

Aurora author looks for Canada's stories



By Brock Weir

Most people in this country recognize how lucky we are to be Canadian, according to Janet Matthews.

It is clear on first sight that Ms. Matthews is one of those people. Dressed from head to toe in red and white, she has come to know her way around the Great Canadian Stories over the past 10 years.

Indeed, for Ms. Matthews, finding these quintessential Canadian stories has become something of a way of life as the "Chicken Soup Lady." Having co-authored Chicken Soup for the Canadian Soul over 10 years ago, Ms. Matthews is back at it again, this time combing works and submissions from established authors from across the country for Chicken Soup for the Soul's "O Canada: The Wonders of Winter."

The latest volume in the popular anthology series focuses on "101 Stories about Bad Weather, Good Times, and Great Sports."

"Our Canadian stories are defined in a lot of different ways," she says. "We have a lot of stories about our heritage, stories about our history, about our heroes, and we have stories that occur in everyday life," she says. "We explore love, we build our family, we build our community and these are our stories. Canadians love this country, they love the physical country, we love our cities and our small urban communities, and we love our traditions."

These points were brought home to Ms. Matthews as she criss-crossed Canada after her first book was completed in 2002. Over the years, and in her previous efforts, she was astounded by the nearly 6,000 stories that were submitted for the first Canadian book of the series. These included the story of Craig Keilburger, the renowned Canadian philanthropist, who started his journey at a very young age hearing about the plight of working children in impoverished conditions. Then there was the story of Ryan Hreljac who, at the age of six, took it upon himself to spearhead efforts to drill a well in an African village with no source of potable water.

"We learn as our awareness grows how fortunate we are as Canadians," she says. "I became extraordinarily grateful [over the journey]. I'm a big flag-waver and I love going out in my red and white."

Ms. Matthews is a native of Toronto. Starting work as the photo editor for fashion lines and catalogues for Eatons and The Bay, she eventually left that industry. When it was time for that phase in her career to wrap up, she was looking for options.

An acquaintance of Jack Canfield, founder of the book series, she was invited to co-author the first Canadian title, working with authors to hone their stories.

A lot of the book is production work, something she found by chance was right up her alley and, truth be told, not all that much different from her previous line of work, she notes. Learning by the seat of her red skirt, she found she was actually quite good at it.

'I developed a whole new career path because I passionately love it,' she says. 'I learned that life continues to provide us with new opportunities to re-invent ourselves. I had no idea I had this other thing in me. Sometimes the universe, if you're open, paying attention, and willing it will deliver to you what you need. When the opportunity came, I just said yes.'

Going with the flow and picking up this opportunity has also afforded Ms. Matthews, who moved to Aurora in the early 2000s, a chance to carve out a niche as an inspirational speaker. She focuses on the positives in life, and enjoys working with other people. While she says she has a number of books inside her focusing on personal and spiritual growth, right now she is focused on bringing out the authors in all of us.

'We want to see stories about facing adversity, overcoming obstacles, community, family, and making a difference, but told in the environment of winter,' she says of her latest book. 'It could be about hockey, it could be about Christmas, and it could be about surviving a snowstorm, an ice storm, or any of these things. There has to be a moment of inspiration, a moment where your heart opens up and you realise something that you can use in your own life.'

'Or maybe it is a moment of laughter where you read, 'Oh, my god!' I know what that's about. There has to be a moment of being touched.'

If you have a story you think fits the bill, submissions are being received by Ms. Matthews through July at www.janetmatthews.ca.