

A simpler time?



By Nate Smelle

Every edition of Bancroft This Week, or any community newspaper for that matter, is a time capsule archiving a specific day and time. Sifting through one of the piles of old newspapers protecting my office floor from the elements, I came across a copy of each edition of Bancroft This Week from the month of December 2006.

In comparison to the headlines we have become accustomed to today, upon first glance, the news worthy of print that month appeared rather ordinary, even boring. At this time in our history, one could find headlines such as "Ontario declares state of emergency, as health-care system 'on brink of collapse'"; "Military's report paints a grim picture of Ontario's long-term care system"; or "Neo-Nazi's donation leads to MP Sloan's expulsion from Conservative Party", decorating the front pages of community newspapers in Ontario. During the month of December 2006, the front pages declared: "Old Station standing on shaky political ground"; "Hospitals now able to buy some new equipment"; "BBIA tries out new event in downtown Bancroft lot"; and "Prayers rankle secular organization at council." While the issues addressed by these articles certainly mattered enough to the community to make the front page, in contrast to the intersection of crises dominating the front pages in 2020 and 2021, one could describe 2006 as a simpler time.

Curious regarding my reasons for keeping these seemingly insignificant papers, I decided to have another look. It was during this second scanning of the December's editions, that I started to see the story arising from between the lines of these four newspapers. This time around, I read through the pages as if they were written this week to inform the community about the news that matters in August 2021. Reading the papers in the same manner I do the daily newspapers on any given day, I carefully combed through them for what some like to call 'hard news.'

Every turn of the page now revealed a collection of articles, press releases, letters to the editor, photos and ads; each whispering hints about where we came from, and where we are going. Recognizing several names still making the news today, I forgot for a moment that I was reading newspapers from 15 years ago. Equally as responsible for inspiring this sense of familiarity was the fact that these voices, among others, were raising awareness of issues that the community is still wrestling with today.

Jumping from the pages as I inspected them more closely were more familiar sounding headlines: "First step taken in local homelessness project"; "Rates are going up for water, sewer in Bancroft"; "Bear poachers are nabbed by MNR in Faraday"; and, "Empty shelves." Although it was the last of these headlines that compelled me to ride this train of thought, it is worth noting that anyone of them could appear on the front page of Bancroft This Week in 2021.

It was upon this realization that it became obvious how depressingly slow the wheels of change turn.

At first, it was the headline, "Empty shelves" that caught my eye when I came across Bancroft This Week's former editor, Sheryl Loucks's column from Dec. 15, 2006. However, it was these three questions she asked the community in the piece, which inspired me to ask them again nearly 15 years later. Questioning the moral implications of allowing people, especially children, to go hungry, Loucks asks, "Why, in one of the richest countries in the world, with one of the highest standards of living, are 40 per cent of food bank users in Ontario children? Why can we not as neighbours and extended families support each other? Why can we not ensure that a single mother or parent is provided with sufficient food to feed a family?"

According to Feed Ontario's Hunger Report 2019 - a study conducted 13 years after the one cited by Loucks, and months before the COVID-19 pandemic - 33 per cent of the 510,438 foodbank users in the province were children. The report also outlines several systemic shortcomings in Ontario contributing to food insecurity, including: offering social assistance programs that fall well below what is needed for a basic standard of living; having the highest proportion of minimum wage workers in Canada; and the fact that precarious work is on the rise throughout the province.

Here we are, 15 years later and we are still trying to make sure every person in one of the richest nations in the world has basic necessities such as food, water and shelter.

The headlines back in 2006 may tell a story of simpler times, however, when we look deeper into the stories they sum up, we discover traces of the mistakes we have made to weave the complex web of crises we are struggling to free ourselves from in 2021. Unless we acknowledge and address the origin of this crisis of affordability - income inequality and greed - we will continue to be stuck reading the same headlines over and over again, while we watch the rich to get richer and the rest of us get sicker. If we want to change the things we do not value in our society - poverty, homelessness, hunger, greed, environmental degradation, war and terrorism - we need to change the way we look at the world. Instead of seeing a world running on the "necessary" collateral damage we do to each other and the planet; we must take time to learn from our mistakes, and use this wisdom to shape a better future.