



Photo by Alex Bowman

Allison Alexiou cuddles with her cat Baby at her home in Toronto. Alexiou adopted the nine-year-old cat from the Toronto Humane Society back in the late summer of 2020, having previous experience adopting from the organization back when she was a young girl.

Pets offer comfort during tough times

By Alex Bowman

With everyone locked down at home, not being able to go out and socialize, many people have turned to animals for companionship. Just because we cannot hangout with our friends does not mean we have to spend this time alone.

Since the onset of the pandemic, animal shelters like the Toronto Humane Society have seen an incredible increase in interest in adopting animals.

"We have had 11,000 applications in just the first six months of the pandemic. Just speculating, I would think people more so than ever before are looking for companionship and relying on companion animals," says Hannah Sotropa, public relations specialist at the Toronto Humane Society.

The humane society has been around for over 130 years as a non-profit organization and has always maintained a "no-kill" policy, giving all the animals they see a fighting chance.

"Not once have we paused our adoption program, and now with more eyes on the internet than ever, our longer-stay animals, the ones who have a harder time getting adopted, have been seen all over the world with anyone in Canada interested in adopting, being able to look at our site," explains Sotropa.

Although the humane society may have seen an increase in interest, that doesn't necessarily mean that the adoption rate has increased.

"We had to limit our rescue transport program, so that meant we had fewer animals for adoption. With social distancing, we have to remember we can't have as many animal care workers in the building," says Sotropa.

She goes on to explain that the humane society has very high standards in enrichment, taking animals out for a walk a minimum of three to four times a day. With so few staff members allowed in the building, it would be impossible to provide each animal with the proper enrichment.

But for one lucky applicant, Allison Alexiou, who works in downtown Toronto, she was able to successfully adopt Baby, a nine-year-old cat, from the humane society back in the late summer of 2020, and Alexiou loves her cat like a child.

"I knew that I would love whatever animal I got, but I never expected to be this attached to her. Baby actually wasn't the cat I was initially interested in, but by the time I sent in my application that cat had been claimed. I know it worked out this way for a reason, and now she is honestly like my child," says Alexiou.

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Allison Alexiou

She also said that the process was much quicker and easier than anticipated, explaining that the whole process took about two to three weeks and included video interviews, online meet and greets and an online application.

When discussing the changes in pet adoption processes since COVID-19, the Toronto Humane Society says that originally the full adoption process took place in person with paper questionnaires. But now the exact opposite is happening and the full process is on the website.

"You get the same expertise and knowledge, and now the one nice thing about this virtual experience is that the foster parents can engage in the process, you can ask them where they like to sleep, and what their favourite foods are," explains Sotropa.

She speculates that the interest in adoption has increased not only be-

cause we are missing that human interaction and we are now able to find more comfort in our furry friends, but also because a lot of people are home and have more flexibility and free time.

But it seems that another major reason is to protect our mental health.

"If I've had a long day at work, I can't wait to come home and cuddle into bed with Baby. During the pandemic, where many people may feel like they are losing their sense of purpose, I felt like I gained a new purpose in being responsible for this ball of energy. She is the perfect addition to my life," says Alexiou.

Seeing her friends benefit from the companionship of animals as well, Alexiou has no doubt of the power of the human-pet bond.

"I know someone who is currently fostering, hoping to adopt, a dog through another agency. After spending two days with the dog, she knew that they were perfect for each other and I think it definitely helped her through the pandemic, especially with mental health support, as she, like many, went through several job changes at this time. It was nice for her to be able to focus on something that brought her so much joy, rather than stress," explains Alexiou.

According to a study by Patricia Pendry and Jaymie Vandagriff at Washington State University, hands-on petting of animals actually reduced stress levels in university students. Even students who observed the animals had lower stress levels than prior to the test.

This is not the only study that has discovered the benefits of animal companionship. According to a meta-analysis that focused on nine studies, conducted by the Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health, animal-assisted therapy or animal-assisted activities significantly reduce depressive symptoms.

Although Alexiou sees the benefits to one's mental health by adopting a companion animal, she also wants anyone considering adoption for mental health purposes, to make sure they are in a mental state where they are fully capable of taking care of an animal. Sotropa shares the same sentiment.

She explains that there are four quadrants of adoption to think about – Longevity, budget, lifestyle and requirements.

"Really, it is a holistic way to look at it, and the mega thing to do is thoughtful research because it is a large commitment," urges Sotropa.



Photo by Luke Best

A solitary endeavour

While the stay-at-home order was in affect, many people spent their weekends ice fishing off Potter's Creek Conservation Area. Some fished with their families bundled inside a tent or a hut. Others spent time alone, completely comfortable with just a stool and a thick jacket.



Photo by Luke Best

Outdoor winter fun

Carter Seymour of the Belleville Jr Bulls, is pictured mid breakaway during a casual hockey game on the ice at Victoria Park in Belleville on a Saturday afternoon. Even with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, people are still able to find a way to remain active and get in their exercise. With the announcement that local non-essential services will be opening again, athletes are left wondering about when organized sports will get the go-ahead.

Black History Month off to a vibrant start

By Bec Gauvin

Durham's Black History Month celebrations kicked off Saturday, Feb. 6 with a performance featuring local black artists.

The show, called "Feast of Black Excellence", featured performances from musicians, comedians, spoken word artists, storytellers, and a keynote discussion on issues facing the black community. The show was presented by the Cultural Expressions Art Gallery in Ajax in partnership with the Durham

chapters of Congress of Black Women, Durham Children's Aid Foundation, the City of Pickering and the Town of Ajax. Additionally, the event was sponsored by Durham Regional Police Services, the Rotary Clubs of Pickering and Ajax, the Ajax Library, the Durham Catholic District School Board, and Elexicon Energy.

This celebration and recognition are extremely pertinent and vital this year, especially considering one of the biggest social issues addressed in 2020 was systemic anti-black racism, and the year

'There is much work to be done to continue to address anti-Black racism and the perils of a global pandemic.'

Esther Ford

saw many instances of violence against people of colour.

"While we are happy to put 2020 behind us, we know that we are not yet out of the woods. There is much work to be done to continue to address anti-Black racism and the perils of a global pandemic. We must all remain steadfast in the work that needs to be done so that we are strengthened and not diminished by these trials," says Esther Forde, event co-chair and founder of Cultural Expressions Art Gallery.

This is the 14th incarnation of this event and because of the pandemic was adapted from a live performance to a

virtual one to be live streamed on multiple platforms.

"We know it is a privilege that our annual celebration has not been sidelined and so we are extremely pleased to present Feast of Black Excellence," says Forde.

Durham's Black History month events will continue each weekend, with virtual kids' trivia on Saturday, Feb. 13, and a virtual film screening on Sunday, Feb. 14. For more information on these events, visit the Durham Black History website.

Pandemic creates surge in micro weddings

By Alex Bowman

"It was just something we planned, and we didn't feel like a global pandemic should stop it because we obviously love each other and wanted to move to the next stage in life and not let that hold us back, so we decided to have a small wedding in our backyard, our little mini-mony," says Nicole McGill sitting alongside her new husband Ryan McGill on their living room sectional.

The pair married back in September of 2020, diverting from their original plan of having a wedding at a large venue, Le Belvédère, in Quebec on Aug. 13, 2020.

With white curtains hanging from their backyard ash tree, tied down to cut logs adorned with flower arrangements, it might not have been the scenic mountain overlook the Quebec venue promised, but it was just as special.

"It's given me an appreciation for having close friends and family and being able to celebrate with them," says Ryan, reflecting on what this small ceremony has given them.

The McGills decided that having that small ceremony in their backyard with only their immediate family and members of the wedding party would be important in returning some sort of normalcy to their lives.

"Even though the world more or less came to a halt, we thought that having our small ceremony in September and getting married and having all the official papers and the documents and my name become Nicole's last name, just for us, it was important to us because it made it feel normal again for a little bit there," explains Ryan.

This couple, among many others across the country, had to halt their nuptials due to the limit on large gatherings during the pandemic.

According to Heather Nagle, co-founder and president of the Ontario Wedding Association, Ontario sees more than 65,000 weddings each year, and about 85 per cent of them were cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic.

"In June, July and August, we saw small 50-person weddings littered with socially distancing rules and limitations. There was no dancing. All guests had to wear masks, and they were not permitted to travel from table to table to mingle," says Nagle.

She also explains that these "mini-monys" are quite popular right now, and that for couples that have been engaged for a couple of years, it has been devastating to see them have to cancel their weddings.

"Micro weddings have become very



Photo by Alex Bowman

Ryan and Nicole McGill look at their wedding photos in their home in Peterborough. The couple originally planned for a wedding of 150 people in Quebec in 2020, but had to postpone their wedding. After having their big day cancelled, they decided that they wanted to keep some sort of normalcy in their lives and planned a backyard wedding, an event they call their "mini-mony."

popular for couples because they offer all of the aspects of a big wedding, but in a shorter amount of time, and with a fraction of the guests. Those who were married with just a few people in attendance in 2020 were planning big receptions in 2021, but some have decided now to cancel that option due to the continuance of the pandemic," explains Nagle.

And for some couples who narrowly missed the cancellation of their weddings due to the lockdown, they understand just how truly lucky they were.

"We feel bad for everyone who had to cancel, postpone or modify their weddings due to the pandemic," says Nicole Bowman, regarding her pre-pandemic wedding to husband Jack

Bowman.

"Our wedding day was perfect, and we wouldn't have changed anything. Your wedding day is something very special that you dream about for a long time, and to have to make last-minute changes that disrupt that perfect day would be very disappointing."

The couple married on Feb. 14 of last year and had just returned from their honeymoon in the Dominican Republic when the travel ban was initiated.

"Postponing is extremely unfortunate, but I believe we would've waited to ensure we could still have the perfect day without compromise," says Jack.

Although many people flat out cancelled their weddings, postponing them to another date and hoping

the pandemic will get better, there are still people going through with their weddings, just with a tiny guest list.

According to the City of Toronto, wedding religious services, rites or ceremonies are limited to 10 people or less indoors – including staff or officiants. In addition, indoor wedding receptions are prohibited. While outdoor receptions are acceptable, they are only allowing five people or less.

Not only are couples being negatively affected, but the wedding industry is seeing catastrophic negative afflictions because of the pandemic, according to Nagle.

"Many wedding professionals are full-time business owners, who have

lost most, if not all of their income for 2020. The overhead costs for wedding venues still continue to occur, whether weddings and events are happening in their facility or not. Some businesses have had to close, while others have been applying for government grants to keep their doors open," says Nagle.

Even though couples are permitted to remove their masks during the ceremony and see a couple of family members during their "mini-monys," these weddings that take place are just not the same and will continue to impact the entire wedding industry as a whole.

To see more about this story, click on this link:

<https://vimeo.com/loyalistphotoj/minimony>



Photo by Natalie Cummings

Over this past fall, The Grind in Trenton received a fresh new face behind the counter. Taylor Russett, 21, transformed the small-town staple to The Grind & Vine, a coffee café and wine bar. Since its opening, even though Russett has braved vandalism and working under the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, he continues to provide those in Quinte West a safe space away from home and work.

The Grind and Vine still grows

By Natalie Cummings

When a dearly loved coffee shop closed its doors, and the lights went dark, local patrons were left wondering what could possibly replace the Trenton icon.

What was formerly called The Grind sits on the corner of Front Street overlooking the Trent River with a picture-perfect view. It served as a favourite place for many individuals in the community to grab a steaming cup of coffee while walking through the heart of Trenton.

However, curiosity peeked when in late summer, there seemed to be movement within the walls of 45 Front Street.

Taylor Russett is the fresh new face behind The Grind and Vine, the same coffee shop adored by many, but with a fun addition.

Not only does the shop still serve coffee, but it also now dabbles in wine.

Twenty-one-year-old Russett, who is a photographer and student at Queen's University, was among those who couldn't bear to see the place crumble.

"I have a love for this place, as well as a love for coffee," Russett laughs. "Might have been an addiction."

It was on Nov. 27, 2020 when the Grind and Vine opened its doors back up after weeks of being shut.

With the red ribbon cut, and back open for business, despite the COVID 19 pandemic, it seemed like there was nothing but sweet brews ahead for Russett and his team.

Despite looking at the good things ahead, in the coming weeks after its opening, the Grind and Vine fell victim to vandalism and arson.

However, Russett refused to let the setbacks break his drive. Not only did he quietly and confidently repair the damage to his café, he continued to serve the community while doing so.

"Having constant validation from customers, family, and friends that your

business is successful is the most prideful moment I have," Russett beams. "People trust my café and wine bar is a community space that is safe for all."

Looking back on his journey as a young entrepreneur thus far, Russett credits support from family and friends, mentors and other business owners in the community for not only for encouragement for pursuing a small business, but also for collaboration in bringing new products to the Grind and Vine.

"I am not a stand-alone business. I work with others to create products and services that inspire others."

With the sun setting later by the day,

and spring just around the corner, there are more surprises in store to the Grind and Vine. But for now, those who choose can still stop in for a coffee and a smile from Russett and his team.

Carrying on a decade-old legacy The Grind left behind, Russett has re-vamped the café and given it a more modern feel. But at its core, the Grind still serves its community by providing a place where everyone is welcome in for a drink.

"We strive every day to provide service that is accessible and inclusive to all," Russett says heartwarmingly, "that's what makes our café a community space."

Occupational therapist serves community for over 40 years

By Natalie Cummings

At the age of 19, Phil Leadbeater knew that there was a lot more to the world than just his oceanside town of Sydney, Nova Scotia.

After graduating high school in 1975, he was faced with three options — work in the steel plant, work down in the coal mines, or join the military.

Leadbeater, who now lives in Port Hope, spent the first five years of his military career in Petawawa, Ont. with the Special Service Force, serving with the 2nd Field Ambulance as a medic.

"Being a medic came naturally to me," Leadbeater smiles.

In 1982, he was posted to Shearwater, Halifax. There, after thriving while working in a medical clinic, he was encouraged by those he worked alongside to pursue becoming a doctor.

Despite all of his experience as a medic, Leadbeater did not have the high school credits or requirements to apply to medical school.

Therefore, in 1983, at the age of 26, he returned to night school to take classes to introductory science at the Grade 10 level.

For the next three years, not only did Leadbeater continue to work in the medical clinic during the day, but also spent many long nights doing homework.

The road to higher education was long and hard. During his time going to night school, not only did Leadbeater continue to work with the military and volunteer with veterans, but he also survived a serious motorcycle accident that left his arm broken for what seemed beyond repair.

"The road was rocky, as life is sometimes," Leadbeater says, but there is a twinkle in his eye. A twinkle of pride.

Despite these setbacks, Leadbeater received his first university degree in 1991 — a bachelor of science in psychology from Dalhousie University.

Despite the long nights at school and draining days at the medical clinic, Leadbeater was

not accepted to medical school.

Ultimately, rejection lead him back to Dalhousie University, where Leadbeater decided to apply for the highly competitive program for occupational therapy.

After graduating Dalhousie with the highest honours, to this day, Leadbeater works as an occupational therapist for veterans across Ontario.

Later in his career as an occupational therapist, Leadbeater forged Project Phoenix, a project that successfully sent an abundance of walkers, wheelchairs, and more to those struggling in Haiti.

Throughout his career, because of his work in the military, and his humanitarian efforts involving veterans, Leadbeater holds the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, "for services in carrying out humanitarian and charitable works for the relief of persons in sickness, distress, disability and suffering," by order of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second, and presented by the Governor-General of Canada.

Leadbeater was also presented a medal, in 1989, the Canadian Armed Forces Decoration for 12 years of service to Canada, as well in 1986, he earned the Skirosky Helicopter Rescue Award, for a Life Saving Rescue in the North Atlantic.

As of 2021, Leadbeater has served his community for over 40 years.

Still working as an occupational therapist, he currently practises out of a clinic in Belleville, Ont., as well as still being in touch with the local veteran community.

Looking back, Leadbeater does not look at his past heroic, but perhaps more along the lines of survival of the fittest.

He says what simply may make him different from everybody else is that he listened to the tiny voice in his head that drove him to do what he had to do.

"To see the power behind one person, watch a room of dominoes when one is turned over!" laughs Leadbeater.



Photo by Natalie Cummings

Phil Leadbeater stands outside of Revive Physio Care, where he currently works as an occupational therapist. Over the years, Leadbeater has assisted hundreds of civilians and veterans through community projects and his practice.