

Aurora resident's latest bestseller provides food for thought ? and Soul



By Brock Weir

There is a generational gap today in how people remember the holidays, according to Aurora's Janet Matthews.

For those who grew up in the 1950s or 60s, Christmas followed a certain path. Presents were opened, you would go outside to find your friends, compare a few notes on how good Santa was to you, and then you would grab your toboggan, lace up your skates, and have a few hours of fun while waiting for the Christmas feast to unfold.

"Today, I don't think it happens in the same way," says Ms. Matthews. "People are too busy with their digital toys and devices. There was a certain simplicity about it all, a certain innocent simplicity."

But, at the end of the day, some things remain the same. No matter how complicated things get, there are occasionally universal themes and experiences surrounding the holiday season, and these are what Ms. Matthews is after.

Currently on the national bestseller list, Ms. Matthews is the co-author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Christmas in Canada ? 101 Stories about the Joy and Wonder of the Holidays*. The anthology series brings together holiday stories from a wide variety of authors, and even first time authors from across York Region, and Canada, along with the recollections of expat Canadians and former residents.

Ms. Matthews began her search for the quintessential holiday story earlier this year when the Greater Toronto Area was still recovering from the pre-Christmas ice storm. At the time, she mused the unique and unexpected experiences stemming from the ice storm would, if nothing else, be fertile ground for interesting stories of coming together. And she was right.

"I liken it to Ghostbusters where the girl puts her hand on the button and says, 'We got one!'" says Ms. Matthews with a laugh, of the hundreds of submissions that came in. There are those moments where you just know."

Ms. Matthews was able to let out her inner-Janine when she received a submission from a then 14-year-old girl called Alexia, hailing from the north end of Toronto. She relayed a story how, like so many last December, her house went dark. At the time, she didn't think much of it, didn't want to deal with it, and went back to bed hoping the power would be back on when she woke up. No such luck.

As the hours went by, the more serious she believed the situation, but after several hours, her house was suddenly one of only six on her entire block that had power restored.

“Her parents opened their home to everybody around them to come in, warm up, have a hot shower, share a hot meal, recharge their cell phones and do what they needed to do,” says Ms. Matthews, adding power was still not restored by Christmas Eve and, by then, 15 people were sharing their house making a bed out of just about any surface.

“She gave up her bed to a couple that hadn't had a warm night's sleep the whole week and slept on the floor between her sister and a girlfriend,” Ms. Matthews continues. “In the morning, she got up and said it was the most extraordinary experience because there were four separate families there and they all brought their kids, their presents, and the kids were all worried Santa wouldn't find them. But, Santa did find them. Their parents all made a community breakfast and kids of all ages opened their presents together and shared their Christmas. She said it was absolutely extraordinary and I was moved to tears the first time I saw it.”

Individual submissions for this anthology, which includes a story from Aurora resident Julia Lucas, hit all the right marks for the Chicken Soup series. A story has to touch the heart, deliver a message of hope or inspiration, or strike an emotional chord.

Some of the most compelling stories for Ms. Matthews, she said, were those about individuals who had “gone beyond themselves” to participate in the spirit of giving, whether putting a box together anonymously for a family who was struggling, or finding creative ways of giving back.

“You have ice storm refugees around you, you are giving,” she says. “Whether it is that family who has nothing, so you stretch yourselves for them so they can have a Christmas, you're giving. When we experience Christmas from that perspective of what can we give, how can we love, how can we share, we're going to have a better experience.”

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Christmas in Canada ? 101 Stories about the Joy and Wonder of the Holidays is available now through Chapters, Indigo, and all major book retailers.