

Seniors Stage Their Second Act

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Seventy-four year old Lorne Abramson has spent the past decade becoming an actor, director, screenwriter, reality television character, sound designer, and carpenter through his time as a community theatre volunteer in Halifax. His transformation may come as a surprise to some people, but only to those who haven't met "The Wednesday Crew," an all-volunteer group of men who hold the Pond Playhouse together—sometimes almost literally.

"If you're gutsy you work your way into doing all kinds of stuff," said Abramson, who can be found playing hockey or singing in a rock-and-roll band when he isn't at the theatre. "One piece of success leads to others, it's like a big chain."

The Pond Playhouse is the home of the Theatre Arts Guild, which was originally founded in 1931 and is the longest continually-operating theatre company in Canada. Fifteen years ago, Abramson and some of his fellow theatre-goers realized that the Playhouse needed a lobby and a rehearsal hall. They knew that a community institution couldn't afford the cost of a professional team, so they did the considerable renovation themselves.

From there, the work never really stopped and they've been meeting midweek ever since to discuss the theater's needs. The core group of between 7 and 10 men gathers every Wednesday morning for tea before discussing and delegating duties. Since the theater is completely volunteer-run, the work ranges from taking out the trash, to ticket sales, to bartending, to designing sets for an upcoming play. (Next up: *Dracula—The Bloody Truth.*)



The Wednesday Crew's ages range from 65 to 85 and include a former builder, a teacher, scientists with PhDs, and senior government officials. Together, they represent a new generation of Canadians who are using their later years not to slow down but to volunteer and gain new skills through helping community institutions that couldn't exist without them. These communities are the lifeblood of the Canadian volunteering population, where a combination of experience and expertise has created a legion of committed individuals dedicated to magnanimous causes. Wellings of Picton, a 55+ community in Ontario, has even partnered with one of Prince Edward County's largest volunteering organisations to recognize those who have devoted time and effort to causes around the region. The award is a testament to those who know that getting older doesn't mean slowing down.

"I'm not the retiring kind," said Bill VanGorder, another member of the crew who at 77 is directing plays and running a Nordic pole walking company with his wife Esther, a stage manager at the Pond Playhouse. The Playhouse is so important to the pair that they got married there 22 years ago.

"I think that for myself and for the others, we're not interested in sitting in our rocking chairs and looking out the window," Bill Van Gorder said. "We wanted to stay involved and active and this is an opportunity to continue to do that while also trying to make things better for those who come along after us."

The Playhouse is tucked off a residential street in an unassuming building just inland from Halifax's rocky shorelines. The space is a testament to the rich Canadian tradition of community theatre. "Canadian theatre was born of amateurs," write Canadian theatre experts Gaëtan Charlebois and Anne Nothof. Non-professional acting started with First

Nations use of masks and costumes to perform dramatizations of history and mythology. Later, it was influenced by European playwrights like Shakespeare and Moliere where the theatre thrived in schools and taverns since churches viewed the plays as immoral.

Today, community theatre spans the country, much of it volunteer-run. Toronto boasts Canada's largest collection of English-speaking theatres, and third-largest worldwide. Nearby Stratford is a hub of theatre activity as well, and the city's yearly festival is one of the most popular activities on Canada's cultural calendar with productions that range from Shakespearean classics to musicals to the avant-garde.

"We couldn't open our doors without the volunteers we have at our theatre," said Sandra Cave, former chair and board member of Key City Theatre Society in the Kootenay region of British Columbia. She now helps run volunteer orientation and estimates that 85 to 90 percent of them are retirees who are drawn to the community and energy of the place.

Their attraction isn't without purpose: studies show that consistent volunteering can improve health in older individuals and make them feel less depressed and isolated. It can even help people live longer, and several studies have found that sustained engagement in learning new skills enhances memory function in older adults, something that theatre volunteers are constantly doing.



"Because we are a small community, you're relied on not to do just one thing behind the scenes, sometimes you're doing three or four things in a play," says Key City's Cave, who also does hair, makeup, and costume for the play, all skills she's picked up in her retirement.

Bill VanGorder said that much of the Wednesday Crew had never held a hammer when they started. Today, they do all of their own plumbing and electricity, only occasionally dialling in professionals for final safety checks. Their work means that revenue from ticket sales is put back into the theatre so the community can enjoy ambitious, high-quality productions of plays like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

“When you think about the arts community, it really gives people an experience. It enriches their lives,” Lorne Abramson said after a recent Wednesday meeting during which the crew received a shipment of sound baffles to improve acoustics in the lobby and discussed the library recently built to house donated theatre books and scripts.

Bill VanGorder echoes Abramson’s thoughts about community as well. “This kind of opportunity is special and necessary—to be able to get together and be able to be happy” he says. “When the audience applauds a good show we feel as good about it as the people taking their bows on stage.”