

Exhibition salutes the family side of two community leaders



By Brock Weir

Have you ever passed by Ada Johnson Park or strolled through the Norm Johnson Hall of Education at the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame and wanted to know more about these familiar names behind the landmarks?

Now is your chance to do just that at the Aurora Cultural Centre as Ada and Norm's grandson Bruce Johnson and granddaughter-in-law Lisa piece together artefacts from their family's history to tell a very Aurora story.

Chances are, you already know a bit of the story. If you're an Aurora graduate of a certain age, you might have had Norm as your high school principal or coach. If you came to Aurora as a new Canadian, you might have met Ada in your ESL program. Or, if you're on the younger end of the spectrum, you might have known Ada as Aurora's longest-ever resident, who died in April 2013 just a few months shy of her 110th birthday.

But there is much more to the story, Bruce and Lisa attest.

‘Ada grew up here and was very active in the community,’ says Bruce of his grandmother, who arrived in Aurora as an infant, moving to her grandfather's farm upon the death of her father, which stood just north of Yonge and Wellington. ‘She had 110 Christmases, and 109 of them were in Aurora, all within a 1 km radius because she lived on her Grandfather Robson's farm, moved onto Connaught Street when she married, and after Connaught Street at the age of 99, she moved into Park Place Manor. It is an incredible story to have spent that much time in one community. I know she loved it, and it is nice to have the opportunity to show the history of Aurora's longest-living citizen.’

Although he didn't live to as grand an age as his wife, Norm Johnson left a significant impact on the community. Graduating from the University of Toronto with an engineering degree, he found he could only get a job at about 75 cents an hour. Jobs that could be had after a stint at teacher's college seemed to be the more lucrative option and he went down that road.

After receiving his teaching degree, he had three options, says Bruce, but chose a position at the former Aurora High School – now Williams – when it was on Wells Street because it was close to his home in Snowball and closer to his sweetheart in Aurora.

A veteran of both the First and Second World Wars, he was also a varsity athlete, skills which served him well as he took on coaching duties for various sports teams at the local high school, where he served as principal for five years.

‘He gave a lot more back than he ever took out of the community, and I think he is one of the great founders of this community,’ says Bruce.

Together, they were a dynamic duo, becoming active members of the community and providing a safe harbour for what would now be described as ‘at risk’ youth who attended the high school.

It was with a great deal of pride that Bruce and Lisa embarked on this journey through their own family history in putting together this exhibition, which runs through the end of the month. They already had a good baseline from a small book Ada wrote for her family at the age of 99 sharing her memories of what it was like to grow up in Aurora.

She told of Aurora's dirt roads, its boardwalk sidewalks, and being able to walk her cow down Yonge Street and tying it up at

Tannery Creek for the day while she ran home to do her chores.

It also gave Bruce the opportunity to marvel at how interconnected the paternal and maternal sides of his family are.

Case in point, Ada planned to give birth to her son Dave ? Bruce's father ? at home. They had all the birthing linens ready to go, but Dave was in breach position and had to be delivered at the hospital. The unused linens were leant to the Knowles family and were ultimately used in the birth of David's mother ? and the father of this young girl was ultimately the man Norm Johnson succeeded as principal.

?My parents basically knew each other from birth, but going through public school they pretended they hated each other,? says Bruce with a laugh. ?Eventually when my father was in university, he needed a nice girl to take to a concert that was being held at Eaton Hall. He asked my mother and they were sweethearts from then on.?

And thus, Bruce is here ? along with Lisa, who now gives back to Ada's long-time home as an active volunteer at Park Place Manor ? to tell the tale.

?My favourite Ada Johnson saying came when she would try to convince us to have an extra piece of pie for dessert and she would say, ?It's a poor skin that won't stretch a bit,? says Bruce.

Adds Lisa: ?Whenever you would step inside that house on Connaught, it just had this calming influence. Whenever I was down, I would visit her and I would always come away feeling great.?

?Whenever something important in life was happening, whether it was a test at school or something important for work, she would say, ?Give me a call and I will concentrate for you.' She would send her prayers and positive vibes towards you. A lot of people in this world have done better in life because of Ada's concentration and positive vibes.?