric nod
of pussy willows
by the roadside hedge
or the slumberous shimmer
of the sucker run in Penner's Creek.

It came in that one last frenzied
day-long game of shinny
on the Bay's dark, dissolving ice

knowing that one shot wide
of the yawning pipes would launch
our puck on its malignant skitter
toward the doom
of a black and wind-ridged lake

there at the saw-toothed, watery edge
where spring clawed at a winter sky
and our youth

tethered to the relentless
lilt of seasons

drifted toward the turning
of another year.

— David Stones for Heidi Sander's
Canada Is Our Poem contest



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Stratford Winter Film Festival Organizers thrilled with third annual event

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

The third annual Stratford Winter Film Festival (SWFF) has come to a successful conclusion from their weeklong run at the Stratford City Hall auditorium. The weekend of the main event began with a packed reception serving cocktails and nibbles catered by Mercer Hall in advance of the opening night screening of the film *Blue Moon*.

"We're very happy with the atmosphere that day. Our reception went absolutely as well as we could have hoped. We had marvelous attendance, everyone was in very good spirits and it was professionally catered by Mercer. Then we proceeded through extremely frigid temperatures to (the) city hall auditorium where we had our inaugural screening at 8 (p.m.) of *Blue Moon*," said Craig Sangster, SWFF co-director with Bruce McInnis and Leslie Marsh.

The choice of this film delighted the audience with many taking the time to write the trio upon returning home saying how much they enjoyed *Blue Moon*, with one saying it was the best movie they had seen in years. This successfully set the tone for the rest of the weekend.

This year there were nine films showcased over three days in one venue. Lessons learned from past events have led the

trio to streamline their selections curated and simplify the agenda with additional leisure time built in so that attendees could take a break between films and seek out neighbouring businesses.

"Certainly there's a possibility of film fatigue if you go past nine, which we've seen in the past. We saw in some of the feedback that at the price point (for a pass) that we offered people were able to feel they didn't have to go to all the movies. I think at the price we were offering it, seeing six movies is absolutely a great weekend," said Bruce McInnis.

With built in time to wind down between films, festival goers were able to connect with each other and go for a meal or beverage while sharing their reactions.

"That's always been one of our key motivations behind all of this, to get people out and moving about town. We've consolidated down to a single venue which is so central and it allows for that. You can get to most restaurants in town within five minutes on foot so I think that's real key to what we are trying to do here," said McInnis.

The new sound system was a step up and made it clear with full control of levels so that the sound could be balanced and they found no deficiencies. They are grateful that the city has seen the importance of improving the auditorium experience with a permanent quality system.



(ELISABETH SANGSTER PHOTO)

The opening night reception of the Stratford Winter Film Festival set the stage for the weekend which proved to entertain with films curated in the theme of "Friends, Foes, and Strangers."

Fan favourites are yet to be determined by a survey, but if founders were to go by conversations held and overheard, Checkpoint Zoo was an important and profound film that affected the audience. The comedy *Wicked Little Letters* was also very well received.

"Some things are not always easy to take in from an entertainment perspective but they're important. Checkpoint Zoo was like that. I suspect that once we do our email survey, we'll find that someone will have found each movie, you know, it'll have been their favourite and that's the fun part," said McInnis.

This was also a year of growth for SWFF, with the addition of the Canadian Independent Film Day held Jan. 29. "This was an experiment for us that went well, certainly well enough that we'd like to add on to it," McInnis said.

"Having or lead sponsor (TD Bank) step up for a second year in a row is a huge deal for SWFF. This was a better year for us than in previous years so we're encouraged by the trajectory. We're deeming it a suc-

cess not only from feedback from patrons but also from the viability of the project. We've refined our model and found some efficiencies by going to one location and I think that serves us well," said Sangster.

The future for SWFF is bright indeed. They have even bought the domain name, StratfordSummerFilmFestival. Let that be an Easter egg for what is to come from the trio of founders.

"The communal support has been incredibly warm and even the run up to the event, people we went to last year and the year before with posters were very receptive and even said they were expecting us. So that was nice and we came across a few other new friends in town – so the community aspect of it was very encouraging," said Marsh.

The team at SWFF, the founders and volunteers that have returned each year, can call it a wrap on the third annual Winter Film Festival looking forward to a positive feasibility study for year four. Keep an eye out for news from SWFF by visiting www.stratfordwinterfilmfestival.ca.

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On Stage Dance Studio Team Showcase prepares dancers for competition season

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

The team of 112 dancers from On Stage Dance Studio performed their Team Showcase to an appreciative audience at Centennial Hall in London on Sunday, Feb. 15. It was a big day for the dancers, family and friends as the performances are akin to a dress rehearsal for the upcoming competition season.

The Team Showcase features the 112 dancers aged five to 18 years old, as they prepare for 125 routines in five competitions to come.

“We started training for this season in September and have been working since September to improve and to get our dancers ready for the stage, so Sunday was a dry run through everything. Everybody got a chance to go on the stage and practice on the stage with their music and costumes. It’s a nice chance for families to come and see the dances in one day all in one place,” said Meghan Seaman, owner and artistic director of On Stage Dance Studio.

Former dancers join in the day as judges offering critiques and tips for improvement for the dancers to take back to the studio to fine tune their performance. Dance styles covered run the gamut from ballet to jazz, tap, hip hop, contemporary, modern and musical theatre providing a very diverse program.

“It’s a great opportunity for the kids to get up on stage and get in front of an audience doing something they love. There are so many benefits to the performing arts for kids. They are all so proud to be out there and shining so bright is what I always say. They all look like they are born to be out there ... Because there is always the ones that are brand new, or are as a group of two or three friends or all alone, it’s amazing to watch them build their confidence over the course of the dance season. It’s just so wonderful and validating to see,” said Seaman.

Now that the Team Showcase dress rehearsal has been successfully completed, competition season is right on the horizon with the first beginning Friday, Feb. 20 in Richmond Hill, followed by another in



(MEGHAN SEAMAN PHOTO)

The On Stage Dance Studio team performed their Team Showcase Feb. 15th in advance of competition season kick-off. The dancers will perform 125 routines in five competitions beginning the 17th in Richmond Hill. Hamilton the following Friday.

At the competitions, teams are able to see what other studios have been working on and get to perform for them what they have been working on. “It’s a great time, especially for those dancers that have done it for a few years and start to recognize their competitors over the years and start to be able to better recognize their own achievements,” Seaman said.

On Stage Dance Studio prides itself in offering a substantial recreational program that offers something for every dancer no matter what their particular goals are. There is something for the three-year-old looking for an outlet or the competitive dancer looking to enhance their journey.

Their main program begins in September of each year, however, the spring and summer registration is now open for shorter, smaller sessions. For more information about the sessions and to register, visit onstagestratford.dance.

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STRATFORD **TIMES** SPORTS

Warriors gain ground in the standings with weekend sweep, Curtin commits to Division 1 hockey

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

During Family Day weekend, the Stratford Hunter Steel Warriors faced the Sarnia Legionnaires at the William Allman Memorial Arena, followed by road games against the Elmira Sugar Kings and the rival Listowel Cyclones.

During preparations for the week, Evan Arnold and Grady Murphy reflected on the team's recent form and the focus for the upcoming weekend.

"Obviously, we had two tough losses, but we bounced back with a big win against St. Marys, and it was a good learning experience for the team, and just coming out and learning from our mistakes and coming out really hard," Arnold said. "Just keep going, moving our feet at all times and just go, go, go."

"We weren't at our best, but it was good to pull out a win against the best team in the league. It was pretty good to see that when we showed up to the rink, we were put back as a line (with Coen Galbraith and Dominic Marshall), because a few games before, we were apart because we weren't playing the best," Murphy said.

"We just keep trying to keep putting



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Stratford Warriors forward Dominic Marshall battles for the puck against Sarnia Legionnaires netminder Zack Irwin and forward Sarvir Jaworski, with Coen Galbraith (14) close by, at the William Allman Memorial Arena on Feb. 13.

points up on the board, keep winning games and try to finish up the season strong."

On Feb. 11, the Warriors announced defenceman Joseph Curtin has committed to play at Adrian College of the American Collegiate Hockey Association (ACHA) for next season.

"I am incredibly proud of Joe Curtin and his commitment to continue his hockey career with the Adrian Bulldogs. He is joining an excellent ACHA Division 1 program led by Gary Astalos and a first-class coaching staff," Warriors director of hockey operations Jason Clarke said in a statement on the team's website.

Stratford hosted Sarnia for the annual United Way Pass-The-Bucket night. The Warriors honoured the humanitarian organization during the pre-game ceremony.

In the first period, Arnold notched his 12th of the season from Haden Frayne and McQuen Haylock at 7:37, opening

the scoring for the Warriors. Late in the opening frame, Max Wildfong scored his 19th and 20th goals of the season, giving the Warriors a 3-0 lead after 20 minutes.

Jonas Schmidt, from Drew Hodge on the powerplay, put the Warriors up 4-0 early in the second period, but the Legionnaires answered with two goals of their own to cut the Stratford lead in half. In the third period, the score remained 4-2, and the Warriors' offence put on an offensive clinic.

Goals from Arnold, Will Coward, Colin Slattery, Haylock, Frayne and Schmidt put the game out of reach as the home side routed the Legionnaires 10-2 in front of 867 fans. A total of 12 different Warriors' players tallied a point in the win, with Haylock leading the team with a career-high four points.

Stratford netminder Noah Bender recorded his first win in five starts, stopping 15 of 17 shots and improving his win-loss record to 14-9-0-1 for the season. After

the game, Bender told the Times about his bounce-back performance.

"It was good. We came out really strong in the first period. The team did really well. I felt really good in the first period as well. Second period was a little bit slower, and we let them back in a little bit, but then we were able to close out the third, so really, overall, really good," Bender said.

Stratford head coach Dave Williams expressed appreciation for the team's effort and the offensive breakthrough during the third period.

"We had a good first period, generating a lot of decent scoring opportunities, just unfortunately, I think we hit a few posts in there. I didn't mind how we started there in the second, and they scored those two goals," Williams said.

"That was maybe a bit of a reminder that we're going to have to keep going here and keep playing. We came alive over the third, which I think is always good for the guys' confidence."

On Feb. 15, the Warriors travelled to Elmira for the evening matchup with the Sugar Kings.

Stratford put the offensive pressure on Elmira from the early stages of the first period and finally struck paydirt as Aaron Green's blast from near the blueline connected for his ninth of the season from Lucas Minard and Schmidt with 5:19 left in the opening frame. The Warriors heavily outshot the Sugar Kings 22-6 through 20 minutes.

The Warriors continued to pour on the offence as Frayne scored his fourth of the season from Coward 3:47 into the second period. Quinn Kipfer notched his 12th of the season on the powerplay from Slattery and Coward midway through the middle frame, putting the visitors up 3-0. Slattery has tallied four points in the three-game weekend and recorded a point in four straight.

Schmidt continued his career year with his 20th of the season from Frayne and Mateo Craievich with 5:44 left, giving the Warriors a commanding 4-0 lead. Elmira scored in the final minute of the period to close the deficit to 4-1.

Early in the third period, Marshall sped down the rink and scored his 11th of the season from Wildfong at 5:57. Elmira got a goal late in the final frame, but the Warriors prevailed for a key 5-2 win. Gage Hurst picked up his 12th win of the season with 16 saves on 18 shots.

On Family Day, the Warriors travelled to Listowel as they faced the rival Cyclones.

Slattery got the Warriors on the board from Schmidt and Curtin 1:40 into the game. With 19 seconds left in the opening frame, Haylock scored his 5th of the season from Arnold and Wildfong, and

CONTINUED TO PAGE 15

Stratford Warriors

2025-26 Stats

(as of February 16, 2026)

Player	Pos	GP	G	A	PTS
Jonas Schmidt	F	36	20	19	39
Max Wildfong	F	41	20	14	34
Colin Slattery	F	39	12	21	33
Quinn Kipfer	F	37	12	19	31
Coen Galbraith	F	41	11	19	30
Lucas Minard	F	41	12	12	24
Will Coward	D	38	3	20	23
Evan Arnold	F	34	13	9	22
Aaron Green	D	35	9	11	20
Joseph Curtin	D	42	4	16	20
McQuen Haylock	F	41	5	14	19
Dax Vader	F	40	5	13	18
Drew Hodge	D	42	3	15	18
Haden Frayne	D	38	4	13	17
Dominic Marshall	F	42	11	4	15
Grady Murphy	F	37	8	6	14
Rhyse Brown	F	37	4	8	12
Jaxon Broda	D	12	2	7	9
Mateo Craievich	D	31	0	8	8
Cruz Ferguson	F	11	5	2	7
Colten Brenzil	F	2	1	0	1
Cody Billings	D	1	0	0	0
Goalies	Record	GAA	SV-%		
Noah Bender	15-9-0-1	2.83	0.899		
Gage Hurst	12-0-2-1	2.16	0.899		

GOHL Western Conference Standings

(as of February 16, 2026)

Team	W	L	OTL	SOL	PTS	GF	GA
Chatham Maroons	31	8	2	3	67	212	132
St. Marys Lincolns	32	9	2	0	66	176	99
Elmira Sugar Kings	31	8	2	1	65	193	111
Stratford Warriors	28	10	3	2	61	171	119
London Nationals	30	13	1	0	61	199	146
LaSalle Vipers	22	19	3	0	47	159	158
Waterloo Siskins	20	18	4	2	46	133	130
Strathroy Rockets	21	19	2	1	45	162	159
St. Thomas Stars	20	20	2	1	43	166	164
Listowel Cyclones	17	25	1	1	36	123	145
Komoka Kings	14	28	2	1	31	143	194
Sarnia Legionnaires	0	44	0	0	0	75	295

U16 Lakers finish regular season on a high note

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

With the London Jr. Knights securing first place in the U16 AAA ALLIANCE rankings, the Huron-Perth U16 AAA Lakers looked to finish the final week of the regular season on the right note as they hosted the Windsor Jr. Spitfires and the Brantford 99ers at the Stratford Rotary Complex.

Head coach Jason Brooks says the focus is to finish the regular season in better shape in time for the playoff run.

"We're just trying to play better and get ready for the playoffs. You know, working on doing the little things a little bit better. I mean, we had a good weekend last weekend, which was encouraging, but, you know, we can continue to get better," Brooks said.

"Because we know in playoffs, every shift, every play matters, and we want to make sure we're at our best going into the playoffs. So that's what these two games are all about. It's just continuing to work on what we do, and as I say, just get better with it."

Declan McCotter and Rylan Da Costa are among the several to have played in both ALLIANCE U16 and, as amateur players, in Junior B this season. McCotter made his Junior B debut on Jan. 23 with the St. Marys Lincolns, and Da Costa made two appearances earlier in the season with the Chatham Maroons, securing a win in his first career appearance on Dec. 19.

McCotter and Da Costa reflected on their time with the Junior B clubs and explained how they can translate their experiences to helping the Lakers in the postseason.

"I mean, obviously, going up there (in Junior B), the game's a lot different. It's faster, and bringing it down to here, getting to see the game a lot slower, kind of, but work on simple stuff and hopefully win," Da Costa said.

"It was a good experience. All the guys were really nice and treated me well. The game was fun against Waterloo. It helps by preparing me to play against bigger, better players, making quicker decisions, and stuff like that," McCotter said.

On Feb. 13, the Lakers hosted the Windsor Jr. Spitfires. The Spitfires took a 1-0 lead early in the first period, but the Lakers flexed their offensive muscle in the second period, scoring two goals from Joseph Haskett to take a 2-1 lead heading into the final frame.

Evan Miller and Ethan Bridges rounded out the Lakers' scoring in the third period as the Lakers soared past the Spitfires 4-1. Tyler Wilkinson earned the win in net for the Lakers.

After the game, Brooks was content with the victory despite the miscues early on.

"You know, I'm happy with the win. I mean, it wasn't our best game today. I thought our first period was off. We were poor at making decisions with the puck and tended to overhandle it. And then I thought, in the second, we played hard, we made simple plays, we won battles, moved our feet, and then created a lot of chances and got a couple of goals," Brooks said.

"Then the third, we went backwards a little bit again. But then couple nice plays, couple goals, and all of a sudden it's 4-1, and walk away with the victory."

The Lakers wrapped up their regular season play against the Brantford 99ers on Feb. 15.

After a scoreless first period, the Lakers opened the scoring in the second period, courtesy of Miller, assisted by McCotter and Wyatt Finch on the power play at 2:18 into the middle frame. Brantford responded with a pair of goals before Miller's second of the game late in the period, tying the game at two apiece heading into the third period.

Early in the third period, the 99ers scored twice to take the lead, but goals from Colton Van Geffen and Luke McLean in 25 seconds put the home side level with the 99ers. Christian Circelli broke the deadlock and scored the eventual game-winner with 4:31 left.

Da Costa picked up the win in net for the Lakers.

The Lakers finished their regular season with a record of 25-2-3, good for second place behind the London Jr. Knights. Their playoff opener is scheduled for Mar. 1, with the opponent to be determined on Feb. 17.

U18 Warriors looking to build momentum heading into the playoffs

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

With the U18 regular season coming to a close, Stratford U18 AA Warriors head coach Riley Mathieson says it is crucial to finish the season on a high note and to reflect on the team's growth throughout the year.

"I think it's important. I also think that it just matters how we play once we get into the playoffs, regardless of which team we're gonna end up facing in the single a division. We're able to compete and beat anyone, as we've shown during this during this year, just depends on what team shows up if we get the same effort we did on Monday night there in the third period. I think we can be successful, as it showed in the results of that game," Mathieson said.

"... One challenge we've faced this year is the third period. It was nice to see better results in that area. But yes, it also just shows that you can compete with anyone. Brantford, the top-10 AA team in Ontario, also beat the second seed, Milton Menace, in the Ajax tournament to advance to the finals. It shows that we can compete with anyone. It doesn't really matter where we're playing. It depends on the effort we bring."

Speaking of reflection, team veterans Charlie Holloway and Nate Van Bakel expressed appreciation for being part of the team and the program, as well as for the team's mindset as the regular season enters its final stretch.

"It's a real honour. I've played here my entire life. I'm an 11-year vet, and it really means a lot to me to play on this team my entire life. A lot of great memories have been from this team, and it's really remarkable what the coaching staff and your teammates can do, just like how ... it really brings everyone together. Everyone is really tight in our room and close together. It's a good environment

in there," Holloway said.

"So, we're on the bottom half of our schedule, but we're trying to be on the top half of single A, so that's where we're at right now. So, if we keep that up, we're going to be going into a good spot in the playoffs."

"We've got a great team here. The boys have built a tight bond here, and coming into the playoffs, I think we're ready to go. But yeah, everyone's been good to each other, and we all go to war together every game, and we work really hard to try and complete that goal," Van Bakel said.

"I think you're putting the work into practice. And right now we're in a good spot in the standings, but, you know, we could use those extra few points so we can capitalize here. In the next few games, we'll have a great spot for the playoffs, and then during the playoffs, we'll just keep hitting that hammer. And you know, see where things take us, but we just take things game by game."

In their lone game of the week, the Warriors travelled to the Galt Arena in Cambridge to face the Hawks on Feb. 15.

In the first period, the Warriors opened the scoring at 3:23, but the Hawks responded with a goal less than a minute later. Stratford took the lead at 3:31 of the middle frame and doubled it at the halfway mark of the period. Late in the period, Cambridge came back with a pair of goals, tying the game within 12 seconds.

But the Warriors battled back with three unanswered goals early in the final frame, held off the Hawks' late push, and iced the game with 37 seconds left to win 7-4.

The Warriors conclude their regular season against the Woodstock Jr. Navy Vets on Feb. 21, with U18 Grad Day at the Rotary Complex. Game time is 7:30 p.m. at Rink A.

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Warriors gain ground in the standings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

the visitors led 2-0. Arnold recorded two goals and two assists over the weekend, while Wildfong recorded five points.

Coward scored his third goal of the season from Curtin and Dax Vader early in the second period, giving Stratford a 3-0 lead. Listowel responded late in the middle frame, but Rhyse Brown, assisted by Haylock, scored his fourth goal of the season to re-establish the three-goal advantage before the period ended. With two points, Haylock tallied six points over the weekend.

Listowel scored early in the third, but Stratford maintained their lead throughout the rest of the period and ultimately won the game 4-2.

Bender capped off his bounce-back weekend with a solid 31-save performance to pick up his 15th win of the season. Over the three-game weekend, Bender and Hurst provided much-needed strong goaltending as they combined for a 3-0 win-loss record with a 3.00 goals-against average and a save percentage of .900.

With this win, the Warriors climb to fourth place in the Western Conference, tying the London Nationals at 61 points. Their upcoming schedule includes another intense three-game stretch in four days: hosting the St. Thomas Stars on Feb. 20, visiting Waterloo on Feb. 22 for an early afternoon game against the Siskins, and playing their final regular-season home game the next night against the Strathroy Rockets.



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MINOR SPORTS **SCRAPBOOK**



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Parker Blackwell blasts a shot on target during the U11 BB Stratford Warriors game last Saturday.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Joseph Moss launches a shot from the point during last Tuesday's U14 Stratford Warriors game.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Parker Obre fires the puck towards the net from the blueline during the U16 Stratford Warriors game this past Monday. Photo credit:



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Corina Marshall carries the puck up the ice during this past Sunday's U18 B Stratford Aces game.

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Dick's Barber Shop
The Livery Yard
Town Crier Marketing
North End Pharmacy
Annie's Seafood Restaurant
Avon Pharmacy

Irish open playoffs versus the Strathroy Jets

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

On Feb. 13, the Stratford Irish began their NPHL Metropolitan League playoff campaign on the road against their familiar adversary from last year's WOSHL Championship, the Strathroy Jets, in a best-of-seven first-round series.

Stratford initially took the lead when Christian Polillo, with help from Cole Thiessen, scored just 39 seconds before the end of the first period, making it 1-0. The score remained unchanged early in the second period until Strathroy rallied with two goals, edging ahead 2-1 as they headed into the third. The Jets quickly responded with a goal early in the third, but Nick Giunta, assisted by Thiessen, and Zach Magwood came back strong for the Irish, scoring midway through the final period.

Strathroy took a two-goal lead with 4:19 to play, but Stratford made things interesting in the closing seconds of the game as Jaden Peca from Magwood and Thiessen cut the deficit to within a goal. However, Stratford couldn't find the late equalizer and lost the opening game of the playoffs. Thiessen led the Irish with three points in the game one loss.

Zachery Weir made 25 saves for the Irish in the loss.

The William Allman Memorial Arena was the site of Game Two on Feb. 14.

Strathroy scored first with 6:08 re-

maining in the first period, but the Irish quickly responded with a powerplay goal from Stephen Pierog less than a minute later. Stratford then took the lead for the first time before the end of the period, with Thomas Hernandez, assisted by Thiessen and Ethan Tichenoff, scoring with 3:38 left in the opening frame.

The Irish added to their lead with Peca's goal less than 90 seconds into the middle frame. Strathroy responded with a goal late in the period to cut the Stratford lead to one goal.

Thiessen scored his second playoff goal, assisted by Thomas Maia and Mathieu Henderson, to increase the Irish's lead to 4-2 early in the third period. With his two-point performance in game two, Thiessen has accumulated five points in the first two playoff games, making him the team's top scorer.

Following Stratford's goal, Strathroy took back control in the final period and started their comeback. With 8:32 left, the Jets reduced the deficit to 4-3, and soon after, they tied the game on a lucky bounce in front of the Irish net with just over two minutes remaining. In overtime, the Irish encountered more misfortune in the crease, allowing the Jets to seize the opportunity and score the winning goal.

Mario Cavaliere made 30 saves in the game two loss for the Irish.

Game 3 will take place on Feb. 21 in Strathroy and Game 4 on Feb. 22 at the Allman Arena.



(FRED GONDER PHOTO)

Stratford Irish forward Stephen Pierog (27) tangles with Stratford Jets defenceman Jake Alkins in Game Two of the Metropolitan League Quarterfinal series at the Allman Arena on Feb. 14, 2026.

Aces rolling to the playoffs

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

The Stratford Humphrey Fleet Service U18 AA Aces finished their regular season with a pair of wins at the Stratford Rotary Complex and head to the OWHA-Southern playoffs.

On Feb. 13, the Aces defeated the Saugeen Maitland Lightning 4-2 and the Ayr Rockets 3-1 to wrap up the regular season on Feb. 14. Stratford finishes the season with momentum, winning five of the final six games (5-0-1).

The Aces begin their playoff journey when they play the Saugeen Maitland Lightning in the best-of-three series starting Feb. 19 at the Howick Community

Centre in Gorrie (after press time). Game Two is scheduled for Feb. 21 at the Stratford Rotary Complex in Rink A at 4:30 p.m. If necessary, the series-deciding Game Three will be at the Tesswater-Culross Community Centre in Tesswater on Feb. 22.

Round One OWHA-Southern U18 AA Playoffs (Saugeen Maitland Lightning vs Stratford Aces)

Game One – Aces vs. Lightning (Howick Community Centre – Feb. 19)

Game Two – Lightning vs. Aces (Stratford Rotary Complex Rink A – Feb. 21)

Game Three – Aces vs. Lightning (Tesswater-Culross Community Centre – Feb. 22), if necessary

Stratford rivalry - SDSS comes out on top



(AMANDA NELSON PHOTOS)

The senior girls from St. Michael Catholic Secondary School (St. Mikes) and Stratford District Secondary School (SDSS) delivered a high-energy showdown last week at SDSS, with a packed gym roaring behind every rally. SDSS took the opening set 25-15 before St. Mikes battled back to claim a tight 27-25 second set, forcing a decisive third. In the end, SDSS pulled away 25-15 to seal the match, capping off an intense and entertaining rivalry contest between the two Stratford schools.



Bowling League Scores

MEN'S
Brent Furtney 335

MONDAY SENIOR'S
Marlene Crerar 261-627 series
Steve Van Klooster 254,211-639 series
Brian Wagler 225

V-ETTES
Jan Ward 203
Shirley Campbell 226
Sharon Vanderveen 209

TUESDAY MORNING
Helen Fulton 216

UNITED LEAGUE
Autumn Sladtlander 205,264-621 Steven Walker 227
Paul Boyd 230

WEDNESDAY LADIES
Bonita Baranyi 205,228-610 series

YOUTH BOWL CANADA SCORES
Bowlasaurus
Dominic Rowe 128
Evangeline Butcher-Bontrup 125
Owen Farthing 104
Oscar Smith 76

PEE-WEE
Addi Kollman 76-204 Double
Grey Davidson 116-281
Coen Everitt 148-293
Piper Patey 102

BANTAM
Stella Hurley St Pierre -111, 123, 100-334 series
Noah Saunders 151
Roland Rains 156,213-506
Patrick Adair 167
Ava Tiegs 114
Caleb Luckhardt 176
Sierra Stevenson 391 triple

JUNIOR
Mckenna Morris 169,184, 194-537
Tyler Koch 176
Abby Smith 1 52
Brent Louwagie 172
Austin Janmaat 171,220
Myla Douglas 181,219-545
Hugo Black 177, 195-515
Anna Ward 151, 172,238-561
Brianna Bauer 171,172,211-554
Arik Scheuermann 177
Charlee Kayle 151,208-520 triple
Lauren Furtney 169, 191-506
Ryan Scheerer 190,192-521

SENIOR
Austin Bauer 180, 186,237-604
Austin Martin 472 series
Peyton Boyles Keating 183,234,252
Zachary Clarke 225
Dominic Boyles Keating 208
Jake Sippel 283
Alex Ward 292-602

Sydney Smith 177,195
Wiatt Robinson 181,198
Jocelyn Gethke 195,218-571
Owen Martin 246,207-612
Claire Turner 203,287(104 POA)-662
Mayla Laukka 196,209
Julian Colalillo 202
Peyton Petrie 214-573
Payton Kainz 227

SPECIAL OLYMPICS SCORES
Meghan O'Donovan 167,229
Nicolas Graham 178
Franny Hitchcock 173
Michael Hitchcock 171,204
Mike Kelemen 150
Tiffany Keller 211
Jacob Kaufman 219,236
Leah Akroyd Snider 196
Luke Patterson 154
Norm Schenck 164
Michael Ambrozic 156

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Stratford youth bowlers shine at regional doubles championship

NICHELE BUTCHER-BONTRUP

Times Contributor

Young bowlers from across the region delivered amazing performances on Feb. 8 at the regional round of the Youth Doubles Championship, a five-game scratch five-pin bowling tournament that tested consistency, teamwork and great coaching skills.

Multiple local teams from Mike's Bowling Lanes earned top place finishes and advanced to the provincial championships.

In the bantam boys' division, Roland Rains and Caleb Luckhardt, coached by James Tiegs, led the way by rolling a combined 1,588 to capture first place.

On the girls' side of the bantam division, Talia Klomp and Kayleigh Heegsma, with coach Nicole Hvidsten, delivered a solid effort and finished fourth overall with a total of 1,298.

Lauren Furtney and Anna Ward posted a combined 1,735 to earn second place in the junior girls bracket and advance to provincials. Close behind

were teammates Myla Douglas and Abby Smith, who rolled 1,709 to claim third place. Both teams were coached by Caylie Butcher.

Hugo Black and Ryan Scheerer, coached by Doug Mountain, bowled a 1,662 to finish second overall amongst the junior boys.

Competing in the senior girls' group, Payton Petrie and Claire Turner, coached by Irene Louwagie, earned a third-place finish with a 1,986 total.

In the senior boys' category, Dominic Boyles Keating and Zachary Clarke placed fourth with a 2,347 total, while teammates Alex Ward and Owen Martin followed closely in sixth place with 2,115. Both teams were coached by Larry Palmby.

With several teams advancing to provincials, local athletes will now turn their focus to preparing for the next level of competition. Coaches praised the bowlers for their teamwork, composure and sportsmanship throughout the five games.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Pictured from left are Hugo Black, coach Doug Mountain (back) and Ryan Scheerer. Black and Scheerer placed second in the junior boys' division.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Pictured from left are coach Irene Louwagie, Payton Petrie and Claire Turner. Petrie and Turner took third in the senior girls' division.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Pictured from left to right are Roland Rains, coach James Tiegs and Caleb Luckhardt. Rains and Luckhardt finished first in the bantam boys' division at the regional round of the Youth Doubles Championship Feb. 8.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Pictured from left are Talia Klomp, coach Nicole Hvidsten and Kayleigh Heegsma. Competing in the bantam girls' division, Klomp and Heegsma finished in fourth place.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Pictured from left are Myla Douglas, Abby Smith, Anna Ward and Lauren Furtney, with coach Caylie Butcher behind. Ward and Furtney took second place in the junior girls' division, while Douglas and Smith came in third.

Opinions

As I See It From America: What Stratford does best



PATRICK D. BURK

Times Columnist

Mind you, there are many things that are going right and many things that are going wrong in our world. Of course, I am talking about what is happening down here with our government. I have had to almost “hide my head in the sand” many times as I read the headlines and look at the news content on a vast array of mediums. It seems strange that in today’s world, news is instant, not often correct and sometimes even totally fabricated. Is it that way up in Canada as well? I often wonder. Either way, it is seldom happy or welcoming.

We lived through the Super

Bowl – my team was not present, but we made sure to watch the “dreaded” half-time show that was very un-American, as some claim. In a world where people are being kicked off their insurance, children are going hungry and people are being shot in the street by government thugs, the BIG WORRY was the half-time show at a sports entertainment event. What has gone wrong with humanity? There have been some complaints about content in the past, or a costume screw up or even possibly the quality of the performance but to rant and rave about an American citizen providing a wonderful and entertaining program about his area of our country is just so petty.

We were very entertained by the commercials this year. I loved the Clydesdale and the Eagle and even thought a certain potato chip company really hit a home run; we actually live in an area where potatoes are grown for that company. The team that I hoped would win did win in a convincing fashion and all in all, it was mostly entertaining. What was not all that entertaining were the racist comments and the inane thought that a

Spanish-speaking half-time show was perhaps not someone’s “cup of tea.” To all of those people I loudly proclaim, “get a life.” The only thing stronger than hate is LOVE. What a message. The half-time show was something that went right! It was amazing.

It is no news to you that we have been suffering through this horrible winter. I used to be a winter person. I used to ski and have fun outdoors with the likes of toboggans, playing “Broom Ball” and skating. What is Broom Ball? Well, it is basically hockey, without the stick – you use a broom, without the puck – you use a ball and without skates – you wear sneakers. And YES it does take place on a hockey rink. Often times the bruising after the fact is what is measured as you slip, slide, fall and get back up to do it again, hopefully not breaking something in the process. That used to be what I did in the winter.

Now it is totally different. We watch the weather like it is Armageddon and look for any excuse to just stay in bed, pull the covers over our head and ignore the nature that is happening outside.

When we do rise it is to shovel, remove ice from our cars and find the driveway. One of our pastimes is talking, posting and chatting about lake effect. It does become an all-encompassing pastime, never mind the constant trips to fill the bird feeders so that the little buggers at least can eat while they are maintaining their snow-encrusted lives. We feel so bad, we even feed the squirrels.

I realize from talking to friends that it is the same conditions in our most-favourite place, Stratford. Many of our friends think it is weird that while they are pining for the Florida sun, we are pining to get to a place that sometimes is colder and has more snow than we do. We are constantly looking at the dates that we can visit. I often pine for possibly having an apartment or something that we can just travel up to without too much thought. We contact our normal motel and settle on dates that we are staying, we talk to our friends in town and at the theatre and find out how everything is going and we look forward to our first visit.

For our first visit each year we bring up friends in a group. Take a

walk around town, have a marvelous lunch at the Bentley or the Arden Park, shop in a few stores and then go and see a wonderful preview show. This year we are seeing Guys and Dolls. It is one of my favourites and I have performed in it a couple of times. It is a simple show, one where we are all happy at the end and it is full of wonderful music. My type of show to start off the spring season and our first foray to Stratford. It is also a great show to share with a great bunch of friends. We are really looking forward to it.

It is with a high hope that you are going to also rise up out of this “heims horribilis” – that is Latin for horrible winter, just to show you that I have some culture – and prepare your wonderful community for visitors like us. I have said many times that Stratford is our entire family’s home away from home. I imagine that even with all this dreadful weather, we would still feel the welcoming warmth of your gracious community. It’s what Stratford does best!

Please let me know how you feel about this article. Contact me at burk.patrick1956@gmail.com

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Opinions

WEBCRAWLING IN A BIRD-FRIENDLY CITY



SHEILA CLARKE

Times Columnist

There is a bird in my backyard (many, actually). It's a chickadee, so perky, so curious, and such a delightful neighbourhood visitor. It belongs to a group called Passerines, perching birds. It needs food and water, shelter and a range where it can live and reproduce. This is one lucky bird, because it ended up in Stratford. Stratford is one of only 36 Bird-Friendly Cities in Canada! There is a story...

The story began with the Lights On Festival. You may have seen the amazing light show on the Tom Patterson Island this year. There were BIRDS! And the birds were HUGE! Each bird in the Birds of a Feather exhibit represented a real bird that visits the Stratford area. Yes, there was

a giant chickadee on the island named ... Avondee.

Zac Gribble, executive director of Destination Stratford, has pursued a strategy of regenerative tourism that benefits the community. Once he knew that the Birds of a Feather light art show was coming, there was an opportunity to enhance our support of birds in Stratford. Along with discussions with Nature Canada, Nature Ontario and Birds Canada, Zac and Christina Phillips, destination development manager, reached out to voices in the city and came up with a plan. The Birds of a Feather light show would begin a partnership with community to enhance habitat and protection for our birds. Since we are already a Bee City (2017) combining attention to birds and insects is a perfect match. Both populations are shrinking worldwide, both need each other – and we need them both.

The Bird-Friendly City program is run by Nature Canada. It sets standards for three different levels within the title. Each city or town that wants to qualify has to meet at least an entry level set of requirements. According to Zac and Christina, Stratford qualified for the entry level with record-setting speed, in time for

the launch of Birds of a Feather. In fact we're very near the intermediate level! The certification program assigns points in three major categories.

Threat reduction

Implementing measures to reduce human-related dangers to birds. Examples would be attention to bird-friendly windows (as at the Tom Patterson Theatre) to reduce collisions, encouragement to reduce cat roaming (cats are by far the biggest human-caused threat to birds, killing more than 100 million birds yearly in Canada), and bird-friendly lighting, such as the shades over Stratford street lighting to lessen confusion for bats and birds.

Habitat protection, restoration and climate resiliency

Examples are ensuring natural areas and habitat within Stratford. Since habitat includes food, shelter, water and range to live and reproduce, there is much that we share with our birds and much we can consider. Native plants for example are hugely important to birds, both for food and for homes for the native insects that feed both adult and baby birds.

Native plant gardens include the Catherine East Garden for pollinators, the Stratford Public Library gardens and the Rota-

ry Pollinator Garden. The parks department helps to maintain the T.J. Dolan natural area, home to Nature Stratford weekly bird walks and a remarkable community effort to remove invasive plants and replace them with native plants, which was spearheaded by the city's energy and environment committee.

Community reach and education

There are many organizations in Stratford that are supportive of habitat creation and education for birds in parks and in residential gardens. Master Gardeners, the Horticultural Society and CFUW Stratford are examples. Destination Stratford has already begun reaching out to young folk by making the Nature Canada Junior Birder and Activity Guide available to young visitors to Feathered Friends on the island. Over 2,500 guides were handed out during Lights On Stratford, to enhance bird knowledge and enthusiasm!

A mandatory action for all Bird-Friendly City certification levels is to hold an event and officially proclaim World Migratory Bird Day annually (mark your calendar! Saturday, May 9). Other activities include promoting citizen science programs (for

example a Christmas bird count) and engaging the community in stewardship. In addition, there must be a bird team established to lead initiatives, acknowledgment of Indigenous traditional territories and participation, and council support.

Lucky chickadee, lucky us. If we work together, we'll be able to encourage the growth of a city that is even more welcoming for pollinators and birds. They work together – so can we to provide habitat for our Bird-Friendly City.

UPDATES:

Carbon parts per million (ppm) in the atmosphere as of Feb. 16, 2026: 429.23 ppm. Two weeks ago it was 427.49.

The Xerces Society, promoting invertebrates (insects), has come up with a list of New Year's resolutions. I'll be sharing them in UPDATES in 2026.

Transition landscaping plants to regionally-appropriate native plants.

Volunteer 30 hours with a local conservation group.

Sheila Clarke is a Stratford advocate for the environment, of our community and of our planet. She is a member of CFUW Stratford, Stratford Climate Momentum, and the Perth County Sustainability Hub.

Prepare to sit back and enjoy!

JULIA SCHNEIDER

Times Columnist

"Sit back and enjoy the trip" is VIA's encouraging message to passengers like myself. A long-time customer, I have been taking the train from Stratford since I was very young – it was the CN in those days – and I hope to continue doing so.

Sometimes I feel, however, that train travel disincentives outweigh encouraging messages. As a customer/passenger, I have experienced many changes over the years, some easier to deal with than others. Each time I venture to set forth on what is now VIA Rail, therefore, I am unsure what I'll find and how it will affect me; I hope for the best.

In days gone by, I would talk to Bruce, the cheerful individual who sold tickets at the now fondly remembered Stratford station ticket counter. Besides dealing with tickets, he used to tell those waiting for a train when they might expect it; tardy trains are not a new phenomenon.

The personable Bruce disappeared perhaps 15 years ago. He was replaced by a machine one could use to print out a boarding pass or call a number to book a seat, while a monitor on the wall gave the ever-changing train ETA, which tended to be late. (In VIA's defense, this generally happens because freight trains take priority over people; the goods must get through, not so the passengers).

On my last visit to the station, on a recent

Wednesday, these machines were long gone as well. Now one was informed of delays through internet messages and passengers were expected to have a device to check for this. Having a phone that is just a phone might have left me somewhat handicapped, but fellow passengers came to my rescue. One of them, who was bound for the same conference as I in Toronto, kept me abreast of train time developments, as 11:16 became 11:31 and this changed to 11:47.

In the meantime, there was lots in the station to explore – or not. For months I had wondered what was behind the floor-to-ceiling wooden box blocking off a sizable part of the station's interior. What was behind it? What was going on there? One could speculate but, as time passed and curiosity grew on this Wednesday, I edged closer and closer to its door, which was held shut by a primitive wooden latch.

Finally I could control myself no longer. I tipped open the latch and gently pushed the door through which I'd seen workmen exit and enter, peered inside... and saw nothing. There was no identifiable operation there, only a view of the inside of the box, and that quickly disappeared when an expressionless workman emerged to close the door. I marveled at how the station now boasted no obvious on-site technology while also holding basic unexplained operations. Progress?

Not long after this, the train actually arrived. A voice on the loudspeaker said that this was the first and last call for this much anticipated

event; everyone rushed out not to miss it. Unless they had a ticket for the business class car, however, there was a bit of an obstacle waiting outside. Those in Car 5, which was everyone except those in business, had to walk along a narrow path that separated the station from the tracks, and this was further narrowed because only half of it had been cleared of snow. Those with luggage had an exceptionally difficult time maneuvering to the boarding car. A sign on the station cautioned passengers to be careful walking along the path; was it referring to the path with the snow or the one before it fell and was not cleared? Yet another mystery, with no one to ask.

It was now time to sit back and enjoy the trip: we were on the train!

Everything was great – except that I didn't have the forward-facing seat I had specifically requested. An internet message I received two days later, when I arrived back in Stratford, warned me this might be the case, but the crew on the train did all they could to help me, moving me to three different seats over the course of the next two hours in the process. Somewhere past Brampton, I sat back to enjoy my last forward-facing seat for the rest of the trip.

When the train arrived in Toronto I had to get to the Metro Toronto Conference Centre but two days later I was back at Union Station. I wanted to get a Globe and Mail newspaper to read on the train going home; to me, reading a paper is an important part of enjoying a trip.

You might think that it would be easy to

find Canada's national newspaper in Toronto but you would be wrong. Previous experience had shown it was nowhere to be purchased in Union Station. Years ago, when the busy news kiosk in the basement level of the station had disappeared, I had asked a woman at the information booth that used to be on the station's main level where I could find one. She told me a lot of people asked her that, and that she understood the newsstand in the nearby Go Station sold them; this turned out not to be the case.

On my recent trip I decided to ask about papers, again, at the misnamed New York News depot between the MTCC and Union Station. Hope springs eternal. "No newspaper!" they told me. I also had no luck at the Intercontinental Hotel adjoining the MTCC.

Where is the only place to get a newspaper in the heart of Toronto's transit hub? In the basement level news shop at the Royal York Hotel opposite Union Station. There you can get one and with it a smile. In a city that seems increasingly inhospitable, this hotel carries on a tradition has been left behind as many forsake the printed page and disappear behind screens whenever and wherever they travel. In this wasteland, the Royal York makes my day!

The rest of the trip was fine.

Thanks are due to the Stratford Times for making Stratford a newspaper-friendly city, with wide distribution in both digital and print form. MUCH appreciated and valued; you help make this place a home!

COMING EVENTS Email to inquire stratfordtimes@gmail.com

STRATFORD SCRABBLE CLUB

Anne Hathawy Residence 480 Downie St., Stratford
Meets every Wednesday evening at 7 p.m. for 3 games.
Check our website for further details stratfordscrabble.ca

CROCKINOLE

Every Tuesday at the Agriplex in the Ritsma Room from 1-4 p.m. No cost. Ladies and gentlemen, fingers or sticks.
For more information call Oliver Davidson 519-508-5664

STRATFORD ASTRONOMY GROUP MEETINGS

St. Michael Catholic Secondary School, 240 Oakdale Avenue, Stratford

Rear parking lot off Matilda. Room # 1104 - 1st Tuesday of each month from September to June. 7-9 p.m.

We are night sky enthusiasts. Everyone is welcome to attend. See our website at <https://stratfordastronomy.com/> or call 519-275-4472 for more information

EUCHRE NIGHT

Friday, February 20; 6:00 p.m.
Royal Canadian Legion, 804 Ontario St.

Enter your 2-person team for \$20 by calling Anne at 519-301-0914, Dave at 519-703-6544, or the Legion at 519-271-4540. Prizes for 1st to 3rd place.
Come out for some fun and support your local legion.

LEARN2SHINE PERFORMANCE CLUB

Monthly starting Sunday, February 22; 2 - 4 p.m.
Infinity Dance 451 Erie St.

Suitable for everyone in the family aged 7 and up. A chance to sing, dance, say lines. Registration \$20+HST/person, with 15% discount if registering 3 or more.
www.mckinnamangement.com

LENTON LUNCH

Wed., Feb. 25; 12:00 Noon
Immaculate Conception RC Church
\$15.00 Speaker: Pamela Wideman (New Hope Community Church)

GARDEN STRATFORD GENERAL MEETING

Monday March 2; 7:15 - 9:00 p.m.
Army Navy Hall, 151 Lorne Ave. E., Stratford
Featured Presentation: "Sub-Irrigated Planters", Scott

Bremner, Garden Stratford Member
Meeting Open to Everyone; Free Admission.

OSTOMY SUPPORT GROUP MEETING

Tuesday, March 3; 7:00 p.m.
93 Morgan St., Stratford
Speakers - Jamie Church and Colleen McConnell from Best Buy Medical. They will inform us of their services for ostomates. Social time and snacks. Everyone welcome.
519-273-4327

OXFORD PHILATELIC SOCIETY OXPEX & OTEX 2026 STAMP SHOW

March 21; 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
St. Mary's Catholic High School, 431 Juliana Drive, Woodstock, ON, N4V 1E8
Free admission and parking.
Framed and Judged exhibits, Stamp dealers, youth gift bags, Sales Circuit, draw prizes.
Contact: dhfe@silomail.com
Web: <http://www.rpsc.org/chapters/oxford>

STRATFORD TIMES

Deadline: Tuesday prior at 3 p.m.
Contact: stratfordtimes@gmail.com

PROMOTE YOUR EVENTS WITH US! HERE'S HOW:

- The Community Calendar is for non-profit organizations to promote their free admission events at no charge. Event listings can include your event name, date, time and location as well as a phone number, email address or website.
- If your event is not free admission or you would like to include more details than stated above, you have the following options:
 - Coming Events Word Ad in Classified section (50 word max.) - \$10 + hst
 - Coming Events Boxed Word Ad in Classified section (50 word max.) - \$15 + hst
 - Display Ad - Sizes begin at a classified business card size for \$35 + hst

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Sunday 10:00 a.m.
11:00 a.m. - Fellowship and
Coffee Hour
We are a Welcoming Community

STRATFORD TIMES

Pick Up Locations

Erie Street Esso
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Fix Auto
Stratford KIA
Expressway Ford
McDonald's - Erie St
Tim Hortons - Erie St
Stratford Mazda
7-Eleven - Erie St
Joe's Diner
The Urban Barber
Erie Convenience
Mr. Sub
Balzacs Coffee
Shoppers Drug Mart - Ontario
New Orleans Pizza

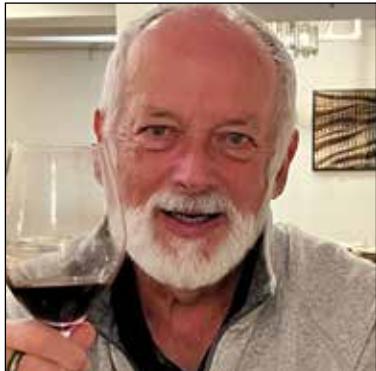
Zehrs
Food Basics
Tim Hortons - C.H. Meier
Festival Marketplace
Stratford Nissan
Stratford Subaru
Stratford Honda
Quality Festival Inn
McDonald's - Ontario St.
Papa Johns
Fore Everyone Golf
WalMart
Stratford Motor Products
A&W
Toner & Ink Shop
Rutherford Funeral Home

Athens Greek Restaurant
Stratford Legion
Gino's Pizza
Rosso's
Buzz Stop
Union Barber
Mornington Variety
Split Rail
Stratford Rotary Complex
Agriplex
No Frills
Cozyn's
Sebringville Esso
Dave's Diner - Sebringville
Stratford-Perth Museum
Sobey's

Shoppers Drug Mart - Huron
Circle K - Huron
West End Pharmacy
Tim Hortons - Huron
Stratford Hospital
Video 99 - Erie St
Jenny Trout
Stratford Medical Pharmacy
Stratford Chamber of Commerce
A.N.A.F.
Stratford Hyundai
Daisy Mart
Foodland
Stratford Variety
Brch & Wyn
Stratford Place

Stratford Chefs School
HH Delea
AJ's Hair
United Way Perth Huron
Sinclair Pharmacy
Blowes Stationery
Stratford Tourism
Coffee Culture
Stratford Public Library
The Parlour Restaurant & Inn
Dick's Barber Shop
The Livery Yard
Town Crier Marketing
North End Pharmacy
Annie's Seafood Restaurant
Avon Pharmacy

OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: Which cruise is the cruise for you?



PAUL KNOWLES

Times Columnist

It's a question I get asked a lot; "Which is better, a river cruise or an ocean cruise?" The answer, of course, is "it depends." I am writing this article because a significant number of the people who approach me have never done a river cruise, but they are considering it.

First off, there are not simply two categories of cruising. Ocean cruises now include a wide spectrum of options, from gigantic floating cities holding 5,000 or more passengers to more elite vessels that carry only 500-600 passengers and offer more personal service.

As well, ocean ship itineraries now range from the multi-port cruises of the Caribbean to voyages to Antarctica, through the North-West Passage, or, almost literally, cruises to everywhere with months-long, round-the-world itineraries.

That being said, ocean-going cruise ships tend to include a few things that many passengers love: casinos, Vegas-style entertainment, good bars and a variety of dining choices. We all know cruise veterans who no longer bother to get off the boat – they are there for all of the above and happy to avoid the hassle of disembarking into a cookie-cutter port or a crowded



Holland American's Noordam, the ship on which the author had his most successful ocean cruise.

(CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS)

tender to carry them landward.

And if that is to your taste, go for it. I will mention that a few of my acquaintances have tried smaller, ocean-going ships and have come away with a lot of praise for the increased level of personal service and high quality of dining options.

And what's different about river cruises? Well, almost everything. Most of the big-ship amenities are missing and so are most of the passengers. For example, Viking longships on most European river cruises carry a maximum of 190 passengers, and that assumes every one of the 95 cabins has two occupants, which virtually never happens. Those figures apply to most of the river-cruise companies. Some of the rivers (like the Seine) require slightly smaller boats, so they never top 170 passengers.

There will also be 50-plus crew

on board, most of whom are there as cleaning staff or restaurant servers, so excellent personal service is not just the norm, it is inevitable.

Some things will seem very different for first timers used to ocean ships. The entertainment is confined to the multi-purpose lounge (also the location of the bar, educational seminars and the daily briefing sessions). Usually, the format is rather piano-bar-like, but there will also be special entertainment. I have enjoyed light opera, flamenco, pop music and concerts reflecting local culture. There is a small area for dancing.

In my experience, dining on river cruises has always been top-notch, but there is not a wide choice of restaurants – the ships have one dining room with no tables for just two, by the way, so you inevitably meet other travellers, and another

spot on the upper deck with a few tables and a chance to dine al fresco in nice weather. I have always found that there is a wide and generous choice of menu options. And although river cruise ships offer relatively inexpensive beverage packages, if you like wine or beer, the already included pourings at mealtime are generous.

Apart from the lack of crowds and consistently superb service, the best thing about river cruises is your proximity to the destinations you are visiting on the cruise. There is a marked difference in comparison to many ocean cruises. Here, there is no stereotypical port with gold shops, souvenir stands and the like. The ship ties up at the dock and you are almost always immediately moments from the heart of the town or city.

While river cruise itineraries tend to include a daily excursion

at no up-charge and also offer frequent add-ons (some pricey, some very worthwhile such as our recent visit to the wineries of Châteauneuf-du-Pape), you can also easily explore historic towns on your own, a mere stroll away from your stateroom.

Of course, both ocean and river cruises can include unanticipated problems. On the river, you are unlikely to encounter the rough seas that can happen in the ocean-going vessels, but high or low water levels in the rivers can disrupt schedules. The last stage of our cruise to Budapest saw us taking a bus from Vienna because the water level in the Danube was dangerously high.

So, the choice is yours. There are advantages to either option, ocean or river. I have done both. My favourite ocean cruise was a voyage in the eastern Mediterranean that took me places I would be unlikely to see any other way – Ephesus, Santorini, Dubrovnik and Malta among them. I loved it.

But more recently, my cruising has been on the rivers of Europe – the Danube, the Rhone, the Bordeaux region, the Rhine – and I can honestly report that I have enjoyed every moment. I have always travelled with Viking River Cruises, though I hear positive reports of other cruise companies, as well.

It is clear that with many Canadians looking for alternate travel options these days, cruising has become an option that is attracting a lot of interest. So, wherever and however you choose to go, bon voyage!

Paul Knowles is an author and travel writer, and past-president of the Travel Media Association of Canada. To contact Paul about travel, his books, or speaking engagements, email pknowles@golden.net.



A Viking longship on the Rhine River.



Cruise ships shown in the harbour at Santorini.

Crossword

CLUES ACROSS

1. Cut quickly
5. A way to state clearly
11. River in NE Scotland
14. Expansive
15. Lacking social polish
16. Amount of time
17. Frame
19. Automobile
20. Toadstools
21. High school dances
22. Utilize
23. Experimented with
25. One-sided
27. Acquisitive
31. Potted plants
34. Everyone has one
35. Kalahari Desert lake
38. Unidentified flying object
39. People 65 and over
41. Small amount
42. Daughter of Acrisius
44. Ornamental box
45. Government agents
46. Uncertain
49. A cotton fabric with a satiny finish
51. Treeless plains
55. One's sense of self-importance
56. Consumer advocate
60. Type of lounge
61. Body part
62. Can be persuaded
64. Woman (French)
65. Ready and willing to be taught
66. Arab ruler title
67. Unhappy
68. Gradually went away
69. Able to think clearly

CLUES DOWN

1. Brushed
2. Small water spirit (Germ.)
3. Heroes
4. Monetary units
5. Some don't want to share theirs
6. Free-swimming invertebrate
7. Litigates
8. Outer
9. Parallelograms
10. Uneasy feelings
11. Cross
12. A way to remove
13. Pages can be dog-__
18. Ukrainian city
24. A citizen of Denmark
26. Month
28. Hindu queens
29. Group of chemicals
30. Rider of Rohan
31. Wet dirt
32. Southwestern Russia city
33. Observed
36. Angry
37. Drivers' licenses
39. Musical composition
40. Auction
43. They __
45. Women
47. Be filled with love for
48. Thick-soled sock
49. Appears
50. Old World lizard
52. The leading performer
53. Protein
54. "Gunga Din" script writer
57. Art __, around 1920
58. __ Blyton, children's author
59. Abnormal breathing
63. A place to rest

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Pet of the week



HUXLEY

Looking for a fun-loving, high-energy companion who's always ready for adventure? Meet Huxley! This handsome two-year-old greets everyone with a wiggly bum, a big smile, and contagious enthusiasm.

Huxley loves to run, chase, and play—especially when toys are involved. Whether it's a game of fetch, a long hike, or zooming around the yard, he's happiest when he's on the move. Strong and athletic, he'll thrive with an active adopter who can match his zest for life and continue working on his skills.

After burning off some energy, Huxley is happy to relax with his people, soaking up affection and sharing endless tail wags. If you're ready for a loyal, goofy, adventure-ready best friend, Huxley can't wait to meet you! He's available at our Stratford Centre. <https://kwsphumane.ca/adopt/dogs>



Sudoku

2		6		3			8	
			4			6		2
1	5			2	8	9		
5							9	
7			2	6	3			
			5			1		
		2	3	9	4			
			7		6	2		
9						8	7	

Solutions on page 27

CLASSIFIEDS

Email to inquire stratfordtimes@gmail.com

IN MEMORY

WILLIAM (BILL) GERBER
January 11, 1931 - February 25, 2025



Forever in our hearts

NOTICE OF CREDITORS



NOTICE TO CREDITORS AND OTHERS IN THE ESTATE OF MATTHEW ARBOGAST MACKEY

All persons having claims against the Estate of **Matthew Arbogast Mackey**, late of Stratford, Ontario, deceased, who died on October 18, 2025, are hereby notified to send into the undersigned Personal Representative of the said deceased, on or before the **17th day of March, 2026**, full particulars of their claims. After the said date, the Personal Representative will distribute the assets of the said deceased, having regard only to the claims of which he shall then have notice.

DATED at Stratford, Ontario, this 2nd day of February, 2026.

A. Paul Parlee
Personal Representative
by his Solicitors,
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8	7	2	3	9	4	5	6	1
4	1	5	7	8	6	2	3	9
9	6	3	1	5	2	8	7	4

QUIZ ANSWERS

- Mango or Durian
- Hedgehogs & Porcupines
- Bessie Smith
- Amazon
- Bamboo
- Ohm (Ω)
- Johnny Depp
- 32
- The Sargasso Sea
- Eight

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