

# STRATFORD **TIMES**

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## Warming centre opens its doors

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The long-awaited warming centre, hosted within the Stratford Connection Centre, has opened its doors, offering a warm respite during this already frigid winter.

Catherine Hardman, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Huron Perth, told the Times a day before opening (which was Dec. 17) that it is an achievement that rests upon the hard work of many different people and organizations – CMHA, the City of Stratford, United Way Perth-Huron, St. Paul's Anglican Church (which is hosting the warming centre) and the Stratford Council of Churches, to name a few.

In the run-up to opening, the response has been strong, and organizers are eager to see how many will utilize the service.

"People are anxious for it to open," Hardman said. "... Certainly, participants that come to the Connection Centre were kind of wondering why (we) can't open right away ... There's some anticipation of it starting, and we know that people will be (using it)."

Above all, Hardman said the warming centre is a gap solution as the City of Stratford and related entities put their funds toward supportive housing – permanent housing with social service support wrapped around it, to make sure once housed, an individual stays housed. Like many leading the city's response to the housing epidemic, Hardman said it is the real solution the city should be striving for.

Currently, the city uses an emergency accommodations program, which provides hotel and motel rooms for the unhoused, in place of a traditional brick-and-mortar shelter. The new warming centre would be an

CONTINUED TO PAGE 2



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Chris Mejaki performs a traditional grass dance for the opening ceremony of Lights On Stratford on Dec. 12. For the full story, see page 3.

## Stratford officers praised for life-saving actions during 2024 Bradshaw Drive shooting

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

On Aug. 1, 2024, Stratford faced a rare and violent crisis as Stratford police received multiple 911 calls reporting gunshot victims and an active shooter on Bradshaw Drive in the city's north end.

Within minutes, six Stratford police officers arrived at the scene.

"In that moment of uncertainty and danger, six of our officers – Consts. Jeff Serf, Brady Simpson, Brent Poppe,

Scott Parkinson, Amy Knechtel and Nick Feltz – responded without hesitation," Acting Deputy Chief Mark Taylor said.

"They rushed toward the threat, knowing the risks, and acted with courage and professionalism. Their decisive actions and life-saving measures that evening not only protected lives but exemplified the highest standards of policing."

Ricky Bilcke, 31, shot his neighbours, Jonathan Bennett, 36, and David Tokley, 43, with a high-powered rifle.

CONTINUED TO PAGE 2



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# Warming centre opens its doors

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

additional resource for the unhoused, as well as another option for those who cannot use or don't feel comfortable using the emergency accommodations program. As Hardman explained, in some cases the program is not suitable due to accommodations not being open to housing certain individuals due to "circumstances," so the new warming centre can be a huge asset for a few in the community.

Like the Connection Centre, which will continue to operate during the day, there will be behaviour expectations for those using the service, mainly to make sure the space is a safe environment for everyone.

One notable distinction is that the warming centre is not a shelter, with the main difference being a lack of beds. Hardman explained that with the addition of sleeping arrangements, a project like this one wouldn't be feasible, as the insurance and liability demands would be too costly.

The warming centre was unanimously approved in a special city council meeting on Oct. 20, after first being brought up by city officials during a public debate on a shelter in September. According to the report presented during the special meeting, it is expected to cost the city, which is footing the bill, \$350,000.

The idea for the warming centre came from a discussion between Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma and Trevor Biehn, pastor at Jubilee Stratford and a member of the Stratford Council of Churches. As Biehn said,



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

**Trevor Biehn, pastor at Jubilee Stratford, Catherine Hardman, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association Huron Perth, Susan Faber, director of resource development and communications at United Way Perth-Huron and Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma pose in the Stratford Connection Centre, which now hosts a warming centre this winter.**

the initiative was envisioned as "Not One More Night" and was intended to leverage community partners as part of a "made-in-Stratford" solution.

To that end, Ritsma said that there is still more to do before that made-in-Stratford solution is seen: supportive housing.

"Homelessness isn't 'just not having a roof over your head' (problem)," Ritsma said. "It's us having enough supports that can address mental health and addiction."

Speaking with the Times a day before the warming centre opened, Ritsma said that the Council of Churches is hoping to fundraise \$154,000 for operational costs. So far, the United Way has pitched in \$10,000 – as has an anonymous citizen.

Located at 9 Douro St., the Connection Centre is open noon to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, and the warming centre will run seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and then 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Doors will be open, no matter the weather.

# Stratford officers praised for life-saving actions during 2024 Bradshaw Drive shooting

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

He then shot Bennett's partner, Stephanie Irvine, with a shotgun before taking his own life.

Bilcke was pronounced dead at the scene. Bennett later died at Stratford General Hospital. Tokley and Irvine sustained serious injuries, were hospitalized and later released.

The incident marked Stratford's first homicide in nearly two decades.

"These officers demonstrated what it truly means to serve and protect," Taylor said. "They saved lives that day."

In recognition of the officers' actions, the Stratford Police Service applied for the Ontario Medal for Police Bravery, but the application was unsuccessful.

"While we were informed in November 2025 that our application was not successful, that does not diminish the heroism displayed that night," Taylor said. "Their actions will forever stand as a testament to their commitment to this community."

Police also recognized the role of two communicators who received the initial 911 calls: Nikki Smidts and Heather Forsyth. Taylor said both quickly triaged calls to ensure officers were dispatched efficiently.

"They did an amazing job taking those 911 calls," he said. "So many calls came in, and they were able to prioritize the most critical information – where individuals were, what they were doing – and calmly dispatch officers to the scene."

Taylor noted the emotional toll the situation carried for dispatchers in a small police service.

"Our dispatchers have personal relationships with these officers. This is a small service, and this is like their second family," he said.

"These two dispatchers had to send officers into a situation where there was an active shooter, knowing they could be putting their friends at risk. That carries a huge emotional toll."

"On behalf of the Stratford Police Service and the citizens we serve, I want to express our deepest gratitude to Consts. Serf, Simpson, Poppe, Parkinson, Knechtel and Feltz, as well as communicators Smidts and Forsyth," Taylor said. "Thank you for your dedication and unwavering resolve to keep our community safe."

An advertisement for 'The Split Rail Country Store'. The top part shows a store interior with shelves of various goods. Below that is a large circular logo with 'The SPLIT RAIL COUNTRY STORE' text and a central illustration of a horse and rider. To the left of the logo, text provides the website 'www.splitrailcountrystore.com', the address '4304 Rd 119 N. Stratford', and a phone number '(519) 273-1881' with the phrase 'For smilin' country service call:'. The bottom left shows a display of cowboy hats on wooden shelves, and the bottom right shows a close-up of a cowboy boot on a red surface.

An advertisement for Sherrie Roulston, a Real Estate Broker at Royal LePage Hiller Realty. The top part features the company logo and name. Below that is a portrait of Sherrie Roulston. To the right of her portrait, text lists her name 'SHERRIE ROULSTON', her title 'Real Estate Broker', her email 'sherrieroulston@royallepage.ca', and her direct phone number '519-272-3578'. At the bottom right, there is a tagline 'A Passion for People' in a stylized font.



# 6th annual Lights On Stratford opens for 'ambitious' season

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Mother Nature couldn't stop this year's Lights On.

The sixth annual Lights On Stratford Winter Festival of Lights flipped its switch on Dec. 12, beginning the long anticipated 2025/26 season. With opening remarks from area dignitaries and a grass dance from Chris Mejaki, dozens gathered in Market Square for the Canadian premiere of CHRONOHARP, an Australian light sculpture that reimagines what a traditional harp is, instead displaying one as a large light structure with interactive colour and harmonious sound.

As Zac Gribble, festival director and executive director of Destination Stratford, said, CHRONOHARP's new temporary home is much different than its native land. The conditions that hit Stratford and area were stereotypically Canadian this year and were the most challenging the Lights On team ever had to face.

"A couple of our crew comes from Australia, because one of our light installations is Australian, and this is the first time that they've experienced freezing rain," said Gribble. "The jackets were crinkly. And one of them said, 'What magic is this?' We had high winds, a tremendous amount of snowfall in (short) peri-

ods, and we had to work through all of that in order to be ready to launch ... The show must go on.

"A mixture of elation and relief," Gribble later said about how he was feeling now that the festival has started. "Because it's just a lot of hard work by a lot of people to pull it together, but we made it. I'm very, very proud of Lights On Stratford this year. I feel like it has evolved and grown every year, and we were very ambitious. The team has pulled it off, and the community's really come together for it."

Lights On was originally envisioned as an anchor festival during the winter "shoulder season" for Stratford. The city's integral tourism sector typically lies dormant in the winter months (Gribble claimed that 80 per cent of the tourism economy occurs only in four months), but many believe that the city must be a 365-day destination in order to thrive. Lights On does not generate revenue, but it does draw visitors into town and once here, they will visit shops and spend money, allowing Stratford to adjust and grow its tourism.

This year has made headway on that endeavour. For the first time in its history, the Stratford Festival extended its season into December, showing *Annie* at the Festival Theatre at the same time as Lights On.

"*Annie* is playing at the Stratford Festival this weekend," Gribble said. "We have Here for

Now theatre with its first ever winter playbill. There's summer music festivals that are doing winter music pop ups, and so that starts to snowball. ... We feel Stratford's got every ingredient it needs to have vibrancy year-round."

Thanking Gribble for his hard work, Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma also highlighted that Lights On goes beyond tourism as well.

"We have so many things going on that are in collaboration with Lights On Stratford," Ritsma said. "I can't wait to have the opportunity to bring my own grandchildren here. This is about not only tourism, but it's about all of our residents in Stratford."

Along with CHRONOHARP, this year's Lights On features BIRDS OF A FEATHER and SHROOMS on Tom Patterson Island, WAYFINDING from local artist Josh Bean, UWATERLOO 13 GRANDMOTHER MOONS and EVERBRIGHT at the Destination Stratford downtown office, HEART at the bandshell on Veterans Drive and the permanent LIGHTWALL and LIGHTBRIDGE displays downtown.

Lights On runs Thursdays to Sundays from 5-10 p.m. until Jan. 18. For more information visit <https://lightsonstratford.ca/>.



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Zac Gribble, festival director of Lights On and executive director of Destination Stratford, told the Times that this year's festival is ambitious and ready to light up Stratford's darkest days.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

CHRONOHARP in Market Square is one of the feature pieces of this season's Lights On Stratford festival.



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# Editorial

## I read smut, and I'm not sorry about it



AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

I read. A lot.

When I was a kid, I devoured the Harry Potter series, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, The Hobbit — basically anything in the fantasy realm I could get my hands on. I've read Jane Eyre, everything Jane Aus-

ten ever wrote, biographies on everyone from Drew Barrymore to Prince Harry, and just about anything related to the Roman Empire. But another, perhaps more interesting, part of my reading life is that I love a good, gritty romance series — and I'm really not sorry about it.

At the ripe old age of 12, I found my mom's stash of V.C. Andrews books and dove right in. The first one I read was Heaven, a series about a young girl who falls in love with Logan Stonewall, a kind but impoverished local boy. Later, she ends up in a complicated relationship with her adoptive father's nephew, Troy — her adoptive uncle. In typical V.C. Andrews fashion, the love story is tangled, taboo and full of drama, but I ate it up

and read all five books back-to-back.

I remember giving a book presentation in class on one of the novels. I spoke with enthusiasm and went way over my time limit. I'm fairly certain my mom received a phone call later that day from my teacher — probably to check on the "appropriateness" of my reading choices.

Next came Flowers in the Attic, another famously dark and twisted series that I also loved. I started reading these intense, slightly scandalous romance novels as a kid, and honestly, they're what made me fall in love with reading in the first place.

When I got older — after college, because let's be honest, no one has time to read for

fun during college — I gravitated more toward fantasy and light-hearted books that were popular at the time. I also went through a historical fiction phase, reading anything about women during the Second World War. Eventually, though, I found myself missing the messy, passionate stories that first hooked me.

A few years ago, I discovered the perfect middle ground: fantasy romance novels.

These books usually start with a normal girl who makes a mistake — like killing a deer she wasn't supposed to — and ends up captured by faeries or kings, only to fall in love with one of them and find out she, too, has special, magical powers. The series often span five, six or even

seven books, and I devour them without hesitation.

If you've been in a bookstore lately, you've probably seen one of Sarah J. Maas's novels, A Court of Thorns and Roses (ACOTAR). There are currently five books in the series, with a sixth on the way. I plan to be one of the first in line to get my copy when it's released next year.

Getting back into fantasy — with a little spice added — has been a game changer for me. It's reminded me why I love reading in the first place. I've always been a reader, but finding this community of people who read like me has been a delight. Escaping into a fantasy world filled with adventure, romance and a little chaos? Totally worth it.

## Letter to the Editor: A "Cooper plan" with guardrails

Developing consensus-driven guiding principles for the Grand Trunk renewal project would help ensure the Cooper Site is developed with professional expertise, transparent oversight and long-term operational sustainability, without shifting future financial risk onto taxpayers. Done well, this project can strengthen Stratford's cultural reputation while keeping our community accessible and our tax base affordable.

Potential site development guiding principles:

Evidence-based procurement and expertise

- Secure the procurement and project-management expertise required to plan, evaluate, and negotiate a project of this scale.

- Ensure all procurement stages are open, competitive,

and transparent.

No future cost risk to taxpayers

- The City must not assume financial, operational, environmental, or structural risks associated with development or long-term management.

- All cost-overflow, performance, and lifecycle risks must reside with the private partner, backed by enforceable guarantees.

Operational sustainability

- Final design and tenant mix must demonstrate predictable, self-funding O&M.

- Proposals must include full lifecycle costing: energy demand, maintenance, capital replacement, and inflation exposure.

Proven developer capability

- Only proponents with a documented history of delivering and managing large mixed-use facilities, rental housing, and complex redevelopments will be considered.

- Experience must extend to long-term operations, not just construction.

Parking strategy that protects community access

- Maintain or enhance downtown accessibility for residents, workers, and visitors.

- Any paid-parking model must not erode tourism competitiveness or impose new costs on residents.

Revenue realism and economic viability

- Revenue projections must be independently validated,

conservative, and realistic, not speculative or aspirational.

Transparent public reporting

- Major decisions, financial models, procurement results, and lifecycle analyses must be made publicly available.

- Residents must have clear visibility into risks, costs, and evaluation criteria.

Heritage value with fiscal discipline

- Any retained heritage structure must demonstrate feasible and cost-responsible reuse, supported by adaptive-reuse experts.

- Heritage goals cannot override financial or operational sustainability.

Governance and oversight

- Establish a dedicated oversight structure, potentially with external advisors, to:

- Guard against scope creep

- Ensure compliance with guiding principles

- Protect the public interest from political or developer pressure

A principled, transparent approach can give taxpayers the necessary confidence that this once-in-a-generation site is being planned with the appropriate expertise and fiscal responsibility. The Cooper Site can be a community asset for decades to come, but only if we get the fundamentals right from the start.

Mark Wilson,  
Stratford

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**STRATFORDTIMES**

### Guiding Principles

1. Everyone has a story
2. The news should be free for all to enjoy
3. Good news beats bad news
4. A Newspaper should be a community effort (contribute to your local paper!)
5. Newspapers document history
6. Newspapers strengthen communities
7. Advertisers, big or small, should profit from their ads (meaning sensible ad rates)
8. Newspapers should be locally-owned and operated



# Editorial

## See you in the new year!



CONNOR LUCZKA

*Times Editor*

The edition in your hands, or displayed on your digital device, is our last edition of 2025. Next week the Times and all other Grant Haven Media publications take a break for the holidays. The week after that is our Year in Review edition, a commemorative issue that covers all of 2025, meaning that the next regular edi-

tion will come out on Jan. 9, three weeks from now.

So, from all of us here at the Times, have a happy – and hopefully warm – holidays. We'll see you in the new year!

In putting together the Year in Review edition, I've been going over all of the 2025 issues and compiling the stories in their pages. Not everything will make it in that edition of course, but the major stories, the stories which have impacted the fabric and future of the Festival City, will be included.

It's gotten me feeling nostalgic. Putting the paper together every bi-week and then every week, the stories of last week soon give way to the stories of next week, and it's remarkable to go through and realize just exactly how much happened this year. Businesses have started and ended, new homes and buildings have bro-

ken ground and risen up and as residents go about their lives, the world changes around them.

Opposite this page are our guiding principles, with one of them being that "Newspapers document history." As a lover of history, I'll admit that this is a huge part of my thought process when putting together the paper. In the years to come, if people were to pick up a copy of the Times, did we reflect what really happened fairly and accurately? Did we capture the feelings of Stratford's residents? Covered the major events? Left enough for future storytellers to learn and reflect? That's what we ought to do. That's what I think we achieve as well.

When the historic Avon Crest hospital was demolished in 2023, I worked on a story going through its history. I figured if the build-

ing wouldn't be standing anymore, the least I could do would be to have an article in its place. With the assistance of the Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance, I took photos of the hospital as it stood a few months before demolition. Then, with the help of the Perth County Archives, I learned everything there needed to know about the hospital, chiefly through past articles of the Stratford Beacon Herald.

In one circa. 1952 editorial, an unnamed author wrote about Avon Crest "Ghosts, they say, have a habit of walking. We haven't heard the last of the old hospital." I don't know why that single sentence strikes me the way it does, but it has. I think about whoever wrote that line fairly often, think about the team of reporters that covered all of the milestones Avon Crest achieved

in its century lifespan.

Ghosts do walk, after all, and they walk in the lines of type printed in pages like these.

Now, the Times is not Stratford's historic newspaper. Besides the eponymous Beacon Herald there have been many newspapers in the city since its inception (in fact we aren't even the first Stratford Times to operate in this city), but we do try to operate like its historic paper, so that one day a reporter working for the press of the day can go to the archives and find our stories – and see just how many comma splices a certain "Connor Luczka" made in the early 2020s.

To that end, our upcoming Year in Review edition is an important one, a culmination of our work this year and a jumping off point for all the work we have in 2026. Keep an eye out for it!

## Letter to the editor: Make your voice heard and show Rob your support

After seeing and hearing the presentation delivered by Rob Ritz at the Army Navy, I found myself overwhelmed with the content, which covered most of the projects that make up a community hub.

I have waited over 30 years to see a proposal so well delivered, and addressing most of the needs of the city.

I find it hard to believe that Rob Ritz would spend over three months to develop the plan using his own time and money. A Stratford boy raised in Stratford that has so much love for the city.

His plan is to carry out the development in seven phases, all of which would be paid for from the revenue from apartment rentals, indoor parking leases, revenue from electric car chargers, the solar panels revenue, rental spaces.

The \$5 million that was paid to the city for the Tom

Patterson Theatre on Riverside Drive that was to be used for a seniors centre at the GTR\CNR building – that was seven years ago, so its interest must be close to \$6 million, waiting for it to happen..

Other revenue possibilities that were mentioned during the visit of the Environment Minister, Catherine McKenna: application for grants from the province and federal governments. These were mentioned during her visit. Additional revenue would come from the YMCA.

The presentation still has to be presented to the city council for approval.

After the presentation at the Army Navy, Rob got a standing ovation, something that I have never seen given to a person making a presentation. The Army Navy was standing room only.

Come on Stratford, make your voice be heard and show

Rob your support.

Rob Ritz is a local architect in Stratford.

*Lorne Bolton,  
Stratford.*

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# CJCS hosts 49th radiothon for Christmas Basket fundraiser

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Almost \$12,000 was raised during the 49th CJCS/Kiwanis Christmas Basket Fund RADIOTHON on Dec. 12, and there is still plenty of time for the fundraiser to reach its \$60,000 goal.

Dave Evans, chair of the organizing committee for the Christmas Basket, said that the initiative was started about 1978 as a way to give back to the less fortunate during the holiday season. Since the station manager of CJCS was a Kiwanian, it seemed like a natural step to host a radiothon.

Since then, the radiothon has become the biggest fundraising day for the Christmas Basket, with members of the community coming from across the Festival City to the station to donate.

Kevin Fell, afternoons/program director with CJCS, said that it's also a particularly lively day.

"There're a lot of personalities in these back hallways for most of the day," Fell laughed. "The building is a little more lively today, a lot more people around, a lot of people buzzing in and out."

The money goes towards the aforementioned Christmas Basket, which was originally hampers of food given out at Christmas. Now, Evans said that the group gives out gift cards instead. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, about 600 families were assisted. Now, they are up to 1,000.

This year, through the fundraising done last year, over \$60,000 worth of gift cards have been distributed through the Salvation Army and the Stratford House of Blessing. Next year, if they don't meet their goal, they won't be able to assist as much.

To that end, those interested in donating can do so year-round by dropping a cheque off at the radio station, according to Evans.



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Dave Evans and Kevin Fell pose during the 49th CJCS/Kiwanis Christmas Basket Fund RADIOTHON.

# With snow piling up, city reminds public of its winter maintenance strategy

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

As snow continues to fall on the region, City of Stratford staff continue to plow the roughly 200 kilometres of roads and sidewalks in its purview.

According to the city's winter maintenance strategy, the public works division takes a proactive approach to winter maintenance. Weather is tracked and recorded several times a day, road inspections are conducted every four hours in the winter, and anti-icing measures are applied in anticipation of a winter event.

With a fleet of winter maintenance vehicles, public works plow according to a route map which prioritizes arterial roads like Erie and Ontario streets, then school zones and collector roads and then lower-used residential roads.

"City staff live and work (and drive) in Stratford too, so we appreciate and understand the frustrations that come with winter storms," said Taylor Crinklaw, director of infrastructure services with the city. "The city's commitment is to provide clear, safe and passable streets and sidewalks, as quickly as we are able, and in a manner that meets Ontario's standards. The public works division has operators working 24 hours a day, seven days a week to address winter maintenance activities."

Crinklaw added that overnight coverage is often assisted with morning crews being called in early, typically at 3:30

a.m., in light of a winter event.

"When snowstorms hit, the longer and heavier the storm, the longer it takes to get the city back to clear conditions. Essentially, the city is required to continually address collector and arterial roads until the snow stops. When the snow stops, we must ensure arterial and collector roads are cleared, before moving onto the less travelled residential streets. This takes time and we ask residents for patience as we continue operations, as it can take as long as 24 hours to make a full rotation through the city after the snow stops. When time permits, staff with contractor support address snowbanks on city streets. Removing and hauling snowbanks comes with elevated costs, which staff try to consider before undertaking such activities."

If a resident sees a road hazard or an area that needs more attention, they can visit the city's Report an Issue section on its website at <https://forms.stratford.ca/Report-an-Issue>.

They are also welcome to call it in at the public works line at 519-271-0250, ext. 259.

"Every year it takes time for drivers to become adjusted to winter conditions," Crinklaw said. "We ask residents to please take the time to slow down, consider winter tires and plan ahead. Most of all, we encourage people to be patient."

To see the city's plow map, visit <https://tinyurl.com/ub9ppy4p>.

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# Stratford police get provincial funding boost to enhance mental-health response capabilities

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Stratford Police Service (SPS) is among several local police forces that will receive a funding boost from the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General to support their unique, community focused programs that help better protect the communities and people they serve.

Last week, Perth-Wellington MPP Matthew Rae announced more than \$700,000 in funding for police services in the riding, including \$240,000 over the next two years for SPS for its mobile crisis response team (MCRT), a program started in 2019 in partnership with the Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance that has qualified mental-health workers respond to calls involving people in crisis with frontline police officers, allowing for de-escalation and connection to mental-health services and resources as an alternative to arrest and treatment in hospital.

"Our communities continue to see a rise in vulnerable populations experiencing mental illness, addiction and homelessness," Stratford police Chief Greg Skinner said. "... Having a qualified mobile crisis response team worker available to respond to people in mental-health crisis and provide support and assessment in the field instead of apprehending and transporting to hospital is the most efficient and effective means to make referrals to community agencies.

"... This program has been the most effective frontline support program to deal with vulnerable people in our communities. Having a mental illness is not a crime and that's why I, as the chief of police, am supportive of the mobile crisis response team program and am grateful that the Ontario Government continues to financially support a program that has so many benefits to individuals and our communities of Stratford, St. Marys and Perth South."

Rae also announced more than \$267,000 over the next two years to support Perth County OPP's MCRT enhancement program.

"It is great to see our provincial government supporting local police services to protect our rural communities," Rae said in a press release. "This funding will help local police services and health-care workers offer specialized mental health supports to community members experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis. Our government will continue to support our first responders."

In addition to the MCRT Grant funding, the province is also providing funding through its Community Safety and Policing Grant program – nearly \$61,000 for the Perth County OPP thanks to a joint application between the West Perth and North Perth detachments, and nearly \$178,000 for SPS to support the police service's purpose-driven responses.

"That grant supports an enhancement to our special constable corps to support court security, community visibility and electronic low priority call response," Skinner said. "With the changes to the Community Safety and Policing Act, the roles and responsibilities of special constables have expanded, allowing them to be assigned to more frontline duties in communities."

Skinner said SPS is in the process of hiring four additional special constables, adding to the service's six current special constables for a total of 10.

"We will be implementing a deployment model that supports the three priorities listed above. We have heard from the community that they would like more visibility in the downtown cores during peak hours over and above the summer period and provide visibility in identified areas of concern within our policing jurisdiction. With these new positions, we intend to provide that increased visibility and add to the sense of safety and security that our residents feel as they're out enjoying what our communities have to offer," Skinner said.

In addition to adding more special constables, Skinner said the police service continues to leverage technology to support community safety including cameras, lighting, signage, drones and automated licence plate readers, all of which play a role in preventing, detecting and solving crime.

Wellington County will also receive more than \$187,000 through the Community Safety and Policing Grant program

## SONNET 155

*(on the occasion of presupposing Shakespeare visits Stratford, Ontario and guiltily falls in love with our beautiful little city)*

'Till now my love hath spun within this isle,  
My jewel'd birthplace where sleek Avon glides,  
Where dearest Anne shames sunbeams with her smile

And all my dreams and roses doth reside.  
Man should not once besmirk his lover's bed,  
Nor speak foul phrases to their sleeping ear,  
For love is not twine but tenderest thread  
And love's arrow too soon the devil's spear.  
Yet today have I seen my dear God's quirks:  
Another Stratford by an Avon blooms,  
Where art and kindness weave their blessed work  
And mortal breath with timeless grace perfumes.  
Forgive me, my heart is elsewhere now,  
Though to both Stratford's doth my love avow.  
-- David Stones, Stratford poet laureate


to support the Wellington Fraud Prevention and Response Strategy.

"Our government is taking decisive action to protect Ontario by ensuring police have the tools, resources and partnerships they need to keep our communities safe," said Ontario Solicitor General Michael Kerzner in the press release.

The Community Safety and Policing Grant program is part of the government's \$91 million investment to support policing initiatives that focus on local or provincial priorities and provides eligible police services or boards and municipalities policed by the OPP with funding to deploy frontline officers where and when they are needed most.

For 2025-2026 and 2026-2027, 36 police services and OPP detachments across the province will receive approximately \$9 million through the MCRT Enhancement Grant to increase the capacity of mobile crisis response teams.

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# “Abuse thrives in silence”: It’s Not Ok. campaign highlights hidden signs of intimate partner violence

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

*Times Reporter*

Optimism Place continues to promote its Not Ok. campaign, which raises awareness that intimate partner violence (IPV) is a widespread issue, both nationally and in local communities.

According to the campaign website, more than four in 10 women will experience some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime. In the past year alone, 43 women in Ontario were killed by a current or former partner.

Across the province, more than 100 municipalities – including Stratford and West Perth – have declared IPV an epidemic. In November, the Ontario government went further, describing IPV as

endemic.

Labelling IPV as endemic recognizes it as a chronic, systemic issue rather than a series of isolated incidents. It acknowledges that violence within intimate relationships is both predictable and preventable, and that addressing it requires long-term, coordinated efforts across multiple systems – not just crisis response.

Understanding gender-based violence begins with recognizing its warning signs and acknowledging that abuse can occur at any age, says Donna Jean Forster, Optimism Place executive director.

Forster says more women in retirement are seeking help than ever before.

“We have had more women over 70 coming into shelter than ever before,” she

said. “They’ve been in very abusive relationships for 40 or 50 years, and they’re at 70 years old saying, ‘I now know that this was not good, and I’m getting out.’”

Gender-based violence is not limited to physical harm. It can include emotional and psychological abuse, such as name-calling, threats and controlling behaviour, including limiting who a person is allowed to see, noted Forster.

Financial abuse is also common and may involve restricting access to bank accounts or preventing someone from working.

Increasingly, abuse occurs through digital means. Technological abuse can involve tracking someone’s location, online harassment or cyberstalking.

Forster says abuse often thrives in si-

lence, making public awareness critical. When people understand the full spectrum of gender-based violence, they are better able to recognize when something is wrong – whether it is happening to a loved one, a neighbour or someone else in the community.

“Are they putting you down? Are they talking negatively about you? Are they talking about the clothes you wear? Are they calling you names? Are they not allowing you to spend time with your family and friends?” she said.

Recognizing these signs, she adds, can lead to earlier intervention, safer conversations and stronger support for survivors.

For more information or to seek help, visit [itsnotok.ca](http://itsnotok.ca) or call 519-271-5550 for 24/7 support.

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# Stratford Perth Museum venues winter music event

ALEX HUNT

*Times Correspondent*

The Stratford Perth Museum transforms into a winter chalet this Saturday with live music, themed cocktails, and festive fun.

The museum will host its first “Chalet Shakedown” event, featuring music notes from Nevin Douglas, Lea Keeley and Mutual Mind. The event will begin at 7 p.m. with tickets priced at \$25 per person.

“We wanted this event to connect the museum with the winter season. I didn’t want it to feel overly holiday-themed, but still wintry, festive and fun,” said Ethan McCarroll, museum technician and Mutual Mind front man. “We want to make this event as immersive as possible and tie the music, the museum, and the overall atmosphere together into a full experience.”

Greg Plante of Craftsman Custom Cocktails will craft winter-themed and chalet-style beverages. Food and treats

will be provided by MOKA Eatery Inc. in Sebringville and Corner Store Candy Co. from Stratford.

Every person attending is encouraged to dress in retro ski-themed attire and will receive a free raffle ticket and a round of shots.

“The integration with the special event and the music is something that we strive for as a band,” said McCarroll. “We try to create these immersive atmospheres, and we bring the house down with really good music, and that keeps people coming back, and we work hard on our craft so much that when we go to play, it’s undeniable.”

McCarroll hopes to provide attendees with that feeling of community and that they leave the night with a sense of joy.

Mutual Mind has also curated and played at last year’s museum speakeasy event, Velvet and Ivory: A 1920s-Inspired Evening.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Mutual Mind aims to bring down the house at the Chalet Shakedown on Dec. 20.

# Humane society encouraging literacy confidence in children with Tales for Tails

EMILY STEWART

*Times Correspondent*

Donating books about animals for elementary school students up to Grade Six can give young readers a chance to work on literacy skills by reading to an animal.

The Humane Society of Kitchener Waterloo Stratford Perth (KWSP) is looking for donations of books for their Tales for Tails program. The books must be for readers between kindergarten through to Grade Six and have an animal theme.

Educators part of the humane society will then review the books to make sure they match the requirements and will take the books to schools part of the Waterloo Region District and Avon Maitland District School Boards. The students can pick a book and read to Scout, the organization’s education bunny.

“It’s just a program to help kids build their confidence and their literacy skills,” said Cree Toner, community program supervisor. “It’s not necessarily a program that’s going to teach them how to read, but the idea is that they can have a safe and non-judgemental environment with the animal and then reading to the animal will help them feel more confident as a reader and that’ll carry into the classroom and also just more confident

as a person too.”

Toner said that in addition to providing an environment for students to work on their literacy skills without the fear of judgement, compared to reading out loud in front of the classroom, Tales for Tails provides social benefits for the animal and the child.

“From the animal’s perspective, it’s really nice to get to be around children in a calm environment. Some of our other school presentations, the animal might be in front of like 40 students at a time, which is great, but then that one-on-one interaction is really nice for both student and animal,” she said. “It’s also really nice for kids that might not have pets at home to get that one-on-one interaction with animals too, especially if they haven’t spent a lot of time around pets, they don’t maybe feel as comfortable.”

Educators part of the humane society are also working on making books specific to its own work.

“Both of their animals actually came from our animal shelter so we’re wanting to expand on that relationship through those books and teach them what the humane society offers and the importance of the human-animal bond,” Toner said.

Books can be dropped off at either humane society centre, including Stratford Perth’s on 124 Griffith Rd.

## Weekend Quiz

By Jake Grant

1. Where does Santa live?
2. How many reindeer does Santa have?
3. In the classic song, “Frosty the Snowman,” what made Frosty come to life?
4. Which fairy tale were the first gingerbread houses inspired by?
5. Which popular phrase was made popular by Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*?
6. Who catches the Grinch stealing?
7. Buddy the Elf sticks to the four main food groups, what are they?
8. What is the colour of the berries on mistletoe?
9. Where was Jesus laid after he was born?
10. What is the day after Christmas called?

This week’s answers are found on pg. 27

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# Stratford Walking Tours offering a family friendly nature walk this holiday season

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Stratford Walking Tours, in collaboration with C.O.R.E. Nature Experiences, presents the "Spread Your Wings" tour where families can enjoy a family-friendly, bird-timed outing.

Designed to appeal to both individuals and families, this accessible walking tour will run on Dec. 30 and 31, Jan. 3 and 4, 17 and 18 at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

This 60-minute guided walk along Lake Victoria, aims to educate guests, who will discover local history, learn about the park and river system, and more about birds and nature. The tour starts at Gallery Stratford and attendees will walk down Lake Victoria to Tom Patterson Island.

"We planned the tour around those days between Christmas and New Year's, when parents are sometimes looking for things to do with their kids," said Lauri Leduc, owner, operator and guide of

Stratford Walking Tours. "It's a great way to get outdoors and spend time together and in nature."

The walking tour aims to teach families about feeder birds that are often seen in Stratford. This theme ties in perfectly with Stratford's new Bird Friendly City designation, said Leduc.

"Following the recent designation of Stratford as a 'Bird Friendly City' by Nature Canada, the walk offers a wonderful opportunity to learn about birds, history and explore Stratford's beautiful riverside," she said. "The walk is also the perfect pairing to the Lights On Stratford BIRDS OF A FEATHER exhibit on Tom Patterson Island."

Collaborating with C.O.R.E. Nature Experiences, founded by Denise Iszczuk, attendees can expect to learn about nature and birds through engaging, hands-on experiences, such as feeding the local birds.

"On most of my walks, I do hear the black capped chickadee, people can also

expect to hear or see cardinals and of course blue jays," said Iszczuk.

"It is the perfect way to discover winter feeder birds, learn fun facts about history and natural heritage and get outside with family and friends," she continued.

As a heart-centred nature educator, Iszczuk brings her passion for living things to life. She helps people of all ages discover the wonder of nature right in their own surroundings and said children will have a great opportunity to learn all about birds on the walk.

"It kind of becomes a little bit of a scavenger hunt," she said. We will use our eyes to see different birds, and then also highlight our listening skills by hearing different birds."

After the walk, guests will be treated to free cookies and hot chocolate at Gallery Stratford, which is also offering a 50 per cent-off voucher for admission that can be used the same day, or at a later time.

For the full tour schedule and booking information, visit [stratfordwalkingtours.ca](http://stratfordwalkingtours.ca).



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Chickadees are among the many birds that can be seen and heard on the upcoming Stratford Walking Tour and C.O.R.E. Nature Experiences collaborative walk this holiday season. Designed to appeal to both individuals and families, this accessible walking tour will run on Dec. 30 and 31, Jan. 3 and 4, 17 and 18 at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

The guided walk along Lake Victoria aims to educate guests, who will discover local history, learn about the park and river system, and more about birds and nature. The tour starts at Gallery Stratford and attendees will walk down Lake Victoria to Tom Patterson Island.

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# Gilly's Pubhouse wins best burger in United Way Perth-Huron's Burger Battle

ALEX HUNT

*Times Correspondent*

St. Marys' Gilly's Pubhouse has won the People's Choice Award for Best Burger in the United Way Perth-Huron's (UWPH) Ultimate Burger Battle fundraiser competition.

Gilly's Pubhouse brought their sweet and salty Lincoln Burger to customers throughout November in support of United Way Perth-Huron's fundraising contest. Patrons were able to vote online on which restaurant made the best burger.

UWPH debuted the Ultimate Burger Battle competition this year, which invited local restaurants to make an original burger and sell it on their menu throughout the month of November. Participating restaurants donated \$2 to UWPH from every burger purchase to raise funds for community programming.

"It feels great to win this award," said Miguel Raposo, manager at Gilly's Pubhouse in St. Marys. "We aim to be a restaurant first and bar second. I think that's what makes us stand out in a town like St. Marys. We are very warm and

welcoming and that makes a difference in the hospitality atmosphere."

Ten restaurants competed in the contest to bring home the titles of People's Choice or Most Burgers Sold, the latter of which went to Bentley's in Stratford for their Gouda Cause Burger.

UWPH senior manager of resource development and communications Sonya Heyen said the local United Way brought in around \$5,000 through the competition. She added the organization is proud of the intake, especially since it was the UWPH's first time hosting the contest.

"We accept donations in different forms and this is another way for people to support us," said Heyen. "It's got an element of creativity and it encourages people to support local restaurants. It's a friendly competition that brings in different pieces that combine to make this a successful event."

"We have plans to include a judging panel and ranking systems to make this event more exciting next year. The People's Choice is a pretty fun trophy, which will live at the winner's restaurant for the year, and we hope that they display it proudly."



(UNITED WAY PERTH-HURON PHOTO)

United Way Perth-Huron executive director Ryan Erb, St. Marys Mayor Al Strathdee and staff at Gilly's Pubhouse in St. Marys proudly pose with The People's Choice Trophy from the United Way Perth-Huron's Ultimate Burger Battle.

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# Lights On Stratford featuring UWaterloo Stratford artwork

EMILY STEWART

*Times Correspondent*

Lights On Stratford will feature art installations made by fourth-year University of Waterloo students.

The students from the Stratford School of Interaction Business and Design, the local University of Waterloo campus, enrolled in the course Special Topics in Digital Culture have three art installations included in Lights On Stratford. The large-scale projects titled Healing Currents, When We Come Together, and Ripples Through Time, represent community connection, responsibility, and creativity. The three installations will be inside the Destination Stratford Welcome Office on 47 Downie St.

This will be the second time that students from instructor David Han's class will be participating in Lights On. The 46 students were divided into several groups to work on their projects, and the top three projects were selected.

Several students don't reside in Stratford and take a shuttle bus from University of Waterloo's main campus to get to and from their classes in Stratford. Han said creating large-scale projects for

Lights On allows the students to engage with the city.

"What I really wanted them to do is think about this place that they've been coming to school and spending so much of their time, what it could mean and what it might mean and try to engage with it in that way, especially 'cause Lights On is a very Stratford-specific festival," he said.

Destination Stratford's executive director Zac Gribble and sport development and tourism director Kylie Wasser came to one of the classes to talk about Destination Stratford and the importance of public art. Indigenous educator Patsy Ann Day taught the students about the 13 Grandmother Moons, which was a stepping stone for the students to then do further research and incorporate concepts into their art. To avoid appropriation and only re-telling the stories, the students had to think of the concepts from the stories and how it applies to them.

"I think the students really did take up that challenge and I'm really excited for people to see the results of all that work," Han said.

All Lights On exhibits can be viewed during the evenings from 5-10 p.m. from Thursday to Saturday until Jan. 18, 2026.

# Community comes out to help Kuchma family this Christmas

GARY WEST

*Times Correspondent*

Members of the Shakespeare Optimist Club were again in a giving mood this Christmas, focusing on the Kuchma family.

Shakespeare's Tyler and Diane Kuchma got the news in September that their seven-year-old son Carter had been diagnosed with leukemia. It wasn't long until friends and neighbours were ready to heed the call to help, as well as local service clubs.

Jeff Skubowius, treasurer for the local Optimist Club, was on hand after the village's Santa Claus parade, with a cheque for \$4,400 that he presented to the Kuchma family to help out with expenses incurred with many trips to the hospital.

The money not only came from the

Optimist Club, but also from a local beef farmer near the village of Harmony, Ed Jeffrey, who along with his family, donated his winnings from a recent Shakespeare Optimist club draw (both of \$2,200).

The local Shakespeare Men's club has also been part of the giving, as all proceeds from their October Halloween Dance, brought in just short of \$7,000 for the family. The Shakespeare Community Athletic Association (SCAA) have also been very generous, along with the church congregation at Shakespeare Presbyterian Church.

The Kuchma family is thanking everyone for all the love and support that has been shown to them and Carter. With a smile and a tear, they said the areas timely generosity will never be forgotten.



(GARY WEST PHOTO)

Diane, Natalie, Tyler (back), Carter, Tyler, Hailey and a crouching Jeff Skubowius, treasurer of the Shakespeare Optimist Club, pose for the camera.

As Carter works through his chemotherapy treatments for leukemia, the family thanks everyone for their love and generosity this Christmas season.

**Merry Christmas!**

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(GALEN SIMMONS PHOTO)

Perth-Wellington MPP Matthew Rae, Perth-Wellington MP John Nater, Nater's daughter, Ainsley Nater, and Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma joined the band, Upside of Maybe, on stage at To Stratford With Love Dec. 13 to sing Christmas carols to the more than 600 people gathered for the 37th annual free community dinner at the Stratford Rotary Complex.



(GALEN SIMMONS PHOTO)

More than 600 Stratford and area residents plus more than 100 volunteers gathered for the 37th annual To Stratford With Love free community dinner at the Stratford Rotary Complex Dec. 13 for a dinner of roast beef and all the fixings. After the dinner, organizers Richard and Ruth Kneider extended their sincere thanks to all the people, organizations, businesses and volunteers that helped make the evening possible.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Perth-Wellington MP John Nater had a shift working the Salvation Army kettle in the Stratford Mall on Dec. 15, joining thousands of volunteers across Canada's communities in raising funds for the organization.



# STRATFORD *TIMES*

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# STRATFORD *TIMES* SPORTS

## Brown joins exclusive club, Minard's heroics salvaged Warriors' rough weekend

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

*Times Correspondent*

It was a week for the Stratford Hunter Steel Warriors to forget as they had their winning streaks ended by St. Marys and London, but a shootout goal from Lucas Minard gave the Warriors a much-needed win over Listowel.

But if there was a notable highlight that deserved the positive attention from this week, it was from veteran forward Rhyse Brown.

Brown became the twentieth player in the history of the Warriors/Cullitons franchise to play 150 games on Dec. 14. One of the three remaining players from the 2023 Cherrey Cup Championship team still playing with the organization, Brown says he's grateful to be part of the franchise.

"It feels great. I'm glad to have that milestone here in Stratford for my games here. I love this community. I love it here," Brown said.

Team captain Haden Frayne and Jonas Schmidt praised Brown for their friendship and being a great presence with the team for the entire duration of their junior careers.

"I'm really happy for him. He's a really good friend of mine. We've been playing here together for four years, our fourth year together. It's cool watching him grow as a hockey player and as a friend. Him and I, we came really close together," Frayne said.

"Rhyse is an awesome guy to have in the room. He's one of my close friends now. It's been really good to see him grow as a player and a person over the last couple years. I couldn't be happier for him to achieve that milestone, and I was really happy to be a part of it throughout his junior career," Schmidt said.

Warriors head coach Dave Williams said Brown is an invaluable asset to the organization.

"He is excellent. He's been with us for four seasons, and he's a guy we can hopefully lean on as we get into the playoffs. You know him (Brown), Jonas (Schmidt), and (Haden) Frayne have all played on the team that went to the (2023) Sutherland Cup," Williams said.

"So I think any time you have guys like that that have experience, be it that season or even the last two seasons, you know, going to the final two seasons ago in that seven-game series against Chatham, I think a guy like Rhyse can be a good calming influence on the group, because we're going to face some adversity and have some tough games. I think that it's guys like that that have been through it (that) can help the group push forward."

First up for the Warriors was a road trip to the Pyramid Recreation Centre for their first "Battle of Highway 7" matchup of the season against the St. Marys Lincolns on Dec. 11.

Alongside Williams, coach Chase Windsor shared his thoughts with the Times on the rivalry between the two franchises.

"I think both towns are very passionate about their junior hockey teams, which is excellent, right? We talk a lot about how privileged our group is to play in a community that



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

**Stratford Warriors goalie Gage Hurst makes the save in the shootout against the Listowel Cyclones on Dec. 14.**

looks so favorably upon the hockey club. And you know, lots of young kids come and see our guys play and aspire to be them someday," Williams said.

"I mean geographically, when you're only 15 minutes apart, and you have two proud organizations with fan bases that are consistently following their team, I think it's going to be a great environment. Hopefully the weeknight doesn't take away from that, but I would anticipate that there should be a good crowd in there for our first trip to St. Marys."

"When I was growing up, they ran in the same conference, so I didn't see a whole lot. But last year we had a game where we came from behind, and I think we won in overtime with Hudson Binder scoring two goals late. So that was an exciting game. That was kind of my first real experience of the big rivalry and the exciting game," Windsor said.

The visiting Warriors scored first when Evan Arnold scored his sixth of the season from McQuen Haylock and Dax Vader at the 9:34 mark of the first period. St. Marys responded with 4:49 left in the period to tie the game at 1-1. The Lincolns took the lead 96 seconds into the second period and kept piling on the lead with 53 seconds left in the middle frame.

After St. Marys extended their lead to 4-1 less than a minute into the third period, Stratford starting goaltender Noah Bender was relieved for Gage Hurst. Hurst kept the Warriors in a stable float by stopping all seven shots, and Max Wildfong scored his 13th of the season from Joseph Curtin and Will Coward with 3:41 remaining to cut the lead to 4-2. Despite the Warriors' offensive push, they ran into bad luck and ran out of time, as their season-long winning streak ended at nine games.

Bender allowed four goals in 18 shots and picked up the loss. Williams commented on the team's performance at St. Marys.

"There were lots of the game that I liked. I

think it's been like how we played the last little stretch here. I think our PP obviously needs to be more impactful in games like this, where things are the goals are a little tougher to come by against a good team, really good defending team, and I think the biggest thing for us is we need to get inside in the offense as well," Williams said.

"We're playing too much outside the dots. We're generating some shots. We're not generating many second-shot opportunities. We're not making it tough on the goalie sometimes, you know. I thought there were too many pucks that he saw. That's an area that we need to continue to get better at."

The Warriors returned home on Dec. 11, hoping to keep their unbeaten home streak alive against the London Nationals. The team, along with CJCS and the Kiwanis Club of Stratford, hosted its annual Christmas Basket fundraiser during the game to support local Stratford families in need.

London struck first just over a minute into the game, but Wildfong responded with his 14th goal of the season from Jonas Schmidt and Haden Frayne midway through the opening frame. Later in the period, the Warriors nearly took the lead, but Lucas Minard missed the open net.

The Nationals retook the lead for good 65 seconds into the second period and added another goal with 6:59 left in the middle frame for a 3-1 lead. London would add another pair of goals in the third period and won the game by the score of 5-1.

Postgame, Williams wasn't pleased with the team's lack of offensive scoring.

"I think we were hoping that things would go a little bit better tonight, after last night's tough game in St. Marys. You know, it's kind of tough when you fall behind on that first goal real early, and you're kind of chasing the game a little bit. I thought we still had moments in the game where we're doing some good things,

and we still need to find ways to score goals. I mean, it's tough to win hockey games if you're only scoring, you know, a goal here, a couple goals there," Williams said.

"I didn't think that we had some decent chances. I mean, we seem to be a little snake bitten around the net, and sometimes the timing of those goals can really influence the game. So, you're struggling to capitalize on some of those chances and still trailing, but it just feels like the game is that much harder. And, you know, you're kind of pressing, so I think we could have been better."

Before the late-matinée contest against their regional rival, the Listowel Cyclones, on Dec. 14, the Warriors hosted their alumni game earlier in the afternoon.

The Cyclones got on the board first with the powerplay goal 5:54 into the first period. Listowel added another goal with 1:41 left in the period, but the Warriors responded with Schmidt's 11th goal of the season, the 50th of his GOHL career, from Minard 43 seconds later to cut the deficit to 2-1 heading into the second period. With the goal, the Stratford native has recorded a point in nine of his last 13 games.

The score remained 2-1 for the first 19-plus minutes of the middle frame until Wildfong scored with 33.6 seconds left in the period from Dominic Marshall and Coen Galbraith. With the score remaining at 2-2 after the third period and overtime, the contest headed into a shootout where Minard scored the lone goal, and goaltender Gage Hurst stopped all three shots for the win.

When asked about the mental preparation for the shootout, Minard shared his thoughts about the process.

"Yeah, 100 per cent it's a little game of chess with the goalie. It's obviously way easier. I think for the player, at least, you can kind of go whatever speed you want, try to throw the goalie off. That's what I kind of try to do there, go slow and then speed up at the end," Minard said.

"I think at the end of the day, you get comfortable with certain shoot trip shots or moves or whatever it is, so you just kind of stick to your old habits."

Williams was happy the team fought through and pulled out the win in the shootout.

"I thought it was the type of game we thought we were going to see here this afternoon, they do a really good job defending and make it tough to get inside," Williams said.

Williams also explained to the Times how the coaches prepared for the shootout.

"I think a lot of it goes into just everyday hockey, when you see guys shooting pucks, and whether it's game or practices, the toughest part for I think a lot of the guys going in to shoot is the ice is typically so bad by the time we get to the shootout already, so it can be a little bit challenging," Williams said.

Stratford hosts the Elmira Sugar Kings at the Allman Arena on Dec. 19 and then travels to Strathroy to face the Rockets on Dec. 20 before the holiday break.



# MINOR SPORTS **SCRAPBOOK**



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Ally Murray releases a shot from the point during the U11 B Stratford Aces game last Wednesday.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Ryan Ross rips a long-range shot off the rush during this past Sunday's U12 Stratford Warriors game.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Kohen McLeod unloads a heavy shot on net during the U13 Stratford Warriors game last Saturday.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Natalie Ostriynick launches the puck from the blueline during this past Sunday's U18 B Stratford Aces game.

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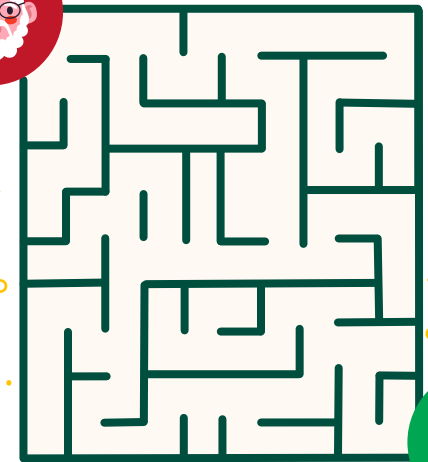
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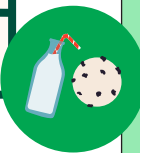
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# Struggles continue for the Irish in loss to the Strathroy Jets on home ice

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

*Times Correspondent*

The Stratford Irish lost for the third time in four games, falling 5-3 to the Strathroy Jets at the William Allman Memorial Arena on Dec. 13.

Strathroy scored its first goal 5:07 into the game, then added two more to lead 3-0 by the end of the first period. Early in the second, the Jets scored again, but Stephen Pierog, assisted by Brendan Charlton and Thomas Maia, finally put the Irish on the board late in the period.

The score stayed at 4-1 early in the third period until the Jets made it 5-1 just over five minutes in. Mateo Cabral, assisted by Maia, scored with 9:32 left to make it 5-2. Pierog added his second goal, assisted by Matthew Fuller and Jaden Peca, with 19 seconds remaining, giving the Irish a late boost in an otherwise tough home loss.

Mario Cavaliere made his first home start as goalie for the Irish but took the loss after allowing five goals on 29 shots.

After this loss, the Irish are now in third place in the Metropolitan Conference's Gateway Division with a 7-5-0-1 record. Their home record stands at 2-3-1 for the season.

The Irish will head to Alvinston to play the Killer Bees on Dec. 20.



(FRED GONDER PHOTO)

Stratford Irish goalie Mario Cavaliere makes the show-stealing save during the game against the Strathroy Jets on Dec. 13. Despite the effort, the Jets beat the Irish on home ice, 5-3.

**Thank you for letting me be part of your home journey this year. Wishing you a wonderful Christmas and a prosperous New Year!**

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# SDSS Junior Bears win the 2025 Mitchell Bowl Basketball Tournament

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

*Times Correspondent*

The Stratford District Junior Bears picked up their first basketball tournament win of the season at Mitchell District Secondary School on Dec. 8.

The Bears went undefeated in the round robin, beating Kincardine DCVI 56-34 and Brantford Collegiate 74-43. In the semi-finals, they had a strong 32-point third quarter to help secure a 70-48 win over Woodstock College Avenue, then topped London Lucas 78-56 in the final.

Coach Chris Cassone said the team worked through early-season challenges and found their rhythm to win the tournament.

"We have a strong team this year. Entering the tournament, we knew we'd have an opportunity to claim the championship, however, we weren't playing our best basketball. Fortunately, we found our stride during the tournament and improved with every game," Cassone said.

"The kids love the game of basketball. They all get along really well. Nothing



Members of the Stratford District Junior Bears basketball team pose with their Mitchell Bowl Tournament banner on Dec. 6.

beats winning a championship with your good friends."

With this tournament win, Cassone hopes the school will support the team and that more people will come out to their home games.

"Winning always fosters engagement. We're trying our best to increase awareness of basketball not just in our school but also in the community. Winning the title helps with that. Our school does a really good job at getting behind their teams," Cassone said.

"We have a spirit squad with over 70 members who routinely come out to support us. Sport helps build culture in schools. It's my hope that our junior boys will help drive that."

Cassone said the goal for the team is to build on this tournament win and keep working on the important details.

"We just take it one day at a time. We didn't set any long-term goals this year. Our focus is to just get better with every practice and game," Cassone said. "We're fully aware this won't always happen. However, if we can focus on the details of the game, improvement will naturally happen."

## Circelli and Fisher discuss future aspirations; Lakers draw with Canucks on the road

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

*Times Correspondent*

The Lambeth-native Christian Circelli describes himself as a power forward and is proud to be a member of the U16 Huron-Perth Lakers team, which features Ontario Hockey League draft-calibre talent.

"I know this year, we got a great squad. We got tons of top guys that will probably be going on the (OHL Priority Selection) draft," Circelli said. "You know, got major success this year, currently top of the league right now. So, it's been great this year, so far."

Circelli has scored three goals and seven assists for 10 points in 18 games this

season and was on a three-game points streak going into the Dec. 14 contest against the Elgin-Middlesex Canucks, and four in the last five overall.

Circelli says that shifting his focus was the reason why he is on the points streak.

"I think it started the season, I wasn't seeing the results that I liked," Circelli said. "I just had to find that motivation in me this past little stretch here, and I've been following my groove in this past little stretch. So, it's been good."

Evan Fisher describes himself as a 200-foot player and enables his style to Jack Eichel of the Las Vegas Golden Knights. The London-native likes the team's culture and how he produces to help the team win.

"You know, it's a great, great squad, great coaching on the overall – a positive attitude in the dressing room. It's just fun to be here, and it's fun to play," Fisher said. "I think it's just playing as a team, you know, moving the puck around, getting open, and just playing together."

Going into the Dec. 14 game, Fisher has 11 points in the last five games, and has recorded an average of over a point per game in 18 contests this season.

The Lakers travelled to Komoka for their road matchup with the Elgin-Middlesex Canucks. After a scoreless first period, the Canucks got on the board first on the powerplay with 5:39 left in the period. Over a minute later, the Lakers tied the game at one apiece on the goal

by Declan McCotter, his 19th of the season, from Callum Brooks and Sullivan Kipfer.

With the goal, McCotter now has 13 points in the last five games, 22 in the last 10, averaging over two points per game. Brooks extended his point streak to 14 consecutive games with the assist, and Kipfer extended his point streak to three games on the secondary assist.

Despite two powerplay opportunities in the third period, the Lakers were unable to score the winner as the game ended in a draw. It marked the second straight result the Lakers ended up with a tie, who now have a record of 16-1-2 through 19 games in the ALLIANCE regular season.

## Stratford Skating Club hosting Stratford December Classic

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

*stratfordtimes@gmail.com*

The Stratford Skating Club (SSC) is excited to announce its annual skating competition, the Provincial Series #6 Stratford December Classic will be returning to the Stratford Rotary Complex on Dec. 18-21. This year, the event has grown to run for a full four-day period at the Rotary Complex.

This year, the SSC will be welcoming 1,006 skaters to Stratford over the four

days of this event. This year's events will include men's and women's singles events at the Star 5-Gold levels, and Pre-Juvenile and Juvenile Free Programs. New Ice Dance events have been added to the Stratford December Classic schedule as well this season. This event will host both Provincial Qualifying and Non-Qualifying events. Skaters in Provincial Qualifying events are competing not only for this event, but the skaters' scores are archived and then compared with others in the province.

The top scores by the end of February 2026 will be invited to the Skate Ontario Provincial Championships in March 2026. The regular Special Olympics West qualifier events will also be returning this season. Back to the Stratford December Classic this year will be the Skate Canada Adult competition events. These Adult events will run on Dec. 20 on the Rink A ice pad at the Rotary Complex.

The SSC will have a record 12 skaters skating at the Stratford December Classic. The skaters will be competing in a

number of Non-Qualifying and Provincial Qualifying events, as well as some of the Adult events.

This event is open for general admission to the public. Cost to watch the competition per person per day is \$10 for adults and \$5 for students (aged 4-17) and seniors (age 60+). All children three years and younger are free. Cash admission will be collected at the door. The events will start at 8 a.m. on Dec. 18, and run on both ice surfaces until 5 p.m. on Dec. 21 at the Rotary Complex.



# U18 Warriors overcame the odds to win Ajax Winterlude Tournament

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

The Stratford U18 Warriors participated in the U18 AA Winterlude Tournament in Ajax from Dec. 11 through Dec. 15.

During round-robin play, Stratford was placed in the Fisherman's Bay group and played Clarington, Aurora, top-ranked Milton and host Ajax-Pickering.

On Dec. 12, the Warriors began their tournament play in a 4-2 loss to the Clarington Toros in the early afternoon game but finished their first day with a 3-2 win over the Aurora Tigers in their evening match-up.

The Warriors faced a stiff test in the Milton Jr. Menace in their matinee game but lost



(RILEY MATHIESON PHOTO)

**Stratford U18 Warriors won the Ajax Winterlude Tournament on Dec. 14.**

2-0. They then lost their last game of the round robin to the host Ajax-Pickering Raiders 3-1 in the evening game. After two days of round robin, the Warriors qualified via tiebreaker over the fifth-place Orangeville Flyers with a record of 1-3-0.

On championship day on Dec. 14, the Warriors upset Milton 2-1 in the semis, and later on the day, U18 Warriors captain Owen Blain scored the winning goal in the shootout to win the Fisherman's Bay Division Championship at the Ajax Winterlude Tournament on Dec. 14.

Stratford head coach Riley Mathieson

said he is very proud of the team winning the championship and is hopeful this is a turnaround the team needs as the season progresses.

"It was a really good experience ... and I think what will be a great turning point in the season for us. We've had a tough schedule up until this point, as well as facing some tough opponents and in multiple game weekends, and we were showing signs of improvement, and we're just waiting for the results to finally come through," Mathieson said.

"I think this weekend was just to validate everything else that we already

knew about the group we had. We are a good hockey team; you know, we can be competitive against anyone, but it just took some results to finally go our way. So, we had something to show for it, and I think that's what you saw this weekend. I'm not surprised that we had success this weekend, by any means, because as a coach I spend a lot of time with them. I could see what they were capable of."

The Warriors resumed ALLIANCE regular season play on Dec. 18 against the Kitchener Jr. Rangers, Sarnia Jr. Sting on Dec. 20, and Dec. 21 against the Cambridge Hawks.

"Christmas brings friends and family together. It helps us appreciate the love in our lives we can often take for granted. May the true meaning of the Christmas season fill your heart and home with many blessings.

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# Taoist Tai Chi: The journey begins with January open houses

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

The new year brings new opportunity to boost health and wellbeing by embarking on the Taoist Tai Chi path, beginning with the open houses planned for January. There will be three open houses with the presentation beginning Jan. 5 at 10 a.m. and 7 p.m., followed by the third on Saturday Jan. 10 at 10:30 a.m.

With three open houses accommodating many schedules, the goal is to make it accessible to everyone that may be in-

terested in experiencing the art. Taoist Tai Chi arts will be of interest to anyone of any age and any ability and the benefits of beginning are many.

The open house will begin with a little bit of history about the organization. "We talk about how we are currently organized worldwide and how Canada is organized, how this branch is organized. It's pretty brief, just touching on things, who we are and what we do and that we are a registered charity," said Grant Dillman, Stratford branch leader.

There among the curious onlookers will be seasoned participants who have

been practicing anywhere from four months to 40 years to demonstrate a demo set, which is a shortened version of the typical 108 moves that comprise Taoist Tai Chi practice.

"We are also going to demonstrate and practice with the visitors the first two foundations and a couple of moves just so they have a flavour of what it is. There is no expectation of anybody, it is an opportunity to try for themselves," said Dillman.

The open houses will be attractive to anyone curious about learning more. It is referred to as a path because there is always opportunity to learn more.

The path begins in a friendly environment recognizing that everyone is different and comes with their own challenges. The gentle methodical movements of the set are not meant to bring pain, rather alleviate it. Balance improves with time, as does flexibility and memory of the moves. This is a non-competitive art form, unlike other forms of martial arts. This transformational path takes time, practice and community.

"There are no belts, or

stars, we just do what we can. There's no expectation that you will know it, or remember it, but you can do it because you're working with a group," said Dillman. "We have these sessions so that we can share what we know and people can see what we do and learn from it."

Going forward with the journey, there will be three introductory sessions to choose from beginning the following week: Monday, Jan. 12 at 10 a.m. or 7 p.m. and Saturday, Jan. 17 at 10:30 a.m.

Start your journey to better health and wellbeing by coming to the open house. Registration will be available at the open house. The Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism, Stratford Branch is located at 670 Ontario St., Stratford.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

The St. Marys Salvation Army handed out hampers to locals in need recently, as part of its holiday programming. Pictured here are Jennifer Morris, community and family services manager, and volunteers Connor Davis, Dorothy Davis, Lucas Davis and Joanne Walden. As part of the initiative, the Rotary Club of St. Marys have made soup for locals coming to pick up hampers as well.

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AND HAPPY NEW YEAR

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# Here For Now Theatre review: *Ruby and the Reindeer* is a fun, heartfelt and local holiday story

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

There's nothing quite like being home for the holidays, and for those of us who call Stratford and the surrounding Perth County home, Here For Now Theatre's world premiere of *Ruby and the Reindeer* hits about as close to home as it gets.

Set on a dairy farm on Perth Line 29, *Ruby and the Reindeer* features everything I want in a local Christmas story – Santa Claus, reindeer, snow, a family reunited, an unlikely love story, puppets and a flying Holstein cow – all wrapped up in that feeling of warm, nostalgic, 1980s Christmas magic.

Written by Mark Crawford and directed by Irene Poole, the play's narrator, adult Ruby (Maev Beaty), takes audiences back in time to Christmas 1989 when her 12-year-old self (Tabitha Campbell) and her widowed dad, Dave (Gordon Miller), are asked by Dave's father and Ruby's estranged grandfather, Gerald (Benedict Campbell), to have their new livestock vet, Kathy (Ijeoma Emesowum), determine what medical malady is causing one of Gerald's reindeer from his Christmas petting zoo "up north" to act so strangely.

A quick examination of the reindeer, who Dave tells Ruby is referred to by her tag number, B2, results in the discovery that she is pregnant and must remain on

the Perth County dairy farm until after she gives birth. Kathy asks Ruby to serve as midwife for the pregnant caribou, and she excitedly takes on the role with the not-so-secret ulterior motive to play matchmaker for her dad and his new livestock vet, and to finally meet her grandfather, whom she knows almost nothing about.

Without giving too much away, both Ruby and her dad rediscover their Christmas joy and somehow wind up saving Christmas for every other kid on Earth. Quite the feat for a dairy-farming, father-and-daughter duo from Perth County!

From the actors' performances to the costumes to the set and everything in between, *Ruby and the Reindeer* felt both familiar and fantastical – a story I'd be thrilled to see told and retold every Christmas.

Crawford's writing is both humorous and heartfelt with just enough local references to keep me smiling without them becoming too heavy handed. The dialogue is delivered with expert timing by each of the actors, and their onstage chemistry anchors the story in what feels like real relationships between father and daughter, father and son, and a girl and her reindeer.

Do yourself a favour and see what I'm sure will become an instant holiday classic before it closes.

*Ruby and the Reindeer* runs at Here For Now Theatre (24 St. Andrew St., Stratford) until Christmas Eve.



(HERE FOR NOW THEATRE PHOTO)  
B2 the reindeer (puppeteered by Maev Beaty) and 12-year-old Ruby (Tabitha Campbell) in Here For Now Theatre's world premiere of *Ruby and the Reindeer*.

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# Art in the Park's call for artists open until Feb. 15

LISA CHESTER

*Times Correspondent*

The annual call for new artists to join current members of Stratford Art in the Park (AIP) has opened and those interested in becoming part of the group have until February 15th to submit their online application.

For over 50 years, AIP has been providing members with the unique opportunity to showcase their artwork in the beautiful setting along the waterfront of the Avon River from May to October each year. Visitors to AIP come from near and far drawn by the high calibre and diversity in artwork presented for sale to the public.

The application to join is online only with submissions subject to an anonymous jury process to ensure that the criteria for inclusion are represented in the artwork.

"The artists are selected on the basis of the application they submit. They have to include a brief bio to explain who they are and what their background is. They fill the form in and add six images of pieces they have done in the last three years," said Bev Hewitt, AIP Juror Coordinator.

The six images are required to be in .jpg format representing work in the chosen category available. Each category chosen requires separate submission. Acceptable

categories are: clay, wood, leather/fabric art, photography, sculpture/carving/collage, Glass, Jewellery, painting/printmaking, and digital art (no AI). There are participation limits for each category except for painting, and for the 2026 season the jewellery category is full.

Names and identifying marks are stripped from the application so that the jury process is unbiased and fair. There are three jurors who are in the art industry, who are anonymous and unknown to each other, who will assess each of the submissions and score based on style among other criteria.

"Those three sets of eyes will go through each set of six images to judge that they meet five criteria. They do make comments, sometimes. They do critique some of the art which is a bonus and I can feed it back to the individual if they don't get through," said Hewitt.

With the observation comes the opportunity to improve and return another year to try again. Those that are accepted can expect to hear back in the early spring. There is the expectation that each member must be present with their work at a minimum of ten showing days per season. With over 50 showing days each season, the participation requirement is an easy one to meet.

"It's a community with knowledge passed to each other. There's a camara-



(TIMES FILE PHOTO)

Join over 60 other artists showcasing their work along the shores of the Avon River by being part of the 2026 season of Stratford Art in the Park.

derie among the artists and that's what's brilliant, it makes people want to help each other and you can go to others that have been there quite some time and get guidance and advice," said Hewitt.

It is highly recommended to read and follow the guidelines for application on the website found at [www.artinthepark-stratford.ca](http://www.artinthepark-stratford.ca). Without meeting the minimum requirements of the application the risk is immediate disqualification.

"Be brief, the jurors will get the bios.

The clarity of the photos is very important such that the image does not include background images. It's the photograph that is going to sell it to the jurors," was the advice Hewitt had to give to perspective applicants.

Becoming a member is the opportunity for exposure to a worldwide audience of art enthusiasts that travel to Stratford each year drawn by the arts and culture of the city. Exhibiting artists do not need to be from the Stratford Community only.

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*Merry Christmas*



HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO CLIENTS, COLLEAGUES,  
FAMILY & FRIENDS

Wishing all my clients, family, friends, and colleagues a SAFE, JOYFUL, and MEMORABLE HOLIDAY SEASON. May you enjoy time with loved ones and find moments for REST, REFLECTION and REJUVENATION.

As I celebrate 20 years in real estate, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my clients for your LOYALTY, TRUST and continued SUPPORT. I am truly grateful for the meaningful relationships built over the years and for the privilege of helping you navigate your real estate journeys.

Warmest holiday wishes,

**Alison Willsey & Family**



# Stratford Winter Film Festival returns for third year

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

In the dark of winter, a bright light shines through when the Stratford Winter Film Festival (SWFF) returns with its third annual event. Beginning Jan. 30 and spread over two weekends, co-founders Leslie Marsh, Craig Sangster and Bruce MacInnis are thrilled to bring the third edition to the Stratford City Hall auditorium.

Since the inception of the festival the co-founders have remained steadfast in their vision, to bring together the community and surrounding area for a shared experience.

"I think we have stayed true to the vision. When we first conceived of it, we were at the tail end of COVID and things weren't particularly vibrant in town especially at that time of year. We have remained motivated to bring people in and offer something that is family friendly with broad appeal, and cost-effective," said Marsh.

Together, they celebrate this achievement, the third annual festival, as three individuals who came together to share a love of film and togetherness with the community. It was purely out of goodwill with a lot of moving parts in the first year, and an outrageous storm the second year.

"But we learned from it and I think this year is going to be the best one yet because there are no surprises. There will be one venue at the city hall auditorium, which solves a lot of logistics," said Marsh.

The theme this year will be Friends, Foes and Strangers. On Friday, Jan. 30,

the trio are planning a free community event that is sure to appeal to those who love musicals and sing-a-longs. Jan. 31 will feature independent films of varying lengths broadcast throughout the day.

"This is new this year, the independent films. We've had an online presence for independent filmmakers, and it is global thing where people submit from anywhere. Our technical man, Robert Smith is an independent filmmaker and will be helping with the weekend. We've had, I think, 15 submissions so far," said Marsh.

The main event will be the following weekend, Feb. 6-8, where the curated collection of films will be screened over the three days. The current plan is that movie-goers can look forward to nine films beginning Friday evening and four each day following with sufficient time built in to allow for refreshments at local establishments surrounding the venue.

"We didn't do that last year but that was because we had three venues and the logistics of planning for this and different times for different films was a massive Rubick's Cube, which I'm pleased to say we don't have this year," said Marsh.

The growth this year is due in thanks to the local community's support in the past. Grants and donations have helped them to develop the festival over the two weekends.

"Hopefully people, who would want to come to the main weekend will also take the time and support the young independents the weekend before. It's all at city hall, with the same tech to treat them with same technical respect we are treating our main program," said Marsh.

For more information as it is released, visit stratfordwinterfilmfestival.ca



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

The Stratford Winter Film Festival is now in its third year and has grown to cover two weekends.

## MERRY Christmas & HAPPY NEW YEAR

*"May You and Your Family Have a Safe & Very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!"*

### The Brenneman's

#### CHRISTMAS HOURS 2025

##### Stratford and New Hamburg

Date	Sales	Parts & Service
Tuesday, Dec. 23	9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
Wednesday, Dec. 24	9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Thursday, Dec. 25	"Merry Christmas"	
Friday, Dec. 26	Closed	Closed
Saturday, Dec. 27	9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	Closed
Sunday, Dec. 28	Closed	Closed
Monday, Dec. 29	9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
Tuesday, Dec. 30	9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
Wednesday, Dec. 31	9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
Thursday, Jan. 1	"Happy New Year"	
Friday, Jan. 2	9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.

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# Opinions

## UNTIL SOON. LIVE WELL: THIS IS WHERE YOU CAN FIND ME NOW



STUART LENDER

*Times Columnist*

Every now and then an interaction with another person happens that you come away from a little rejuvenated, a little renewed. These, let's call them "episodes" (because they feel like one is in a kind of hyper-reality), happen rarely – most often with an acquaintance, but sometimes with complete strangers. As example I put forward two unexpected liaisons – one with someone I knew but did not know well and the other with someone I didn't know at all.

Conversation with the first, up

until that day at that specific time and always in that specific place, had been shallow: vacation, weather, "how are you," "what have you been up to?" So, when she was standing near my small table with a smile and a "hello" in a café we frequent, in a space filled to the brim with coffee and customers – I offered the other chair at my little oasis amongst the chaos, which she graciously accepted. And for the next hour, we talked – not a surface conversation, not just a few pleasant-tries soon after forgotten – a real conversation of substance, where each topic touched upon became a deep bucket of cool clear spring water brought up from the well of our past experiences, our future hopes, and shared as refreshment.

Our words bounced off the walls of that well and echoed sentiments held only in the heart until then, experiences never spoken, reverberating with gaiety and something not often revealed in such a public space – tears. For reasons unknown I handed over episodes of profound hardship and struggle, instinctively know-

ing that this person would accept them in the context of a universal humanity and not as some strange aberration. And true enough, she did – unashamedly showing tears of her own through the mirroring of her personal life's struggles with mine. And the conversation kept moving back and forth like that – bread off the same plate, one large or small bite at a time, in a room filled with chatter and people unnoticed.

At the end of it, we hugged. Undeniably natural. It felt binding, generous. And from that day forward, I knew there was a part of who I am held gently by another – an almost stranger, but not unknown.

The other episode occurred with a certified stranger – same café, same time, same staff that I know by name. The drama played out as soon as I approached the counter. It must have been the lightness of spirit in the air as I was greeted by one of the staff with a spontaneous hug (something I am a huge advocate for). One of the owners of the café who saw the transaction joking-

ly chastised her staff member: "Why are you the only one who gets to hug him?" she said. After which she too opened her arms. That opened the gate for another staff member to do the same, after which I felt a tap on my shoulder, turned, and was hugged by the other owner. There was no denying it – we were all in the flow of a long hug-train and drunk with spontaneous affection.

Throwing inhibition to the wind, I spread my arms and exclaimed: "This is amazing... anyone else here who needs a hug... anyone at all?" Up until that point I was familiar with everyone who offered it up, but I caught the eye of a gentleman sitting at the front window with a huge smile on his face, no doubt having observed all the voluntary agreements – who rose from his chair with open arms, whispered "sure..." and offered up a bear hug wrapping me up in playfulness.

These two episodes, despite their disparate durations held the same ground – a space in which, after one enters, one never wants to leave. A free-flowing space

where two are equal in all regards that matter, with valid emotional concerns and a shared understanding. You know when you are in that space. Its trademark sensibility is in feeling fully accepted, in being uniquely oneself. You catch a glimpse of a fulfilling existence and sometimes, recognize a life filled with self-centred and petty grievances. It all ebbs and flows in those wonderful moments of seeing into what matters – which always take place in the present moment and always teeters on the cusp of normalcy.

If you feel those instances often, if you're fortunate enough to recognize those moments with another, where the veil of your life is threadbare and the universal shows through – you will have truly lived. It's where I'm open to existing now. In gentleness. Expansive and free. It's where you can hopefully find me.

*Stuart is a celebrant and the manager of Rutherford Cremation & Funeral Services. It is his privilege to serve, dispel myths, and give information concerning his field of compassionate service.*

## As I See It From America: Stay warm, safe and loving



PATRICK D. BURK

*Times Columnist*

This is a special time. During this holiday season, I have this wonderous feeling in my heart that at times I cannot explain. It is like the universe somehow opens up and allows me to feel all that is kind, gracious and amazing. It is a season of hope and love. I do feel that it happens because of all that we hope for in the future. As the new year approaches, as we stand and admire all the lights and holiday glamour, I see the possibilities in what we all can achieve. I see promise.

I usually write about how your fair and wonderful city has impacted my life and those that we love. There is no doubt that we just love that whole entire area

and for many years in the past it has been a destination for holiday shopping and gifts. We were sure to shop in many of your fine stores for gifts and I was very happy to find some wonderful things this year. Of course, Watson's is a great destination for many things under our tree, not to mention Fanfare, my favourite Scottish Shoppe and it is hard to not find my wife dressed in some wonderful piece of splendor from the Wardrobe. I could go on and on!

There is no secret that my wife and I really do love Christmas and this whole holiday season. It could be the 14 (YES 14) decorated Christmas trees in our tiny home, the excess of red and white lights on the outdoors of our trees and on our red and green cottage or the scores of food that we make during the season to share with our family and dear friends. Some may wonder why we make piles of cookies, bowls full of Chex mix and pounds and pounds of fruitcake. The only reason I can think of was that I was brought up to make and share. It is in my DNA. It is part of who I am.

I try to do one new thing each year. This year it is the cherry

cookies that I am planning on making. I usually try out the recipe early to ensure that they taste good. Some years I have made candy. I do have a new candy recipe that may be the backup plan but if something doesn't work out in the trial phase, we usually pivot and go back to a tried-and-true replacement. Even with all the mess, the clutter of ingredients and the pans and boxes in our tiny kitchen, I feel the spirit of my parents and grandparents as they worked to create magical items to gift to their neighbours, family and friends. Let's hope the cherry cookies taste great!

It is amazing that many people don't seem to like fruitcake. Our recipe is at least 137 years old as there is copy somewhere of when my great-grandmother made it and wrote it down for my grandmother. On our kitchen wall is a copy in my mother's handwriting that we still follow every year. Last year, my daughter took it down and re-wrote it for her kitchen wall. It is perhaps the longest family tradition that we have, and it makes fantastic fruitcake that is requested every year by over 30 friends, neighbours and family members (we added two this year) that we de-

liver to homes on Christmas Eve. That is my favourite day of the year. I just love delivering these food packages which often include a bottle of fine wine. We are blessed to have so many that we love and see during this holiday season.

Many have given up the Christmas card tradition. We still do quite a few and although it is less than past years, we still make sure to say hello to those on our list with a cute card and message. Since I still have quite a few clients and theatre people that I deal with on a regular basis, it is a good way for me to tell them how much it means to my wife and myself that they are a part of our lives. I try to do a certain number of cards each day. The week before Christmas and at New Year, we still send out messages the new-fashioned way via email or text. That is our step into the 21st century. I still love sending and receiving Christmas cards, but we do have to make some changes as we get older. Last year my digital Christmas message was considered "hip" by many. I just thought it was a nice picture with a good message.

Which brings me to my clo-

sure for 2025. What a year! We all know that we have had to endure and push forward daily. We have suffered through the tariff issue, negative comments and nastiness, and the continued U.S. government breakdown, but consider this! We have had to assure each other that we are good neighbours and still friends. We have had to hug each other a lot more and provide more kind words and calming thoughts. All in all, there was much of this year that I wish we could go back and change but sometimes I wonder ... did all of this happen to teach us a lesson? Did we find ourselves in need of comfort and reminding each other that we must be best neighbours in good times as well as bad? Is there some solace in all that has been going on in the world? We can only HOPE!

From our little red and green cottage here in the U.S. to all of you in our FAVOURITE city in the world, OUR BELOVED STRATFORD, our very best to you and yours during this holiday season and New Year. We will be sure to see you soon. Stay warm, safe and loving I wish we could ship you all a great big fruitcake!



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**Royal Canadian Legion, 804 Ontario St B1, Stratford**  
Generous portions, tickets are \$20, children 12 and under \$10. Help us meet our goal of serving 100 meals. For tickets: Legion office @519-271-4540, Dave Hartney @ 519-703-6544

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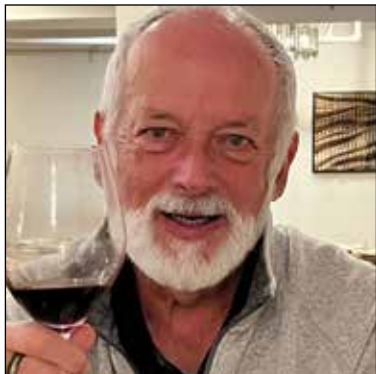
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# OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: Can't wait to see old friends on stage in 2026



PAUL KNOWLES

Times Columnist

About 20 years ago, I discovered that CBC Radio was promoting community-based readings of Charles Dickens' wonderful story, "A Christmas Carol." The idea was initiated by CBC radio news anchor Judy Maddren. CBC would provide scripts, posters and a volunteer reader for such an event if local organizers did the rest.

I liked the idea and so did some others in the community of New Hamburg. So, we contacted CBC Radio, got the supplies and started to recruit the other four readers we would need, as well as some musicians.

The way it worked was the story was read in five "staves" by five separate readers, with musical interludes between each stave. Charles Dickens himself had converted and abridged his novel for live presentation and had been the first one to do such a reading in 1853.

I emceed our first one a century and a half later. Although we didn't present such an event every year, we did do at least 10 in New Hamburg, Fullarton and London, and I got to emcee each one, sharing the stage with fabulous readers.

And what, you are asking by now, has this to do with travel?



Sara Topham as Hermoine (front-right) and André Sills as Polixenes (front-left) with members of the company in *The Winter's Tale*. Stratford Festival 2025.

Okay, maybe it's a bit of a nostalgic stretch, but stay with me. To digress for a moment (it will all come together, I promise), I am a big fan of the Stratford Festival and I think it is important to write about Stratford – both the festival itself and the rest of the community, a day-trip destination we are very lucky to be close to.

So, I was interested to receive the full menu of plays being mounted at the festival in 2026, including a list of all of the actors appearing on Stratford stages next season.

The playbill looks great, by the way. Check it out on the festival website (stratfordfestival.ca). I can't wait to see *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Guys and Dolls*, the return of *Something Rotten*, *The Importance of Being Ernest* and much more. It will be a superb

season.

And the reason I link 2026 Stratford with my fond memories of Dickens' readings? Well, that first year, as we stumbled our way through a process we had never done before, we realized our proximity to Stratford might mean we could do something special. So, we naively reached out to some wonderful actors who were appearing on the Stratford stage at that time. First to say "yes" was the amazing Brian Tree, showing amazing trust in us. Brian not only came to read the fifth and final stave (which he did for us several more times over the years), he also brought with him Thom Marriot, a terrific actor, hugely impressive as the Ghost of Christmas Present. And we were off and running.

Subsequent Dickens events saw

the returns of both Brian and Thom, and a revolving cast of Stratford greats. The readings were so well performed that in 2010, when Judy Maddren herself came to read, she told me it was the finest she had ever attended. After CBC Radio stopped sponsoring the readings, we continued with five first-rate volunteer actors every time.

And so, as I read the details about the 2026 festival season, I was thrilled that half a dozen of "our" actors will be on stage in Stratford next year. These are folks who volunteered their time and talent for our readings and never ever took it for granted. They brought their full passion and commitment every time.

Sara Topham (in our Dickens in 2008, 2011 and 2017) will be busy this year; she is Titania in one of

my favourite Shakespeare comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she plays Cath in The King James Bible Play and she is also movement director in *The Hobbit*.

Steve Ross (2017) – who knocked it out of the park in previous seasons in *La Cage aux Folles* and *The Rocky Horror Show* – will play Shylock in the much-anticipated return of *Something Rotten* and Nicely-Nicely Johnson in *Guys and Dolls*, where he gets to bring down the house with "Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat."

Rod Beattie (2014) – famed for his Wingfield Farm one-actor plays, but also well known for his work in classical theatre – is back on the Stratford stage playing Antonio in *Saturday, Sunday Monday*.

Stratford icon Lucy Peacock (2006) plays Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Ernest* and Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* where she will share the stage with another of "our" alumni – Tom McCamus (2009). Tom is the tragic protagonist, Willy Loman, and will also appear as Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. And finally, Tom McCamus' wife, Chick Reid, who joined us for a Dickens' reading (2009), appears in *Death of a Salesman* and as Brabantia in *Othello*.

So, forgive me for wallowing in nostalgia, but I for one can't wait to see these generous and talented people on stage, once again, in the best theatre in Canada, in a city which I think is the number one day-trip destination in southern Ontario.

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](mailto:pknowles@golden.net).



(DARIANE SANCHE PHOTO)

From left, Lucy Peacock as Linda Loman and Tom McCamus as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Stratford Festival 2026.



(ANN BAGGLEY PHOTO)

Steve Ross as Shylock in *Something Rotten!* Stratford Festival 2024.



# Crossword

CLUES ACROSS

- 1. American automotive titan
- 4. Tire term
- 7. Two-year-old sheep
- 10. Indigenous people of Thailand
- 11. Anti-Soviet Cold War group
- 12. Actress de Armas
- 13. Not moving
- 15. Cool!
- 16. Plants of the arum family
- 19. Connected with touch
- 21. Pen stain
- 23. Monetary units
- 24. School kids' art project
- 25. Early Bell Canada executive
- 26. Sword
- 27. Hates
- 30. Fixed in one place
- 34. Pie \_\_\_ mode
- 35. Moved swiftly on foot
- 36. Carrier on vehicle
- 41. A path to get through
- 45. "Rule, Britannia" composer
- 46. Spiritual leader
- 47. Flowing
- 50. Respectful compliments
- 54. Cure
- 55. Soft, lightweight fabric
- 56. Building material
- 57. Japanese delicacy
- 59. A way to cause to be swollen
- 60. One and only
- 61. You might get one in summer
- 62. Wreath
- 63. Thus far
- 64. They \_\_\_
- 65. Employee reference number

CLUES DOWN

- 1. Policemen (French)
- 2. Toy dog
- 3. Intestinal condition
- 4. Muscular weaknesses
- 5. Helps little firms
- 6. Alphabetical lists
- 7. Takes down
- 8. Facilitates
- 9. Ethnic people of Ethiopia
- 13. Engine additive
- 14. Explorers group
- 17. Written account
- 18. Consumed
- 20. Opposite of first
- 22. No (slang)
- 27. Government lawyers
- 28. NY Giants great
- 29. Small amount
- 31. A way to save for your future
- 32. Fall behind
- 33. Midway between northeast and east
- 37. Head pain
- 38. Wildly popular sport
- 39. "Princess Diaries" actress Hathaway
- 40. Boat race
- 41. About fish
- 42. Nursemaid
- 43. Able to be marketed
- 44. Not as large
- 47. Parts per billion (abbr.)
- 48. Paddle
- 49. Oneness
- 51. Bitter chemical
- 52. Not around
- 53. Very fast airplane
- 58. Main tributary of the Rhine

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## Sudoku

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

Solutions on page 27



# Mike's Bowling Lanes High Scores Dec. 8-14

## BOWLASAURUS

Audrey Parker 109  
Theo Brown 117  
Evangeline Butcher 92  
Anika Klomp 111

## PEEWEE

Jace Sebben 75  
Lincoln Brown 103  
Lincoln Butcher-Cassidy 121

## BANTAM

Talia Klomp 175

Coen Everitt 111  
Stella Hurley-St. Pierre 142, triple 313  
Ella MacDonald 125  
Mason Morris 183  
Roland Rains 181, triple 455

## JUNIORS

Ruby Parker 159, triple 413  
Brent Louwagie 227  
Austin Janmaat 206  
Myla Douglas 179  
Hugo Black 242, triple 583  
Anna Ward 206, triple 540

Brianne Bauer 273, triple 631  
Arik Scheuermann 199, triple 514  
Charlee Koyle 162  
Lauren Furtney 214, triple 500

## SENIORS

Austin Bauer 299, triple 813  
Peyton Boyles-Keating 181, triple 508  
Jake Sippel 222, triple 571  
Zachary Clarke 281, triple 666  
Dominic Boyles-Keating 208, triple 605  
Alex Ward 207, triple 593  
Sydney Smith 221  
Wiatt Robinson 222  
Austin Martin 159  
Payton Petrie 245, triple 624  
Claire Turner 2242, triple 630  
Mayla Laukka 219  
Owen Martin 194

## SPECIAL OLYMPICS

Brady Houston 92  
John McCarthy 131  
Rob VanNatter 152  
Sara Schweig 161  
Lucas Forte 176  
Sidney Martin 132  
Sue Dickson 125  
Dan Noon 169  
Marie Martin 186  
Luke Patterson 202  
Tiffany Keller 196  
Franny Hitchcock 157  
Jacob Kaufman 197  
Norm Schenck 178

Meghan Odonovan 171  
Mike Keleman 165  
Andy Van Schalk 152

## ADULT LEAGUES MENS'

Dan Clarke 336, triple 924  
Nathan Smitjes 378  
Dominic Boyles-Keating 340, triple 877

## MONDAY SENIORS

Marlene Crerar 294, triple 621  
Jerry Richards 214  
Brain Wagler 205  
Steve Von Klooster 269, triple 726

## WEDNESDAY LADIES

Debbie Freeman 206  
Bonita Baranyi 218

## TUESDAY MORNING LADIES

Ann Buerson 207

## ST. JOE'S

Jessica Hill 256  
Henry Kaskamp 267

## TOURNAMENTS

Mike's Bowling Lanes hosted the House Round of High-Low Doubles Tournament on Dec. 14, with the top two teams moving on to Provincials. In first place, with a score of plus-232, Kayla Klomp and Josephine Deschauer finished atop the field, while Joe Gethke and Ben Bauer took second place with a plus-214 score.

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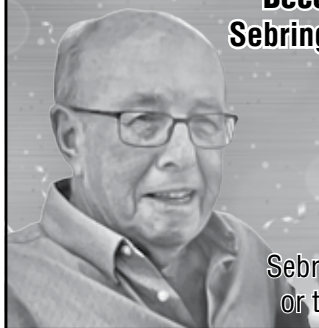
# CLASSIFIEDS

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1	9	2	8	6	4	7	3	5
3	5	7	2	9	1	6	4	8
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5	8	9	3	2	7	1	6	4
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4	2	3	9	7	5	8	1	6
8	1	5	6	3	2	4	7	9
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## QUIZ ANSWERS

1. The North Pole
2. Nine
3. An old silk hat
4. Hansel and Gretel
5. Bah! Humbug!
6. Cindy Lou Who
7. Candy, candy canes, candy corns, & syrup
8. Milky white
9. In a manger
10. Boxing Day

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Buzz Stop  
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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  
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Tim Hortons - Huron  
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Video 99 - Erie St  
Jenny Trout  
Stratford Medical Pharmacy  
Stratford Chamber of Commerce  
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