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Song Spot's Matilda Jr. Hits The Spot

Danielle Zebeski was one of two girls cast as Matilda. She and Swaraa Raman alternated shows. See additional photo page 3

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Less than half the picture by Richard Bercuson



Stepping Up When It Counts

It is now 13 months since Vladimir Putin's Russian forces invaded the Ukraine. At first, we here in the safe confines of Canada searched for ways to lend a hand, however small. We could send money, clothing or other goods through various agencies. However, some were able to take that many steps further.

Doug Summers and his partner, Jenn Rhines, found a way to help in an altogether more hands-on manner. Summers's family owns a few golf courses, including Winchester, as well as the 16-acre parcel of land where his home is located on the south side of Winchester Road, east of Thickson.

One day last spring, wondering what they could do to help, he visited the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

on Bloor and offered to sponsor a family. He describes how, when he went in, they thought he was a bit nuts. Not only does he have the means to do it, but there's also a 7,000 square foot stone house with six bedrooms sitting empty on the Winchester club grounds. After mounds of paperwork, he was able to sponsor two families, seven people in all, who now live in that house. He doesn't charge the families anything to live there. One of them is Oksana Valevka and her two daughters whose story appears in his issue.

At that church, a committee had been formed to assist people wanting to come here. Doug says it was a good deal easier dealing with that support group than trying to negotiate through government red tape, which was his first attempt.

"If we could all do our bit," he says, "it would make a huge difference. These people have been completely displaced. I felt we needed to do something and I had that huge house just sitting there."

Led by Jenn, they converted a small structure at the rear of his property to a wellness centre, with massages by Jenn, a registered massage therapist, and aesthetics by Oksana who held the same position in her native Odessa. Thus Winchester Wellness (winchester-wellness.ca) was born.

"I've found that refugees who come here are very entrepreneurial," he offers. "They have nothing to lose and of course there's a massive learning curve. But the last thing I could never call them is lazy." He describes how the other woman he sponsored cleans offices during the day and works at night online for a Ukrainian company. The hus-

bands of both, meanwhile, are fighting the Russians somewhere. No one knows where.

"I don't know what they would have done," Doug adds. "We take a lot for granted here. I look at what's happening over there and it's the silliest excuse for a war I've ever seen. I mean, think about it."

We have. We do. So he and Jenn are doing what they can.

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Region Launches Online Customer Portal

Durham Region has launched an online self-service portal so residents can request a service or report an issue to the Region. Since March 10, residents can now use the portal to submit and track requests for many Regional services such as waste and recycling, water and sewer, and traffic inquiries. The self-service portal is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at **myDurham311.ca**.

Residents can submit a request online whenever it's convenient for them, and set up alerts to track their request. Requests are automatically sent to a customer service representative for action. If a customer needs to call the Region about their request, staff will have all the information at their fingertips.

Residents can use the self-service portal to request a recycling blue bin or a garbage bag tag exemption, report a water issue, tell us if you see a traffic light not working properly, and more.

The following list outlines the requests that are now live via **myDurham311.ca**:

- Waste Diversion Kit Request
- Waste General Inquiries
- Waste - Request School Programs and Outreach
- Bag Tag Exemption Form Request
- Report Water Issues
- General Traffic Inquiry
- Pedestrian Safety
- Emergency Management Inquiry Submission
- Contact the Office of the CAO

During business hours, residents can call 311 for access to Regional information within the geographical borders of Durham Region. People outside those borders can access information by calling one local number, 905-668-7711, or toll-free at 1-800-372-1102.

The self-service portal is part of the myDurham 311 initiative, a transformational project aimed at improving the customer experience at Durham Region.



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From Odessa to Brooklin

By Richard Bercuson

There was a day, early in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when bombs were being dropped near Oksana Valevska's home in Odessa.

"I remember my kids," she recalls. "They just fell on the ground because there were missile by missile like every 30 seconds and there were about 10 of them and my kids just fell on the floor and they started crying like, 'Mom, are we going to die now?'"

"I was like 'No, no, no, no, don't worry, that's just loud noise, no worries, no worries'. Probably if I reacted the other way, I would be panicking. But I would keep smiling, so inside I was shaking and crying and horrified. I would be smiling, no, no, no, don't worry, that's just, you know, it's like an earthquake, no worries. Put on a happy face."

"And then I realized that we have to, you know, we have to run. But something kept me there, you know, because every single day, I hope that it would be over."

"I couldn't believe that such nonsense can happen in such a

modern world."

Well qualified

As she admits, life had been good for her and her family before. With graduate degrees in psychology and pedagogy, she'd been teaching at a college in Odessa where she grew up. The city is a major port on the Black Sea and became an early target for Putin's forces. She also had a certificate in aesthetics and permanent makeup and, after five years of medical study, was within a year of another degree. However, with the war, her qualification exams were canceled and thus the diploma as well.

Aside from her teaching job, she'd also worked as an aesthetician, a role she's carried over to her new Brooklin home. In the Ukraine, teaching positions don't pay as well as here, hence the need for the two jobs.

"Because I can say that at that time, just before the war, I had such an interesting thought that well, now looks like I've achieved everything I wanted. I have a job of my dreams and my kids are healthy, they are with me, I have

a wonderful house and I have no money issues, right?"

Strong English

Her spoken English is excellent, accented of course, and in the five months she's been in Canada, she's made a point of reading English books and watching English TV. She'd been exposed to the language in school and years back, before marriage and children, she worked on Royal Caribbean Cruise lines as a pool attendant.

The invasion, however, not only came as a surprise but the reactions of people in Odessa were such that none could quite believe it was happening, even though Putin's troops had been massing along the eastern border for some time.

"The people of Odessa, it being a really important strategic area militarily, was there in the time leading up to February 24th, a feeling that, do you hear what the Russians are doing," she says. "We were reading about it."

"Nobody believed. It was too crazy. No reason. We just, all the time we thought that it was just a threatening, you know, like showing off like we are powerful, shake, tremble, why would it happen."

Lip blush

She recounts what she calls "a funny situation" a week before the war started. She had a patient come for some treatment. She joked with the woman, "Oh well, you are going to do your lip blush, but if the war starts, why do you need it?"

Her customer's matter-of-fact reply was, "Well, just imagine the war starts and I have a beautiful lip blush."

Her home was located about midway, about kilometre each way, between the international airport and a naval station. "So these two objects were being bombed all the time and we were just in the center in the middle of it. So let's say every day was very risky and let's say we were playing risky games, staying there. Actually I did not realize that this was happening at the beginning and then I couldn't realize that it would go on."

"And everybody hoped that it would end one day because it was nonsense, you know, what was happening."

A dream

The day it began, on the morning of Feb. 24, 2022, she woke *continued on page 5*

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Steph Mitchell



continued from page 4

up at around 4 am to the sound of explosions at the naval station. “The house just was literally shaking and jumping. And at that moment I realized that it was war starting. Because I saw a dream the whole night before the war started, I had a dream that I saw this, and that was strange.”

The “nonsense,” as she calls it, continued unabated. Her husband joined the armed forces right away. Because of her medical training, she, too wanted to join but having two young daughters, now 8 and 9 years old, stopped her. “There would be nobody to take care of them. I just had no right to do that. So he went and I stayed.”

Then in April she learned of a Canadian organization called CUAET, Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel measures, a federal program “to help Ukrainians and their family members come to Canada as quickly as possible and to provide them with the ability to work and study while in Canada.” (<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/ukraine-measures/cuaet.html>)

Passports and visas
Her children didn't have passports. There was no Canadian consulate in Odessa and the embassy in far away Kyiv was closed. Instead, she had to travel to neighbouring Moldova to provide biometric data like fingerprints. She eventually managed to obtain their passports but the next step was to obtain visas to get here. That meant two long and miserable days on a bus to Vienna, Austria, since there was no other way to reach it.

Her girls had to stay home. “But of course that was very dangerous. But it would be a great challenge for them because the, you know, the trip was really bad. Two days in a bus with long stops and it was packed. People were sitting between the chairs so I couldn't afford taking them. But we had a shelter in the house. A basement.”

Within a few days, she got the visas. “I came back and we started packing. It was hard because I practiced it until the last day, I don't know, waiting for some miracle to happen. But then, just the day before, we had to leave. We packed and you know, it was also a hard thing to do because



we had to pack all our life into one suitcase for each of us.”

They found a woman who drove them by car to Chisinau, Moldova. There, they got a flight to Bucharest, from there to Paris, and finally to Toronto, a full day of flying with their lives crammed into three suitcases. It was October 5.

As for her husband, now fighting near the front lines, they'd been together once in March and then, on the day she left, he'd been given a couple of hours with them to say goodbye. Contact since then has been sporadic.

Arriving in Canada

They arrived at Pearson Airport at around 7 pm and took a taxi to Brooklin where Doug Summers and Jenn Rhines had set up a house for them. “These people they made something impossible for me because, you know, we were strangers for them and they accepted us here.”

“The moment I left Ukraine I felt that we were not free but we were not in danger and I felt a great relief. The moment we were approaching Canada and I saw the coastline, I have no idea why but I literally told my kids we are at home. I don't know why just like that was a feeling that I'm going home. I don't know why really so I was happy to come here and there was no grieving just because you know the dearest people were with me and I knew that they were safe.

“I now understand that coming back to Ukraine would be convenient for me after the war because there is a house, friends, I have some social status there. I would go back to work because they wait for me at college and it would be good for me.

Children's safety

“But it wouldn't be good for my kids because I don't know when

is going to be the next time Russia will attack us and are growing up in a country which is so destroyed and devastated right ruined with ruined economy with ruined destinies, ruined hopes, unhappy people would be cruel for my kids. I want them to be calm and happy and probably complaining about little trifles, you know. But yes, I would like to grow something here, like to plant seeds here.”

The girls are enrolled at Blair Ridge Public School and are as happy as can be. The older one, who in 2021 was the Ukraine's cheerleading champion, has joined the school cheerleading team.

Oksana herself, as he tries to

grow her aesthetics business (winchesterwellness.ca) thanks to the magnanimity of her sponsors Doug Summers and Jenn Rhines, plans to enroll in college one day to upgrade her qualifications. “If I want to do something serious here, I need to get an education here.” Meanwhile, on March 29, she will be at Pearson Airport to greet close friends of hers from Odessa, a family of five, whose plane tickets she paid for, and bring them to Whitby.

“You know, I never thought that our people, our nation, our men are so extremely brave and tough. I never had an idea that our nation, that Ukrainians are so strong. There's an expression. They wanted to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds.”

What You Need To Know This Week in Whitby



Creating a Community Strategic Plan for Whitby

Thank you to the **2,100+** people who participated in the first phase of engagement to create a new four-year Community Strategic Plan for Whitby.



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Plant-Based Eating by Sheree Nicholson

Vegans and Non-vegans Living In Harmony

When sitting down to write this column, I asked my fiancé what burning questions do people who eat meat have about veganism. His answer was, "Can vegans and non-vegans get along?" Hmm...a great response. I'll now try to address it.

I've been vegan for 12 ½ years, a vegetarian for 22, and live with someone who eats meat. We're getting married in June and are planning the wedding food. I think there is way too much meat on our menu while he questions my vegan food options. To settle this problem, we're hiring two caterers: one who will serve more traditional fare, and the other who will serve vegan options.

No arguments

My choice was made for many reasons. After having eaten meat myself for around 40 years, I don't feel I can question the

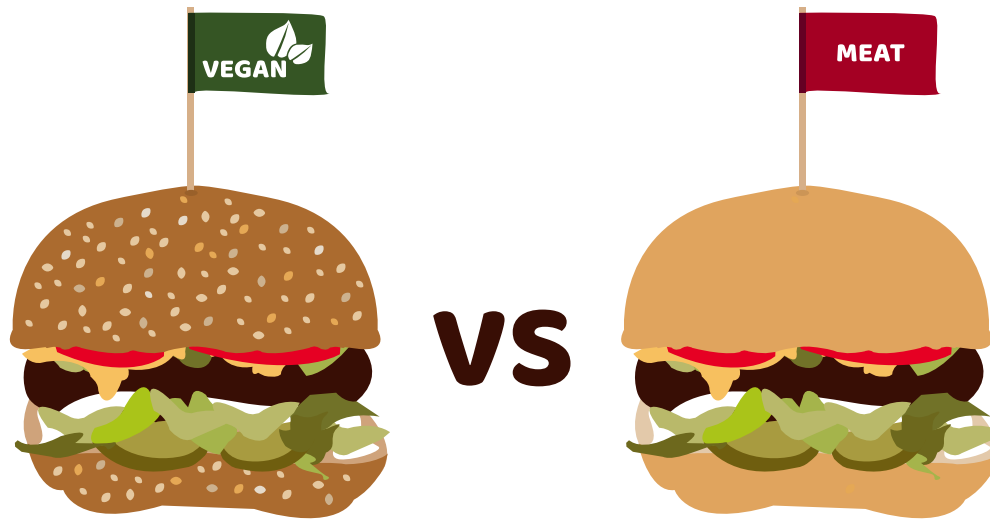
meat-eating decisions of others. It's easy to spew statistics and facts around the benefits of veganism, but I stay clear of black-and-white thinking. My method is to live my life and if, by my example, someone wants to explore not eating meat, I am happy to help.

Pushing my choices on others creates even more separation.

An example of things I don't do is to call meat eaters "flesh eaters," as some vegans do. I consider it derogatory. Still, I do get asked many questions by people who just want to debate me on the topic. No debate is necessary though as I can eat vegan and you can eat meat. A couple of the questions I get asked are: How do you get your protein? Don't plants have feelings, too?

Mix and match

In my home life, meat and vegan meals are cooked every day. We can mix and match sometimes in that my meal can be his side dish, or I can replace the meat on my plate with a veggie burger. With respect and love, we can live together. Occasionally my partner will join me at a vegan restaurant, and sometimes I'll join him at a steak house like The Keg. More and more though, we are drawn to restaurants that serve both meat and vegan options.



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One of our fast food favourites is the Pita Pit. They have a few vegan and many meat options. This makes it easy for us. In Ajax, there's the Italian restaurant "Il Fornellos" with an extensive vegan menu. Indian restaurants are another great option. I recently tried "Rekha's Indian Kitchen" in Whitby and the food was fantastic. We order Thai food from Country Perks, a restaurant in Courtice. I've heard Bangrak Thai Street Food in downtown Brooklin is also excellent.

A little tolerance of both sides means we can live in harmony.

Sheree's Hack: Try ethnic restaurants such as Thai and Indian for a wide range of meat and non-meat meals.



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She completed her BSc in Ophthalmic Medical Technology at the University of Ottawa with training at the Ottawa Eye Institute. She was a surgical technician at the Clearview Vision Institute before obtaining her Doctor of Optometry at Nova Southeastern University. Dr. Byer completed an extended practicum at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in subspecialty clinics including cornea, medical and surgical retina, glaucoma, and neuro-ophthalmology. Additionally, she did

a residency in primary care and ocular disease at Chicago's Illinois Eye Institute where she obtained extensive experience managing urgent eye conditions.

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Our First Community Centre's Origins

By Jennifer Hudgins



Back in 1876, the Oshawa Vindicator newspaper praised Brooklin's religious diversity and highlighted the fact that there were

five churches and few taverns in the town.

What the paper failed to mention was that the site of the Bible Christian Church had once been a bustling tavern. It was only when the tavern was demolished that the Bible Christians

were able to construct the building on their property at the corner of Cassels Road and Church Street.

Community saved it

The cost to build the church totalled just over \$2,900 (equivalent to about \$580,000 today) which included the property, fence, and furnishings. The community rallied around the construction and donated enough money to cover the debt, managing to complete it within two days of the dedication ceremony. Bible Christians used the building for eight years before joining with the Methodist Episcopal and Wesleyan Methodist Churches. These eventually amalgamated with members of the Presbyterian denomination to form what is now the Brooklin United Church.

After the Bible Christians left, Baptists used the building until 1916 when the congregation disbanded. For four years, it sat empty until the Township of Whitby bought it and converted it into a



Courtesy of Whitby Archives

public library and municipal offices. It served as such for 46 years until a new municipal office was built directly behind the property.

Hosted dances

During World War II, the building took on a new purpose as a dance hall. A portion of the admission fee was donated to support the war effort. One of the featured bands was Billy Hole and His Live Wires who played nostalgic tunes. To enter, patrons had to pay 15 cents as well as buy a 25 cent war savings stamp. Businessman Matt Agar made it clear on a poster advertising the dance event that attendees with alcohol on their breath would not be admitted.

The building became Brooklin's first Community Centre in 1966, marking yet another chapter in its storied history. The dances

of yesteryear were replaced by the energetic sounds of hard rock. Former Brooklinite Tom Lakey and his band had the old wooden floor shaking with their rendition of Led Zeppelin's "A Whole Lotta Love."

Over the years, the centre has played host to countless community events and gatherings. It has been home to Boy Scouts, Cubs, Girl Guides and Brownies, as well as wedding receptions, auctions, school Christmas concerts, plays and Group 74's Old Tyme Christmas.

Despite the many changes it has undergone, the old centre has been a place for the community to gather and will most likely continue to serve that purpose for years to come.

The former Bible Christian Church provides a window into the town's past, reflecting the varied needs of its residents for over a century.



MARKETING YOUR HOME FOR ALL IT IS WORTH!

BUSTED: common myths among buyers

Interest rate hikes continue to impact the real estate market, with number of houses exchanging hands down substantially in February compared to onset of rate hikes. Home prices, meanwhile, have fallen since their record high a year earlier.

Here in Durham Region, the number of new listings in February decreased by 44 per cent to 896 compared to this time last year and residential transactions dropped by 47 per cent to 601. The average price, meanwhile, was \$888,448. That's a 23.3% decrease compared to a year earlier. While lower costs diminish the effect of higher borrowing costs, a decrease in the number of new listings could lead to increased competition between buyers, which could in turn lead to higher prices.

If you're a prospective homebuyer, you may be wondering if the time to buy is now or if you should continue to wait out the market. **HOMES ARE NOW ON SALE!**

There are many buyers sitting on the side lines waiting for interest rates to come down before they purchase. Financial institutions are seeing a large number of preapproved mortgages that are yet to be funded. If you wait you may find home prices going up due to competition with other buyers and a short supply of homes for sale. You could find yourself in bidding wars! Now may be the best time to buy.

Other common real estate myths can confuse you even further. Dispelling those myths can help you make the decision right for you.

A good credit rating means a better interest rate. TRUE! Credit-reporting agencies like Equifax and TransUnion rate you on a scale to measure your financial health. The higher the score, the lower the risk you pose, which should help you secure a better mortgage. Still, shopping around is key because interest rates, conditions and products can vary from one lender to another.

The house price is the only cost you need to worry about. FALSE! If you're planning to buy a home, you're likely focused on the purchase price, but the cost of a home is made up of more than that. Budget for expenses like legal and administrative fees, a home inspection if you choose, appraisal fee, land transfer tax, moving costs and home insurance.

Mortgage insurance protects you should something happen to you. FALSE! If you want to buy a home with a down payment of less than 20 per cent, you'll

need mortgage loan insurance but contrary to popular belief, that insurance protects the lender in case you can't make your payments – not the borrower, reminds CMHC.

Buyers get a better deal if they don't use an agent. FALSE! It's easy to dispel the myth that buying a house without an agent can save you money. That's because the agent commission for both the buying and the selling agent – if there is one – is paid by the sellers. In short, that means that as a buyer, you don't pay for your agent's services.

Make a lowball offer so you have room to negotiate. FALSE! There may be a time and a place for lowball offers but those are typically few and far between. In most instances, the seller's agent will advise their clients to not take the offer, perhaps because it's seen as insulting or simply not serious or because the seller has received competing offers from prospective buyers who chose not to lowball. You could miss out. Working with your agent to make a competitive offer that considers your budget, the asking price, the home's condition and the current market is a wiser strategy.

At The King Home Team: Royal Heritage Realty, we take the time to dispel real estate myths before our clients begin their house selling and/or buying journey. For buyers and sellers alike, it's important to choose a real estate agent who's knowledgeable about current market conditions and your preferred community.

Choose someone you trust, who makes you feel comfortable, who listens to you and respects your views. The King Home Team can help you find the home perfect for you. Please visit our website at www.kinghometeam.com for a longer version of this article and a blog that busts common real estate myths among sellers

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