

Wildewood owners celebrate 30 years in community



From left, Joey Shulman and Barry Siegrist laugh as they discuss their early years in the "greater" Maynooth area. The pair met in Toronto in 1981 and have been together ever since. They first settled in Maynooth after moving from Banff in 1988. This year marks the fifth anniversary of their Wildewood Gallery. It's open every day in the summer and by appointment through the winter. /

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By Sarah Sobanski

Joey Shulman and Barry Siegrist first settled in Maynooth 30 years ago. Back then the town was comprised of a general store, gas station and a niche arts community - a blink for travellers as they journeyed Hwy 62.

"If you had told someone 20 years ago Maynooth needed another gallery, they would have laughed," said Shulman before looking to Siegrist to chuckle at the irony. They're seated beside each other in the front room of Wildewood Gallery discussing the art gallery's upcoming fifth anniversary with a Bancroft This Week reporter.

But Shulman and Siegrist didn't start in the community as gallery co-ordinators. They started in hospitality with Wildewood Guest House - a bed and breakfast on Madawaska Road.

"And dinner," Siegrist laughed. "A bed and breakfast and dinner."

He explained tourists would come from the city late Friday night and they'd have to turn around and head back to Bancroft for a late dinner. So they had to make dinner too. That was back in 1992.

"We were the perfect hosts because I'm a morning person and Barry comes alive after 5 [p.m.]," said Shulman.

Named after the pair's "patron saint," Oscar Wilde, the B&B&D hosted more than 1,000 guests from all over the world between the early '90s and 2011. Shulman said the guest house helped "spread the word" about Maynooth and convinced more than a dozen people to buy property in the area.

He noted however, the guest house wasn't the only business helping build the community's foundations.

"We have to recognize Bob and Carla Van Balen Walter," he said before crediting them with purchasing the town's two "anchor businesses" -- its gas station and general store - in 1986 and starting the Maynooth Business Association, which would later become the Maynooth and Hastings Highlands Business Association.

Today, Shulman is one of four directors on the association's board. With the association he's helped inaugurate Maynooth Madness, Brighten the Night and the Maynooth Social Club, which hosted annual Cabin Fever and Beach Parties at the Arlington Hotel.

It's not a surprise that so many of Maynooth's most well known events have been supported by Shulman and Siegrist. They've been hosting community Pride parties for more than two decades, brought to fruition five musicals and have now supported more than a dozen artists at their gallery.

No wonder they opened Wildewood Gallery little more than a year after shutting down their guest house and moving into town. Shulman said they had plans to take a break and retire, but that might not be in their nature.

The pair purchased property on Maynooth's main street in April 2012. The building in question had been vacant for more than 15 years and needed substantial renovations. The foundation was angled and collapsing in on itself. Purchasing property today probably requires the same amount of research or a good real-estate agent (more on this subject can be found on Vents Magazine) as it did then. Siegrist said he'd always wonder if the house would still be there while on his way to continue renovations.

"Just a little bit every day," he said. "This place has been I don't know how many things."

Shulman said their first dinners in the house felt as if they were having a "royal" affair. Where the gallery is now was their living and dining room. They'd have to holler at each other to pass the butter because their table had to be long enough to match the size of the front room.

"Barry said this is a huge waste of space," said Shulman.

Today, Shulman and Siegrist have nearly completed renovations on the gallery, which also happens to be their home. Shulman said the gallery's front owed much to the Community Futures Development Corporation for its façade improvement loan program.

"It contributed to our makeover immensely," he said noting the gallery's wheelchair ramp, awnings, signs and eye-catching blue paint.

Since opening, the pair has hosted shows for Rocky Green and Anita Murphy, Ken Balmer and Ren Lonechild, Henry Gordon, Arne Roosman, Alan Dhingra and Gail Burstyn. It also supports local artists on consignment such as stained glass artist Margo Merritt, potter Amy Doole and fibre artist Anne Garwood Roney.

"We're very fortunate to know living artists and it's really nice to be matchmakers," said Shulman explaining the pair has helped artists through their first shows and to get their names out into the world. They also connect the right buyer with the right piece of art, he said.

"A lot of artists don't have places to show their work," said Siegrist.

It also worked because, Shulman said, he and Siegrist have similar taste. They aren't ever "battling" for which artist to show.

Today, he said, people come around to see what new artists they have and take time to stop in Maynooth.

"They say to me, 'I can't believe I've never stopped in Maynooth before,'" he said. "It's exciting to find an undiscovered artist."

For their fifth anniversary, Wildewood Gallery will host George Raab this month and Henry Gordon for July and August. Last month they hosted Rene Lonechild's first solo show.