



Major sewer bypass open for business

By TAMAR ATIK
The Observer

After two years of planning and three years of careful construction, the Coxwell Sanitary Trunk Sewer (CSTS) bypass is in operation.

The city describes the CSTS as “the most critical section of sanitary trunk sewer in Toronto.” It is about 60 years old, and damage was found in a 60-metre stretch of the line in 2008.

That raised fears of a local environmental disaster — with the possibility of sewage spreading underground from the leak, near O’Connor Drive and Coxwell Boulevard, and contaminating the Don River.

So in 2010, a massive construction project began, to build an underground bypass around the damaged section. There were long delays in the work, and serious inconvenience for the people living, working and travelling through the neighbourhood around the construction site.



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But the councillor for Ward 29/Toronto-Danforth, Mary Fragedakis, said the work couldn’t have been finished any sooner.

“It took as long as it took, unfortunately, because they were being very careful, and we have to be very careful — because this is a sewer that is a connecting point for three other sewers that actually hook into Coxwell and go down to Ashbridges Bay,” she said.

“So it’s best to err on the side of caution.”

The CSTS carries approximately 400 million litres of wastewater to the Ashbridges Bay treatment plant daily.

“I’m glad that this has been sorted out and the problem has been solved,” Fragedakis said.

■ See CONSTRUCTION, page 5



Vida Korhani /// Observer

Honouring Jack

More than 300 people gathered on Sunday for the unveiling ceremony of Jack Layton Way. Layton’s wife, MP Olivia Chow (left), and Councillor Paula Fletcher opened the renamed street, just outside East York’s southwest corner, in honour of the late MP for Toronto-Danforth — who also served as the federal NDP leader. See story on page 5.

Local principal gets top marks with national award



Jamie Anderson /// Observer

Tammy Ross is one of the winners of this year’s national Outstanding Principal award.

Crescent Town principal creates ‘fabulous learning environment’ for students

By JAMIE ANDERSON
The Observer

The principal of Crescent Town Elementary School, Tammy Ross, may seem modest when it comes to her role in the initiatives at the school, but her recent Outstanding Principals Award is proof of her productive leadership.

Ross has been the principal at Crescent Town for 14 years and this year she was one of 51 principals recognized across Canada by The Learning Partnership, a charitable organization that advocates for public education.

Although she may say that she was “just lucky” in receiving the award,

her superintendent at the Toronto District School Board, Roula Anastasakos, has nothing but good things to say about her leadership at the school.

“Tammy is an exemplary principal. It’s not a surprise to anyone that she was recognized for this award.... She has been at Crescent Town for many years, so you see the labour of her work and her efforts and what a really fabulous learning environment that has been created there,” Anastasakos said.

“She works collaboratively with her parents, her community, her staff, to do the best in terms of maximizing the outcomes for every single child in that building.”

Ross puts a lot of emphasis on having healthy foods available in the school. Her mother, Norma Orlan, 86, even comes on Fridays to prepare snacks for the students.

“We’ve had a snack program for a long time here, but more recently its just grown a little bit so we have a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables here, things that the kids may not have at home,” Ross said, “giving them a chance to try different things... and it’s good for them, their growth and development, their teeth — and that all affects their learning.”

Ross also has a literacy program at her school that has been recognized by Harvard University, including an event called Reading Empowers All at Crescent Town (REA@CT) where parents and members of the community come in to the school and share their favourite stories.

“We have a really young community and we have a lot of students who are new Canadians,” Ross said.

■ See PRINCIPAL, page 3

POLICE BRIEFS

Murderer gets life sentence

A Leaside man will spend at least the next 14 years in prison for the murder of his common-law wife. On Wednesday, Paul Hindle was sentenced to life imprisonment with no possibility of parole for 14 years, after he pleaded guilty to murdering Lisa Lebitka. On Dec. 28, 2011, Hindle strangled the 45-year-old interior designer and mother of three in their home, near Laird Drive and Eglinton Avenue.

Arrest made in robbery case

Toronto police have made an arrest in connection with the investigation of two recent robberies on Danforth Avenue. Police say a man entered two banks on Danforth and demanded money, leaving the banks with the cash. A suspect was arrested on Feb. 19 and was scheduled to appear in court the same day. Rene Ruest, 34, has been charged with two counts of robbery.

Shots fired from vehicle

On Feb. 19, the Toronto Police Service received a call about shots fired from a vehicle passing through the area of St. Clair Avenue East and O'Connor Drive. When they investigated, they found bullet casings on the road. But no suspects were found and no injuries were sustained.

~ Kristin Eliason



Rajesh Sammy // Observer

Slush city

City of Toronto workers spent much of Wednesday and Thursday clearing local streets and sidewalks of slush, after a winter storm hit the area with a mixture of snow and rain. This East York street still has a way to go before it's walkable in anything but hip waders.

EMS defends 3-hour delay

Elderly woman dies after waiting for ambulance

By NICOLETTE MENDOZA
The Observer

Toronto's ambulance service acknowledges that it wants to beef up resources, but a spokesperson adds that this doesn't mean there was an inadequate response when an 87-year-old woman waited for three hours at a Leaside retirement home for paramedics — and died.

Despite published criticism from the paramedics' union and from Janet Davis, the councillor for Ward 31/Beaches East York, Toronto's Emergency Medical Services

(EMS) "takes each call for emergency medical help very seriously," according to EMS spokesperson Kim McKinnon.

Toronto EMS received a call from a Leaside retirement home at 3:14 p.m. on Dec. 30. When the call was initially received, the severity was considered "not immediately life-threatening," McKinnon said, and "the caller was informed of a possible delay in arrival."

McKinnon explained that incoming calls are prioritized based on the information provided, and once EMS was informed of a change for the worse in the Leaside woman's condition, they responded under the highest priority and arrived at the retirement home within five minutes.

But that's only part of the story, according to published

reports that have quoted a spokesman for the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents the paramedics.

He said that no fewer than seven ambulances could have reached the woman during the three-hour interlude, but they were all redirected to situations deemed more urgent. He said a staff shortage is at the root of the problem.

Susan Eng, vice-president of the Canadian Association of Retired Persons (CARP), agrees.

"What we have to do as a system... is get ahead of the game and think this through," Eng said.

She cited the protocol in Halifax as one that Toronto could imitate. Halifax has a dedicated first-response unit exclusively for nursing homes

that's on-call day and night.

"They are specially trained to handle emergencies right at the nursing homes, instead of hauling them to the ER," Eng said. Then, if more medical attention is required, Halifax EMS is brought in.

McKinnon said that Toronto EMS considers any delay in response as "very serious," and said that the system is focused on making its own improvements to ease some of the pressure.

"We are working with the city manager's expert consultant to review all aspects of Toronto EMS, including staffing requirements and system improvements for the immediate and long term," she said.

City council recently approved the hiring of 50 new paramedics, who will begin orientation this spring.

Sustaining solutions to issues in East York

By CHRISTIAN BOYER
The Observer

For almost a year now, the East End Sustainability Network has held monthly meetings to come up with progressive ideas and solutions to problems facing East Yorkers.

Brought together by Beaches-East York MP Matthew Kellway and Toronto-Danforth MP Craig Scott as a project to challenge the traditional concept of top-down government, the group consists of citizens with varied backgrounds, united in a vision of improving their community.

Scott feels grassroots groups are necessary to approach issues differently.

"I think all healthy communities ultimately start up or end up embracing local grassroots initiatives," he said. "The best form of community tends to be organic. If you work only from the top down you have to guess most of the time, and you'll guess wrong as often as you guess right."



■ Scott

The doors are always open at the East End Sustainability Network, which regularly attracts new members. Ronn Stevenson addressed the skepticism of some.

"It's all about the people, they're stakeholders here, from the politicians to the businesses, to the people," he said.

Bruce Stewart is one of the group's facilitators for events and thinks community involvement helps address a broad range of issues across the country.

"We're looking for a way to link federal policy process right to the community," he said.

Kellway takes pride in the East End Sustainability Network and hopes one day it leads to real social change. Until then, he focuses on environmental issues and promoting generative cities.

"There are ways to make more resilient industries without the government just saying, 'here, take some money,'" he said. "What we have here is not just the opportunity to create sustainable cities but actually generative cities."

Coxwell Station to get new look

Renovations will make station more accessible, TTC spokesperson says

By ROBIN DHANJU
The Observer

A community consultation event in partnership with City on the Move, Young Artists in Transit and the TTC took place at the East York Civic Centre on Saturday.

The event allowed members of the community to get a preview of renovations at Coxwell Station planned for this summer.

David Nagler, a TTC spokesperson, provided more information about what the renovations will include. He said construction will make the station more accessible to everyone.

"There will be automatic fare gates, so anyone with a disability will be able to use the station with no problem, as well as families with strollers," he said.

The Coxwell Station construction is sched-

uled for completion in 2015, with the entire TTC renovation project set to finish in 2025.

Renovations at Coxwell are designed to ensure safer and more comfortable travel for all commuters, officials said.

One concern that the TTC is addressing is lighting on the pathway running from Strathmore Boulevard and Danforth Avenue. Both the TTC and city councillors are working to implement new lights to provide a safer walk for riders, especially during late hours.

Laura Mather, a frequent user of the TTC and Coxwell Station, is pleased with the station in its present state, but hopes more space will be created for commuters.

"It's pretty good," she said. "There's protection for me in the rain when I'm outside waiting for the bus. I find that it's a really good location."

The city councillor for Ward 29/Toronto-Danforth, Mary Fragedakis, said she's excited about the upcoming development.

"This project that incorporates public transit and youth and art, is the right mix," she said. "It's great."

COXWELL UPDATE

■ Automatic fare gates will make the station more accessible to passengers with disabilities or families with strollers

■ New exterior lights will be installed to make it safer for riders walking to the station at night

■ Youth belonging to Young Artists in Transit will be painting a mural at the station

■ Construction at the Coxwell Station is scheduled for completion in 2015



Jabbari Weekes /// Observer

Representatives from Free the Children and the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative launched We Stand Together at Monarch Park Collegiate on Feb. 12. Attendees packed the school's library to find out more about the project.

Standing up for a good cause

Local aboriginal and non-aboriginal students gather to launch annual We Stand Together event

By **JABBARI WEEKES**
The Observer

Wesley Solomon, an Ojibwa high school student, has seen many of his friends drop out of school.

Whether that is due to a lack of teacher attention or alienation from classmates, for Solomon and Free the Children, it is a growing issue they hope to solve.

On Feb. 12, Free the Children and the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative launched the annual event We Stand Together at Mon-

arch Park Collegiate, bringing together aboriginal and non-aboriginal students from the East York-Danforth area to raise awareness, create stronger bonds between students and address underfunding for First Nation schools.

"When you don't integrate a relationship between students in the classroom, there is going to be disparity and this (project) only works if there is a partner and that partner has to be kids with a willingness to act," said Craig Kielburger, co-founder of Free the Children.

Attendees packed the high school's large library to hear Kielburger share the ways that Free the Children has helped improve relationships with First Nation communities throughout Canada.

For example, a group of students

from Calgary reached out to At-tawaspikat, a reserve located near James Bay known for its poverty, while volunteers from St. Mary's Diocesan School in Stratford helped Hillside School at Kettle Point in Ontario with fundraising efforts.

"These amazing actions and initiatives are just the tip of the iceberg. These kids have already accomplished so much, and I think it's a sign of the progress we're making," Kielburger said.

According to a poll done last year by Free the Children asking parents and students in Toronto what local issues they felt needed attention, aboriginal issues ranked the lowest with both groups.

For Kielburger, this indicates that even with their success to

date, there's more work to be done.

"I think there's such a dire lack of awareness and the dismal statistics reflect that, but when you start unpacking the information for audiences like we've been doing, it starts up conversation," Solomon said.

Grim statistics won't prevent Solomon from making positive changes for his community.

"It's great to see people step up in any way and want to make a difference. I really want to bring it to my school and share it with my friends outside of Toronto," he said.

Until next Friday, March 8, We Stand Together will visit schools around the GTA to raise awareness of Aboriginal history, culture and tradition.

Principal has goal of being 'visible'

Cont'd. from page 1

"About 92 per cent of them speak another language at home, so English isn't their first language. So we do a lot of oral language work."

Being highly visible in the school is another way that Ross sets herself apart from other principals. She says that she doesn't really remember her own elementary school principal, because she never saw him outside of the office.

"The community, the staff, the kids; they all have to see you as being a supporter and see you up and about in the community with the kids to develop a sense of security and to know that someone is caring for their kids," Ross said. "I'm hoping these kids will remember who I am."

Akela Peoples, president and CEO of The Learning Partnership, said that they began giving out the Outstanding Principal Awards in 2005 because "as an organization, our goal is to help support the public education system, so we felt there was a need to identify and celebrate talented leaders in the system."



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Erika Marucci /// Observer



Nicolette Mendoza /// Observer

February blahs? Not in East York...

Top: (Left to right) Charlotte Marron, Morgan Leeb, Mandisa Jacques-Sabura, Lauren Marron and Amaliliya Jacques-Sabura were selling hot chocolate on Sunday at Carrot Common on Danforth Avenue, to raise money for Free the Children and the Hospital for Sick Children. Left: Also on Sunday, skaters took to the ice at Dieppe Park for Ward 29/Toronto-Danforth councillor Mary Fragedakis' community skate.

■ COMMUNITY

'Fysical fysics' at Science Centre



Family Day fun for kids, moms and dads

Top: Children and adults gathered at the 'Fysical Fysics' event at the Ontario Science Centre on Family Day.

Bottom left: Performers prepare to go to new heights as the main entertainment at the show.

Bottom right: Noah Dela Calzada, wearing falcon wings, prepares to take flight and learn about the physics of flying.

Robin Dhanju
/// Observer



Doctor prescribes healthy lifestyle choices... naturally

Traditional and alternative medicine 'can co-exist,' says naturopathic physician

By JABBARI WEEKES
The Observer

It's all natural for Dr. Nora Jane Pope.

Pope, a naturopathic physician, led a Feb. 21 discussion on the health advantages of naturopathic medicine as a part of the Big Carrot natural food market's weekly healthy series.

She stressed the importance of making healthy lifestyle choices in order to avoid increased stress and the risk of heart disease. She said that we're surrounded by foods that are tempting — but that eventually lead to health problems.

"The world is designed to make us fail," Pope said. "Like any other regular doctor, I want to educate and help patients uncover the cause of any ailment and remove these obstacles in the body so they can be cured."

According to Pope, natural medicine can

range from acupuncture for sore muscles to the use of herbal treatments such as ginseng or lemon balm for minor ailments. She said that this type of medicine is meant to serve as alternative to prescription drugs.

A naturopathic doctor since 2001, Pope has been treating both adults and children suffering from various ailments. She said that on a regular day, she'll examine patients presenting with various symptoms, and she'll find herbs that match their physical condition. For instance, she'll prescribe products such as hemp seeds (which are high in protein) to lower cholesterol and blood pressure.

"Herbs are very complex and have multiple functions and when I look at the whole person, I'm looking at the herb," Pope said. "So it's finding out what the symptom is and how we can solve it."

However, ever since being first approved by the government in 1925, naturopathy has met with criticism from conventional physicians for its emphasis on herbs that haven't gone through proper testing in comparison to what you can find at a pharmacy.

Pope believes that both branches of medicine



— traditional and alternative — can co-exist.

"Usually, if there is something I'm unsure of, I actually recommend going to see a physician or family doctor for a second look and this is a common practice for most of my peers," she said.

"So I think there has been a greater accep-

tance between professions in recent years."

Covering a wide spectrum of topics — from heart disease to the unhealthy amounts of sugars in our food — Pope explained the methods used by herself and her peers to help patients. For example, she uses piperine, which is a residue of black pepper that helps increase the body's metabolism to assist with weight loss as well as artery inflammation.

While most seemed to enjoy Pope's Big Carrot lecture, some remained a bit skeptical. Suffering from a spleen disorder, Elizabeth Sedgwick thought it was lacking in some areas.

"I don't think it had everything I needed," she said. "There were some nice tidbits on the use of herbs, but nothing outside of the regular practices that benefitted me"

However, both Pope and Sedgwick agree on one thing: they say that health comes down to lifestyle balance, including some control of your urges.

"Of course, you crave what you can't have, so because of my condition I can't eat sugar, or herbs," Sedgwick sighed. "Health counts... although I still love my ice cream."

COMMUNITY



Vida Korhani// Observer

Don Jail Roadway was officially renamed Jack Layton Way on Sunday afternoon. MP Olivia Chow (right), former Toronto-Danforth MPP Marilyn Churley and city councillor Paula Fletcher (left) paid tribute to Layton as they walked down the road to unveil the new street signs.

Jack Layton Way opens

By VIDA KORHANI
The Observer

Near Bridgepoint Health, at the southwest corner of East York, a new street sign reads Jack Layton Way.

The former Don Jail Roadway, running between Gerrard Street East and Broadview Avenue, has been renamed after the former municipal and federal politician who died of cancer in August, 2011.

Over 300 people gathered to honour Layton and take the first walk down the reminted strip on Sunday.

“He was a great politician, but he was also my friend. I knew him for 20 years,” said Michael Prue, NDP MPP for Beaches-East York. “He did a remarkable job with the party, building us up over many elections until finally the big breakthrough, and then he died. I cried for days.”

Councillor Mary Fragedakis, of Ward 29/Toronto-Danforth, joined the crowd paying tribute to Layton.

“Jack has affected me in many ways,” she said. “He’s the reason I’m in politics. He’s the reason I’m a city council-

lor.” Layton served as a city councillor himself, then as federal leader of the New Democrats and MP for Toronto-Danforth.

The reopened street is only the beginning of reconfiguration in the area. Within the next two years, there will be new parkland, pathways and streetscapes surrounding the children’s hospital that opens next week.

“Because Jack is not with us, it’s a reminder that we should be hopeful rather than living in a life of despair and fear,” said NDP MP Olivia Chow, Lay-

ton’s widow. “From a menacing jail of despair to a beautiful hospital about healing, that is so much of Jack Layton Way which is love, hope and optimism.”

“There is East Chinatown, the Chinese gates, a whole new hospital, new park,” said Ward 30 councillor Paula Fletcher. “It’s really the right place because of the many different things that touch us.

“It’s a great metaphor. From a place where there was incarceration to a place of innovation and healing,” she said. “That’s the Jack Layton way.”

Immigrants gain access to services in ‘sanctuary city’

By TICHAONA TAPAMBWA
The Observer

Toronto has become the first ‘sanctuary city’ in Canada.

After long debates, Toronto city council approved an “Access Without Fear” motion by a vote of 37-3. The motion provides undocumented immigrants residing in Toronto residences with unfettered access to municipal services.

“The motion was the recognition of the realities... that we can’t be checking everybody’s immigration status when we admit people to a public park or when they admit their kids to a parks and recreation program, or a community immunization program,” said John Parker, the councillor for Ward 26/Don Valley West.

He believes the decision is good for Toronto overall.

“Where it’s an immunization program, for example, we want everyone to be immunized. We wouldn’t want to exclude anybody,” he said. “We want to include as many people as possible because it’s for the benefit of the general health of the overall population.”

The motion lifts a weight off the shoulders of undocumented immigrants.

“To pass this law allows many immigrants to stop hiding underground and branch out within social services,” said Carlton Murombo, a permanent resident in Canada. “Over the last few years, Canada has definitely tightened its immigration laws, so I know a lot of people that have been denied citizenship and even deported because of their status.”

Accounts from Murombo and other immigrants are part of the reason council passed the motion. Council believes the decision will allow undocumented immigrants to aid officials trying to solve crimes without fear of being deported.

“We are not going to refuse to collect someone’s garbage if they don’t happen to be a legal immigrant. If there’s garbage left at the end of the driveway we’ll pick it up,” Parker said. “It’s a declaration of the status quo. It doesn’t change anything, because we have never gone out of our way to check on people’s citizenship status for the kinds of services that we are providing.”

Construction completed on Coxwell Trunk Sewer

Cont’d. from Page 1

The sewer, a “combined” one originally built in the 1950s, runs based on an old system. Combined sewers connect with others to lead to the same treatment plants. Only one pipe is used to carry both waste and storm water, unlike pipes in newer parts of the city.

The disadvantage of the combined model is that heavy runoff can make the pipes overflow, allowing untreated water to con-

taminate the surrounding environment. Fragedakis said this issue remains, and will be discussed soon.

“It slowly has to be addressed in the city as the infrastructure is aging,” she said.

Fragedakis suspects the pipes will be closely monitored, especially given that they’re older, in order to prevent a similar issue from happening again.

“I appreciate all that neighbours have had to go through in terms of having boarding up by their houses for the last three years. I am totally understanding of their frustration.

“But Toronto Water has been communicating with them on a regular basis and we have been communicating with them on a regular basis,” she said.

“I’m just relieved that the bypass is complete. It’s an important project in the city and I’m happy to say that it’s been successful.”



Photo courtesy of Toronto East General Hospital

Golf legend swings by

Toronto East General Hospital welcomed golf legends Jack Nicklaus and Nick Faldo Tuesday for a reception in support of the W. Brett Wilson Challenge, helping to raise \$1 million for the hospital’s robotic prostate cancer program. Here, Nicklaus signs a memento for one of the golf enthusiasts who attended the event. Dr. Carmine Simone of TEGH looks on.

■ EDITORIALS

Options limited

Homeless young people seeking alternatives since Touchstone Youth Centre shut its doors

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) has vowed to convert Metro Hall into a big homeless shelter this coming Thursday, March 7, unless more homeless shelter beds are opened in Toronto.

This follows a rancorous meeting last week, when council rebuffed a request for an emergency debate on homeless shelters — considering the deaths of several homeless people during our harsh winter.

Meanwhile, homeless youth and East Yorkers interested in their welfare wait to see what will happen with the Touchstone Youth Centre on Pape Avenue.

On Nov. 30, Touchstone closed, citing financial issues. The shelter has served hundreds of youth since 1991 — but is now dark and silent.

“The city is seeking a replacement operator for the facility to be in place as soon as possible,” says former executive director Susette Clunis. “The city and Touchstone Youth Centre will work co-operatively to find safe places for existing clients.”

But while Touchstone was supposed to reopen late last month, the facility remains shuttered. And that means that homeless youths between the ages of 16 and 24 have one less option to get out of the cold.

At last week’s city council meeting, allies of Mayor Rob Ford argued that there are more than enough beds available already for homeless people.

“How many more empty beds should taxpayers pay for?” one asked.

Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong even distributed a report showing a four per cent vacancy rate in an attempt to prove that there were more than enough beds and people just aren’t using them.

So why wouldn’t people use the beds if they’re available in the frigid Toronto weather? Some homeless people have said they’re afraid of being assaulted or robbed in shelters. Or maybe the beds are in locations that can’t be easily reached.

Whatever the reason, this city has to find a way to better protect these vulnerable citizens. Seven deaths among street people have been reported this year; 700 since 1985. Meanwhile, a lighthouse in the dark, like Touchstone, finds it impractical to operate.

Something is wrong with this city’s priorities.

~ Tamar Atik

Say no to violence

NHL setting a bad example for younger players

It’s a story that’s all too familiar in youth hockey leagues: a player has been seriously injured due to an incident on the ice.

Justin Mendes, 16, of the East York Midget-A hockey team, the Ted Reeve Thunder, suffered a broken neck two weeks ago after he was pushed into the boards.

Young players see their hockey heroes hitting each other on TV all the time, but it needs to be made clear that junior hockey and NHL hockey are two different games.

When most kids start to play competitive hockey, they can barely skate. As they get older, their on-ice skills develop at varying rates.

The speed of the game picks up and players begin to collide with each other. They transition into contact hockey. By the time players reach the junior leagues, contact is not only an accepted part of the game, but it is also beginning to infiltrate game strategy.

So when kids watch the NHL on TV and see that a big hit can change the game and draw approval from teammates, some may then try to imitate these revered superstars.

But the context that’s missing from the hockey games that these young players watch is that there’s a good time for a big hit and a bad time for a big hit. For instance, when someone is in the corner digging for the puck, that’s a bad time for a hit.

Young players generally need a reminder about restraint and respect — like the fact that just because one can drill a vulnerable player into the boards doesn’t mean he or she should. After all, would potentially crippling another player for life be worth winning a hockey game?

So parents and coaches need to emphasize that players should have respect for all of the other players on the ice.

Yes, sometimes making the big play changes a game. But when young people make the big play instead of the smart play, they can hurt their fellow hockey players.

~ Jamie Anderson

■ COLUMNS

Back in the groove

For most of my life, I’ve been a competitive dancer — literally dancing my way across the country.

Whether in front of full-length mirrors or on stage or under the spotlight, my life revolved around the world of dance.

But with school taking up more and more time in recent years, I drifted away from the studio, from those mirrors that reflected my passion. And I longed for the time that I could go back.

Then, after five years of being away from that world, I finally thought to myself: “It’s time to get back into the studio.”

So I began to take jazz classes every Saturday morning. It felt like I was back.

Getting back into something you did for a while feels amazing. It’s like being back to being you again. All it takes is reapplying yourself.

Whether it’s knitting,

yoga or that art class you took part in, getting back into it feels amazing.

Just being in that familiar environment is like a good old-fashioned tonic.

Picking up those knitting needles, putting on your Lululemon gear or grabbing that paintbrush again — it’s like fixing something that was broken.

Getting back into it again brings you back to an old, comforting feeling.

Why would you want to get back into it? To fill a void.

But a friendly word to the wise: Whatever the hobby, finding your rhythm with it again may not happen instantly.

Keep at it.

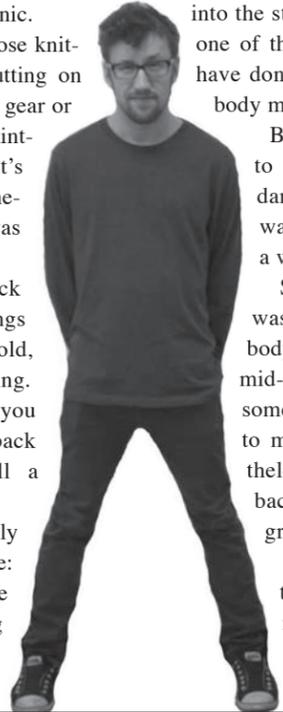
Obviously you won’t be back 100 per cent immediately after going back.

For me, stepping back into the studio again was one of the best things I have done, although my body might disagree.

But I wanted to get back into dance, even if it was just one class a week.

So doing it was great. My body, now in its mid-20s, did have some adjustments to make, but nonetheless was soon back in its regular groove.

Why not do the same? It’s a new year. OK, we’re now into the third month of it, but still, why not?



Erin Cassidy

Pondering passages

Life likes to throw us curve balls — and I almost struck out last year.

Now I’m finding it hard to come to terms with the two anniversaries that are quickly approaching.

Sometimes, I think about how I feel about the loss of two family members, who passed away just months apart from each other.

The first passage was the death of my dog Chico. He was a part of our family since I was 12. He was like my little brother and a best friend.

My grief was cushioned because I knew it was his time. He had been suffering from arthritis for years and it was noticeable that he couldn’t handle running around and playing like he did as a puppy.

In fact, the thing that still bothers me

about his death was that, at the end, he was crying in pain and there was nothing I felt I could do to make it go away.

But I wrapped him in his blanket and he stopped.

That night he fell asleep peacefully, but when we went to check on him in the morning he had already gone to doggy heaven.

Then there’s the hardest thing I have ever had to face in my life: the death of my grandmother — which happened just two months after the loss of Chico.

My family and I knew that was coming too, because she had been in and out of the hospital for over a year.

But it still hit hard, knowing that the queen of the

family was no longer

going to be with us.

She was my inspiration. Not many grandmothers are very understanding when their grandson comes out and says to the family, “I’m gay!”

I’ll never forget her words that day that I came out. She sat on my bed along with my cousin and told me: “I don’t care what you are. You’re my grandson and I’ll always love you.”

My grandmother Augusta’s wake and funeral were the hardest things I have endured in my life.

Seeing her in the coffin, I couldn’t control the emotions; it all came out and I felt like I was breaking.

All I can say now is that these two experiences have made me stronger, but it still makes me cry thinking about them sometimes.

But I know that they will always be watching over me.

Rest in peace to both of you. I can still feel your love, even though you’re not physically here.

You will both be in my heart forever and I’ll cherish all our memories.



Bernard Toney

Police offer tips on taxi safety

By TAMAR ATIK
The Observer

Published reports have pegged the number of Toronto taxi drivers with criminal convictions at 255. But with an older population, with some neighbourhoods dense with apartments and others with little parking availability, East York still needs its cabs.

So East Yorkers who use taxis have taken the troubling news in stride. And the police say there are simple things taxi passengers can do to protect themselves.

"I will still use cabs if I need to," said Angela Walcott, 63. She added that she doesn't have a negative view of taxi drivers in general, but she thinks criminally convicted ones should definitely be off the road. "I would prefer to call the cab company and have them send a cab to pick me up where I am and to drop me off at a specific address; that would be what I would do," she said.

Kmrafiqul Islam, 32, said he has never had a bad experience when taking cabs.

"When I didn't have a car, I used to use them; seems to me most of them are very good."

But Josephine Diaz, 17, thinks differently after having a scary taxi experience two years ago when she was downtown with a few friends and they hailed a cab.

"At first it was fine, but then we noticed that the guy's face was not matching the license.... It wasn't the same driver. We just got out of the car as soon as we could," she said. "After that I didn't really use the taxi service anymore; I usually just take the TTC."

Toronto police spokesperson Const. Wendy Drummond shared some tips that East Yorkers can follow to stay safe. For starters, she said, customers should make note of the services they are hiring.

"Make note of what company you're using; make note of the fleet number," she said. "When you get in the vehicle, there should be a licence clearly visible, with the driver's photograph as well. Make note of the name."

After "a brief conversation with the driver as to where you want to go," Drummond said, follow your instincts:

"If at that point you feel there is just something not right or making you feel uncomfortable, tell them unfortunately something has come up and you no longer need their services" and get out of the taxi.

She added that dialing 911 is always an option in case of an emergency.



Whitney Reyes // Observer

Teachers acting up

Catherine Bertin, Julianna Ozrio, Jennifer Roe-Doiron, Pat Elia, George Stocker, Alan Calouro and Anna Maria Lo Bianca (left to right) perform in the Toronto Catholic school board arts teachers' production of "Dearly Beloved," which ran Feb. 7-9 at St. Patrick Catholic Secondary School.

Digital world opens doors for author

By PAULINA PESTRYAKOV
The Observer

E.L. James may write about Seattle and J.K. Rowling about Hogwarts, but a Leaside author is trying to connect with Toronto readers by playing a little trick on them.

Van Pornaras, a Leaside native, has been writing since he was 16 years of age. He finished his first novel, a 450-page tale called (appropriately) Goliath, two decades ago.

Pornaras is not afraid to try his hand at different genres of fiction, targeting a variety of audiences.

"I've been writing about love lost, angst and love wanting to be found," he says. "I started writing everything, whether it was short stories, children's stories, screenplays — and I have recently decided to put a couple of my books on e-book format: The Wish and The Christmas Crunch."

But what makes him connect with his Toronto audience? He "throws in street names and changes them to people's names" to try to engage the local reader.

Pornaras believes that as a writer, the muse will always come to him and find him through, ironically, bad things happening.

"Writing has always been, for me, a cathartic experience," he says. "Trying to purge the bad and relieve the good and create worlds where things can actually go your way or go the way you want them to. I need to



■ Pornaras

have crappy things happen in my life so that I can actually escape them by writing. If everything is good in my life, I can't write."

But it turns out that writing isn't the hardest part of this author's life; it's marketing that's the real source of stress. Networking is a "door-opener" for self-published authors.

"As an author, it is very difficult to get published," Pornaras says. "With the onset of the electronic world and Kindle readers, iPad, eBooks, Amazon, the whole works, it's made it a lot easier for independent authors to get their stuff out, by-

passing the elitist attitude of the literary world, where you hire the agent, but the agent chooses whether or not they want you.

"It makes it considerably easier as the number in e-book sales has more than doubled within the past year, which makes it so much easier for an author to get his stuff out there," Pornaras says. "Most of my stories have been sitting in a box for 14 years, and it wasn't until the increase in independent publishing that you summon up the courage to put it out into the world."

The author is even more interested in talking to people who have read his books to get their feedback, whether the book was "garbage and why it was garbage, why it was good, what they liked about it." In the end, he says, he is more keen on his audience's response, hoping his readers will "enjoy the novel as much as he has."

"When I write, I see it transpire on a screen," he says. "Music, I find, helps me very much. That's how I get over writer's block. One day there will be some degree of success. A thousand-mile journey starts with a step."

Students talk the talk at public speaking competition



Kristin Eliason // Observer

MP Matthew Kellway presents a participation certificate to a contestant after the Royal Canadian Legion's public speaking contest on Feb. 17.

By KRISTIN ELIASON
The Observer

There were very few shaky hands in the legion's main hall. Contestants were calm and poised. Their voices were confident as they read the speeches they had prepared for this special day.

Seventeen boys and girls participated in this public speaking contest, discussing topics ranging from parent-child relationships and bullying to space exploration, cancer and ethnic cleansing.

The contest was held at the Royal Canadian Legion's Branch 11 at 9 Dawes Rd. on Feb. 17. The categories for the contest ranged from primary

to senior level, including students from Grades 2 to 9.

The MP for Beaches-East York, Matthew Kellway, was on hand to present participation certificates to contestants. He spoke about the importance of developing public speaking skills early in life.

"I think anybody who can speak publicly and persuasively and propose a way forward has a tremendous advantage to lead us," Kellway said.

Around 50 members of the community attended.

The turnout among speakers themselves was noticeably smaller than last year, when 29 contestants competed. Nonetheless, Helen Pearce, a member of Branch 11 and

co-ordinator of the event, said she was pleased with the turnout.

"(I think it went) very well," she said. "I'm amazed you can see the different (contestants) who have a natural talent."

Rida Ahmad, 8, won first prize in the primary category. Ralitsa Nikolova, 10, won for the junior. Zara Ahmad, 14, won for the intermediate and Sonia Mahajan, 15, won for the senior.

All first-place winners will move on to compete in the next level of the legion's public speaking contest this coming Sunday, March 3, at Branch 75 on Ramsden Road, in the Dufferin-Eglinton area.



Kristin Eliason /// Observer

Having a hoot at Todmorden

(Top) Braeden, 2, cuts a gingerbread cookie for cooking over the fire at the Family Day event at Todmorden Mills — with a little help from his friends.

(Right) April, 8, creates a craft at the owl-themed event. Braeden's not so sure it works.



■ GARDENING

Designer takes the inside out

By ERIKA MARUCCI
The Observer

Celia Alida Rutte, founder of the interior decorating and landscape design firm Conscious Living, creates clients' perfect gardens by building gorgeous outdoor rooms.

Rutte spoke about her passion for outdoor decorating to East York Garden Society members at the Stan Wadlow Park Clubhouse on Thursday, Feb. 21.

"It takes a lot of time and energy to plan this out," she said. "It's a thought-out plan beforehand."



■ Rutte

Rutte became interested in decorating in 2001 in Nova Scotia, but fell in love with outdoor decorating after fixing up a friend's garden.

In 2007 she started Conscious Living and today still remembers the amazing moment she realized decorating was her passion.

"It was a wonderful feeling, because I had spent the previous seven years trying to figure out what to do with my life," Rutte said.

"I was doing all these different careers and I didn't know what I wanted to do."

Rutte defines her work as conscious; she needs to be aware of the consequences her decisions will have on her work and clients.

"When I make decisions, it's with a lot of awareness," she said. "I'm creating something that's probably going to last long and create value for the client."

At the end of her presentation, there was a small award ceremony for the People's Choice Photo Contest, called Purple.

East Side Players open the door on suspense

By KENYA BRUCE
The Observer

A suspenseful, entertaining and funny murder story will leave many on the edge of their seats. The East Side Players' presentation of *Communicating Doors* by Alan Ayckbourn at the Papermill Theatre should have audiences there in no time.

The story, set in different time periods in London, connects characters in unexpected ways. From 2032 back to 1992, a dominatrix aided by a time-travelling door is able to complete her mission of saving two dead wives. The three female characters use the communicating doors to travel back and forth in time to avoid their upcoming deaths by changing events in the past.

Along the way, they encounter their killer and work together to outsmart him and survive.

The play embraces 'girl power' and exemplifies the image of strong women fighting for what they believe in. With the never-ending suspense and comedy, you

will either be wanting more or falling off your chair laughing.

The play is directed by Marina Leyderman and the cast includes Tammie Van Dyk as Poopay, Kristie Paille as Jessica, Lydia Kiselyk as Ruella, Donald Baker as Reece, Owen Turley as Julian and Dermot Walsh as Harold.

All are new to the East Side Players and prove their worth, with the majority adopting convincing British accents.

There is never a dull moment during the play. With the use of screen doors and effective lighting, the small stage still provides contrast and different visuals.

Your eyes are never focused on one spot entirely, with constant movement and hidden scenes, but audience members still get a full idea of what is happening even when things aren't shown in front of the stage.

Performances continue tonight through Sunday and then again Wednesday through Saturday, March 6-9, at the theatre on Pottery Road. The box office is at 416-425-0917 or www.eastsideplayers.ca



Kenya Bruce /// Observer

The cast of *Communicating Doors* takes five after the show. From left to right: Donald Baker as Reece, Tammie Van Dyk as Poopay, Lydia Kiselyk as Ruella, Kristie Paille as Jessica, Owen Turley as Julian and Dermot Walsh as Harold.