

BROCK'S BANTER: The Quest for Mayberry

By Brock Weir

?He still thinks this is Mayberry,? one reader told me a couple of months ago, explaining a debate going on between she and her husband on whether or not Aurora should opt in on retail cannabis sales.

There was a smile on her face as she said it, so it was hard to discern whether or not Aurora's apparent resemblance to the fabled town on which The Andy Griffith Show was centred, was a good thing or a bad thing.

Good or bad, it offered plenty of food for thought.

Sure, in the last decade or two, Aurora has grown significantly; so much so that any resemblance it might have had to its questionable television counterpart was surely behind it.

While barber shops and salons are still going great guns in our community, it might be rarer to find one that is a place where people congregate to share vital pieces of juicy gossip about their neighbours or the movers and shakers that make up any communities.

They're not necessarily places where municipal leaders gather over the weekend for a clip or a shave while discussing the week ahead. Now, these services are primarily just that, rather than a hub of community building.

Service clubs are often the hallmarks of our idealised images of a thriving smaller community. Ours are still flourishing today, but there is room for the argument that while memberships are currently holding steady, with some on the rise due to some of the more specialised segments of the community they serve, membership within is no longer seen as an essential part of a community leader's CV.

A few decades ago, block parties were a regular feature of the community. Now, aside from one community on Aurora's east side valiantly trying to keep this tradition alive in their neighbourhood park, they are more the less a memory ? a memory remembered fondly.

Sure, Aurorans are more than eager to take part in any variety of municipally-hosted event, whether it is the Canada Day celebrations each year or last week's Arctic Adventure on Family Day, but if invitations were sent out to a community picnic in the style of yore, I suspect enthusiasm, despite our best efforts, might be a slightly muted by comparison.

In my experience, the closest thing we have to that idealised hub of small town life is the Aurora Farmers' market, held each spring through Hallowe'en at Town Park and on Wells Street.

As an avid market-goer, I can't think of any other place I've been in Aurora that is such a microcosm of this community. We (myself included) often bemoan the strange divide in our Town between the old and the new, the east and the west, but the Market is one initiative that goes a long way to bridge that gap.

I couldn't begin to ballpark how many times I've personally taken in a Saturday at the Market, but what I can say with a great deal of certainty there hasn't been one yet where I haven't met at least one neighbour, or someone I've interviewed through the course of my day job, a lawmaker, a local business owner, a community volunteer, or a tourist.

In fact, more often than not, most if not all of these boxes can be easily checked in the average hour on Wells, or along what is now known as Queen's York Rangers Laneway.

I remember vividly one such Market day several years ago where, out of the blue, I felt a tap on the shoulder and was handed what appeared to be a golden lollypop.

Golden in colour, smooth yet knobbly in appearance, it was a sweet act of kindness on a dreary fall day.

I can't remember what Marie Barnes said to me when she took the barley sugar out of her pocket, but I do remember the explanation she gave me as she patted down the bounty of additional lollypops sticking out of her coat pocket.

Depicting a man on horseback, it was, she said, cast in molds she salvaged from one of the very first Laura Secord confectionary stores in Canada.

Naturally, I wanted to find out more, and, over the years, through further conversation, I found a wholly cosmopolitan woman who had travelled the world, created art, but had a determination to keep the traditions of her adopted hometown alive.

As was anyone who had the good fortune of getting a sample of barley sugar from her throughout the years, I was saddened to learn of her passing on February 17 at the age of 92, survived by her husband, Gordon, and her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

After several years of passing acquaintance, the couple invited me into their home for the first time just over a year ago for a conversation.

I pitched to them the idea of profiling a couple around Valentine's Day, a couple who had gone the distance, found a creative outlet

in each other, and have given back to the community in some way. It seemed like they more than fit the bill, but even I was surprised when I sat down at their kitchen table and Gordon unfurled a three-metre long scroll outlining their distinct, parallel and intersecting lives.

Marie's story began 1926, born in Alberta to a family with Danish roots. Her father was a butter maker who had come to the Prairies from Denmark to make his fortune in the creamery business. As a young woman, Marie studied at the Vancouver School of Art where she married her first husband and began a family and art took a back seat to her role as wife and mother.

Eventually, however, she found her artistic feet again, becoming a renowned artist in the world of textiles, and it is through the art world that she crossed paths with Gordon at the Ontario Craft Foundation ? with Marie serving as Gordon's boss.

Together, they took the world by storm, travelling the globe in the name of art, eventually falling firmly in love in Dublin.

When I sat down with them last year, they claimed never to have had a ?Real? fight in their life, forging a union they said was bound not only by love but a shared inquisitiveness, and a thirst for knowledge, particularly science and history, which they both agreed was ?much more interesting, more titillating than somebody's fiction.?

But they were also bound by a love of community, which they dedicated themselves to after settling in Aurora.

Her pro-tip, she told me, on the secret of a lasting relationship is ?develop wide friendships and sincere friendships with a lot of other people.?

She had these in spades, and the community was all the richer. The community, in turn, would do well by adopting this philosophy. Maybe a modern Mayberry is not too wild an idea.