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# Orleans Star L'édition de cette semaine

Next edition January 19





January 5, 2023 • Volume 37, No. 17

# The spirit of giving

By Fred Sherwin The Orléans Star

The spirit of giving is alive and well in Orléans and not just because of the community's generous support of a variety of charitable organizations and institutions, but because of the efforts of one couple in particular.

We hesitate to even mention their names because they would prefer to remain anonymous, but they deserve to be recognized for the breadth of what they've managed to accomplish over the past 15-plus years.

In 2005, Richard Lussier and his close friend Don Stephenson started an informal "Secret Santa" program, giving two students at St. Matthew High School in Orléans each

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a \$75 gift certificate to Place d'Orléans as a reward for their hard work and perseverance in the face of financial hardship.

They did the same thing for the next four years. Then, in 2010, Richard and his wife Linda launched the Help Our Students program to provide financial support to deserving students throughout the entire school year.

In the first year, they gave two students from St. Matthew High School and one student from Cairine Wilson Secondary School \$100 each month, from September through June, for a total of \$1,000, using their own money augmented by funds raised through family and friends.

Over the years the program has grown and grown to the point where they recently reached CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



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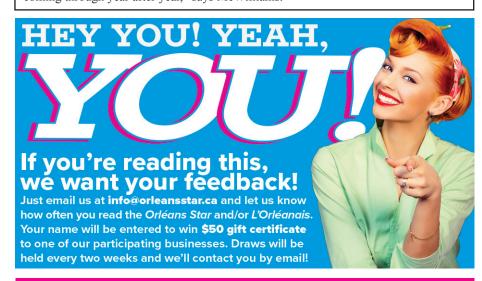
## **COMMUNITY BRIEFS**



Food Aid founder and Navandale Farms owner Wyatt McWilliams hitched up a pair of his horses on Dec. 11 to collect food and monetary donations in the village of Navan. FILE PHOTO

## Navan Food Drive a huge success

NAVAN – The tiny village of Navan has come through once again by providing over 2,700 lbs of food and \$3,400 in cash for the Ottawa Food Bank during the villages annual holiday food drive organized by Food Aid founder and Navandale Farms owner Wyatt McWilliams and sponsored by Sure Print Graphics and area Metro stores along with J.T. Bradley's Country Convenience Store and Costello's Pizza in Navan. McWilliams was joined by a small army of volunteers including a number of local volunteer fire fighters as they went from street-to-street and door-to-door collecting non-perishable food items using the familiar Navandale wagon and a team of the farm's heavy horses. The monetary donations will be used to purchase local beef and turn it into ground chuck which will also be distributed by the food bank. McWilliams is especially proud of the village's generosity considering the current price of groceries and the fact that some people are still recovering from the windstorm that severely damaged a number of homes last May. "I mean, what can you say. They just keep coming through year after year," says McWilliams.



## www.orleansstar.ca

## Student financial assistance program based in Orléans

Continued from page 1

a total of a million dollars, benefiting more than 6,000 students in over 65 schools, including every high school, both French and English in Orléans.

The genesis of the program goes back to Lussier's first year at the Royal Military College Saint-Jean in Montréal. He was 17 years old at the time, and chose to go to RMC St-Jean out of necessity. It was the only post-secondary education his family could afford.

"I was young and stupid and spent most of my time and money socializing," explains Lussier. "Part way through my first year I decided I wanted to quit, mostly because I had run out of money. When I called my father to tell him, he said he would give me \$100 if I stayed in school. A \$100 was a lot of money in 1962, especially for my father who was a middle class factory worker."

Lussier not only stayed in school, but he eventually graduated and went on to have a successful career in the military and then as the managing director of National Arts Centre for 20 years.

"I always remembered that day and it has been my goal to try to do the same for students in similar circumstances," says Lussier.

The students, at least two at every school, are selected by the school's guidance staff. They have to be in Grade 10, or later, and they have to be in financial hardship. Many can't afford clothes, or even a regular meal. Once the students are selected, a bank account is opened in their name with the RBC which works with each student to get the necessary information to open each account.

During the initial few years of the program the recipients would right letters to Lussier telling him of the various ways they used the money. Most use the money to help pay for transportation and clothing. One recipient used the money to pay for a prom dress, telling Lussier it was the first time she felt like a normal student.

Here is an excerpt from one such letter...

"Your monthly \$100 has helped me in many ways. Before I got your money, I was very unmotivated to go to school because I was always sad and hungry and just upset with the way



**Richard Lussier** 

my life was going for the past two years.

"Your money helped me put clean clothes on my body, helped me put the food on the table. And helped me get from place to place. Your money made it easier for me to come to school and actually get work done; before all the help I was stressed and insecure about never having anything. I was able to help my mom, friends and some family over time and I really wish there was a way I could repay you for all your help. I don't know where I would be without you."

The Help Our Students program is funded entirely though private sponsors and is run by a board of directors, many of whom are prominent leaders in the community including the former head of the Royal Canadian Mint. Most importantly, every penny goes to the recipients. Since the program is run on a volunteer basis there are no administration costs.

In 2017, the were given status as a charitable organizations which allows donations to be tax deductible.

To learn more about the Help Our Students program or to make a donation visit https://helpourstudentsprogram.com.



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## Discovery of abused dog raises concerns over animal welfare

By Fred Sherwin The Orléans Star

While visiting a vacant property on Russell Road on Nov. 4, Jessica Cudahy found a dog that was being kept in a caged pen and in obvious distress. The evidence of neglect included a collar so tight that the animal's neck was cut, an infected bleeding chest, a very red/raw stomach, overgrown nails, yeast infected swollen paws and cuts on the pads.

According to Cudahy, the dog, which was an American Bulldog, was very weak and could barely walk.

All the dog had for sustenance was extremely dirty water and there was garbage everywhere, all of which Cudahy found to be evidence of severe neglect and animal cruelty so she immediately called Provincial Animal Welfare Services (PAWS) and asked if she could take her. They told her it was okay to do so as long as she could take the animal to a vet.

After freeing the dog, Cudahy immediately took it to the Colonial Veterinary Hospital in Navan where they not only diagnosed the evident skin issues but also a UTI, and a recent miscarriage.

After the dog, which Cudahy named Kia, was cleaned up, she purchased the recommended medication and took Kia home to a safe environment where could heal over the course of the following four weeks.

After providing PAWS with the address where she found the dog, Cudahy waited for a response. It came in the form of a call from the OPP in early December, during which they informed her that a warrant had been issued for her arrest on charges of break and enter and theft over \$5,000.

It was only after she called PAWS back and sent them pictures of Kia as she appeared when she was rescued, that the charges were dropped. PAWS then began a formal investigation during which Kia was taken from Cudahy and put into a PAWS shelter.

Remarkably, Kia was eventually given back to the owner. According to Cudahy, PAWS told her that there were no indications that dog had been abused in spite of the pictures she had provided them. Cudahy also tried to explain that the reason there were no signs of abuse was because she had nursed the dog back to health during the four weeks she had her.

Cudahy has tried to seek help from local politicians to rescue the animal, but no one seems to have any authority over PAWS which is an agency within the Ministry of the Solicitor General. At the very top of their website are the words, "Abuse and neglect of any animal is not tolerated in Ontario."

The agency's response to Cudahy's complaint has called into question their actions.

In a letter to Conservative MPP Andrea Khanjin, whom Cudahy had asked for help in the matter, a spokesperson for the Ministry of the Solicitor General states... "In regard to this specific case, please note that this investigation is now closed, and follow-up inspections have been completed. The owner is in compliance with the PAWS Act and the animal was observed to be in good condition; no charges were laid."

For legal reasons we can't publish the name of the dog's owner. However, the public is invited to visit a website Cudahy has set up at linktr.ee/jesscdhy where she has posted a video of Kia as she appeared when she found her, along with an online petition seeking "Justice for Kia" which has so far received over 5,265 signatures.



These pictures show some of the skin damage Kia had when Jessica Cudahy found her on Nov. 4, and then nursed her back to health. PHOTOS PROVIDED





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## 2023

With a new year comes new hope, new promise and new opportunity. Opportunity to better one's situation. Opportunity to mend fences long in need of repair. And opportunity to broaden one's horizons if one so wishes. All of which requires a certain amount of optimism.

Optimism always reigns supreme at the beginning of a new year. According to a recent Leger poll, 34 per cent of Canadians are generally feeling positive about the year ahead, while 44 per cent think they will be no better or worse off in 2023 than they were in 2022. The remaining 22 per cent think they will be worse off in 2023.

Among the things people are most worried about occuring in 2023 are higher inflation and interest rates, a possible economic recession and a catastrophic weather event.

Personally, I am guardedly optimistic about the year ahead. There is reason to be optimistic even as war continues to rage in Ukraine, interest rates and inflation continue to creep higher and the possibility of a recession becomes more and more likely. For one, the further we get from the pandemic the better. With each passing week and month we creep closer to normalcy.

Yes, I know many economists were predicting that when the pandemic was over we would enter a period similar to the roaring 20s, but now we realize that those predictions were nothing but a pipe dream.

Ongoing supply chain issues have stunted our economic recovery and fueled inflation, but they should not stunt our optimism.

I am optimistic because we continue to be among the most generous people in the world in spite of our economic woes and worries. As a population we continue to give what we can to agencies like the Orleans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre, CHEO, the Ottawa Heart Institute and the Canadian Cancer Society.

I am optimistic because in meeting young people during my travels outside of Canada, I have come to realize that nothing will spoil the optimism of youth. It's not that they are without fear or anxiety, most have a fair share of both, but they don't allow it to get in the way of wanting to enjoy life to the fullest. Perhaps, it's because they can afford to be so optimistic. But I believe it is just another result of the pandemic. They were locked up and locked away for so long without the ability to socialize at their favourite club, or the gym, or event the movie theatre, that they appreciate the freedom of youth now more than ever. And as well they should. Those of us who are much older could take a lesson from them.

Life is too short to live in a constant state of pessimism. And as much as I hate to remind myself, it is growing shorter with each passing day. So count me in among those who feel optimistic about the year ahead. I look forward with eager anticipation to what the next 12 months has in store for both myself, my friends and the country.

- Fred Sherwin, editor

## Orléans Star



**Fred Sherwin**Owner and publisher

Jody Maffett Editor

The Orléans Star is a bi-weekly publication distributed to over 40,000 residences in Blackburn Hamlet, Orléans and Navan. The newspaper is locally owned and operated by Sherwin Publishing Inc., 745 Farmbrook Cres., Orléans, ON. Inquiries and delivery issues should be sent to info@orleansstar.ca.



# Federal gov't looking for input ahead of Budget 2023

Commons

Corner

**Marie-France Lalonde** 

Happy New Year 2023, Orléans! I hope you've all had a great Christmas and Holiday Season!

The federal government is delivering on its prom-

ise to ban harmful, single-use plastics as part of its comprehensive plan to keep plastics out of the environment and landfills. Starting on Dec. 20, six kinds of single-use plastics – like plastic bags and plastic stir straws – that are harmful to the environment and have read-

ily available and recyclable alternatives have been banned for import or manufacturing in Canada.

On Dec. 9, the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth, launched a call for proposals to increase the capacity of organizations to address gender-based violence (GBV) through promising practices and community-based research. The deadline to apply is Feb. 3, 2023, at women-gender-equality.canada.ca

Moreover, Bill C-22, the Fall Economic Statement Implementation Act, 2022, received Royal Assent on December 15th. This bill delivers on key components of the government's plan to make life and housing more affordable as well as to invest in jobs, growth, and an economy that works for everyone.

Some of these measures includes, permanently eliminating interest on Canada Student Loans and Canada Apprentice Loans; requiring Canada's largest financial institutions to pay their fair share by implementing the Canada Recovery Dividend; introducing the new Tax-Free First Home Savings Account and doubling the First-Time Home Buyers' Tax Credit. Learn more at Canada.ca

Ahead of Budget 2023, the government wants to hear your ideas about how to help our communities and Canadians succeed while building stronger,

greener, more competitive, more innovative, and more inclusive Canadian economy.

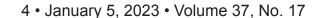
This is your opportunity to share what is most important to you! What challenges do you see ahead of us? What should the government be focused on? What great ideas do you have?

The questionnaire will take about five minutes to answer and will be available until Feb. 10, 2023, at letstalkbudget2023.ca.

The Canada Summer Jobs program call for applications is open until Jan. 12, 2023. This program is truly amazing for our local small businesses. This initiative helps create valuable summer job opportunities, that strengthen both our local economy and our community. Visit www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/funding/canada-summer-jobs to learn more and apply.

I want to let you know that the period to nominate an outstanding woman or girl for the Orléans Leading Women and Girls Recognition Awards is open until Feb. 10, 2023. You can request a nomination form by emailing Marie-France.Lalonde@parl.gc.ca. Thank you for helping us to recognize the essential role women and girls play in our community in celebrating their accomplishments, and their volunteerism.

\*\*La version française est maintenant disponible sur ma page Facebook\*\*



## Addiction to convenience is threatening our entire society

We are a society that has become addicted to convenience and it is threatening everything from our economy to our climate.

Our love affair with convenience began long before the pandemic, but it has become an all-encompassing addiction during the seemingly never-ending cycle of shutdowns and reopenings that became routine for the better part of the last two and a half years.

You could even say that it goes as far back as the invention of the wheel when prehistoric men decided they would rather ride a wagon than walk.

The industrial revolution was just much about providing people with convenience as it was about making their lives better. In fact, convenience and a better life have become synonymous.

But that is no longer the case. Tools of convenience like Amazon, SkipTheDishes, Uber and eBay have done more to dumb down our society and ruin the lives of thousands of people more than any other human inven-

Amazon, in particular, has forced the closure of hundreds of business in Canada as Canadians find it much more convenient to order a product on line-and have it delivered to their doorstep than climbing into their car and driving to a store, or God



forbid, taking public transit.

I even got caught up in the mad desire for convenience until I found out that the need for all those tens of thousands of cardboard boxes needed to deliver those items were forcing up the price of newsprint. It seems a number of paper mills have switched to making corrugated cardboard rather than newsprint. Now isn't that convenient?

So yes, I do have a certain amount of bias on the matter especially when it comes to Amazon, but there are other equally onerous tools of convenience out there.

Uber has forced hundreds of cab drivers out of business across North America and Uber Eats and SkipTheDishes charge restaurants ridiculous amounts of money, often as high as 30 per cent, for the luxury of delivering their food to their customers. And the customers end up a paying a premium as well, but it's a small price to pay for conve-

A number of restaurants have risked losing business by severing their ties with the food delivery companies and asking their customers to pick up their own takeout orders - you know, like the way we used to

The desire for convenience has crept into nearly every aspect of our lives. Electric bikes have become all the rage now because we are too lazy to pedal. Streaming services like Amazon Prime, Netflix and Paramount+ have made it easier and more convenient to watch a movie, although it still takes me at least 20-30 minutes to decide what I want to watch. And the march towards convenience goes on as advances in robotics and AI will make life even more convenient than ever.

Imagine if they could invent a dishwasher that could put the dishes away for you? It would fly out of the stores. Or a stove that could clean itself? Actually they already invented that one, along with fridges that make ice cubes and automatic meat thermometers that activate an app on your phone which informs you when your roast or turkey is ready. I actually like that one, but then even I have become a disciple of convenience, even if reluctantly so.

The one area where convenience has so far failed to rear its ugly head is the airline industry. No industry on God's green earth can be more inconvenient than the airline industry - from delayed and canceled flights to luggage that often goes lost - the airline industry takes the cake when it comes to making our lives a living hell. Unfortunately - or fortunately depending how you look at things - they always seem to eventually get you to your destination, even if your luggage is delayed slightly.

I liken it to that one amazing golf shot the golf gods aways seem to allow you. No matter how bad a round you're having, the golf gods always grant you that one perfect shot that makes you think you can do it again and again and therefore makes you want to come back and shell out another \$100 for a round of gold and a cart. There you go, the golf cart another took of convenience, which only serves to make us lazier and more out

So my resolution is simple this year, to avoid convenience wherever possible and to do things the hard way even if it takes a little more time and effort. I'm not sure what the over or under is on how long I will be able to keep my resolution, but I'm hoping to keep it last as long as possible. Wish me luck.



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## Kick off the New Year with a dose of outdoor activity

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Laura

**Dudas** 

With a new year, many of us pledge to start anew and to be healthier and happier. One of the best ways I have found to achieve this is

to keep active by spending time outdoors, delivering both a sense of physical and mental wellness.

Some may find it more challenging to keep moving through the colder months, so I would like to

share few great options you can find right here in the east end.

Cross country skiing, fat biking, snow-shoeing and hiking trails weave through Green's Creek and along the Ottawa River and are beautifully maintained by Ski Heritage East and the Orléans Nordic Ski Club. The pathways along the Ottawa River are also home to Orléans ParkRun, a great way to participate in group runs, walks, and jogs all year long.

Outdoor skating rinks are beginning to open in our community, and the volunteers that operate them deserve a huge round of applause. For a full list of where to find our community's outdoor rinks, visit: ottawa.ca/

en/recreation-and-parks/skating/outdoor-rinks#outdoor-rink-locations.

If you are looking for a spot to go sledding,

you can find a list of hills at: ottawa.ca/en/ recreation-and-parks/ sports-fields-and-outdoorrecreation#sledding-hills.

Many of the parks and natural spaces peppering our community have

winter maintained and/or walkable paths, offering a peaceful refuge for anyone looking to get a quick dose of fresh air. Another option is to throw on a pair of snowshoes and explore some of our parks or wooded areas. It's such a profoundly enjoyable experience and something I person-ally find relaxing.

As we head through the winter months, staying active and getting outdoors is a great way to remain physically and mentally healthy. Don't forget to stay safe while participating in outdoor activities, by wearing appropriate gear for the weather and for safety, including helmets where applicable. I'll be out there often with my family, so be sure to say "hello" if you see us. Happy New Year everyone!





The Orléans Star would like to honour the many local businesses and organizations whose continued support makes it possible to publish this newspaper.

Our community is truly blessed by business owners who are tremendously supportive of our minor sports teams, artists and neighbourhood events from Navan to Blackburn Hamlet.

Now, more than ever, they need our support to make it through these difficult times. Please support your local business in whatever way you can.

> - Fred Sherwin, Owner Orléans Star, L'Orléanais



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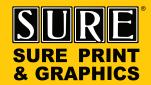
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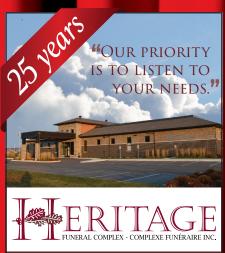
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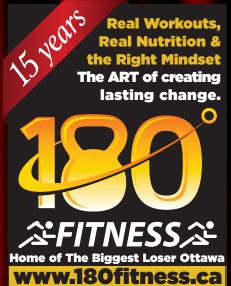
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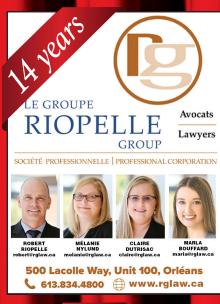










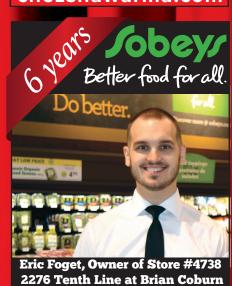




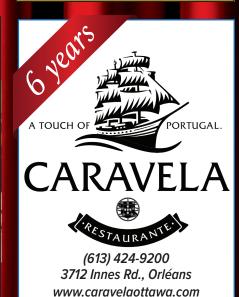




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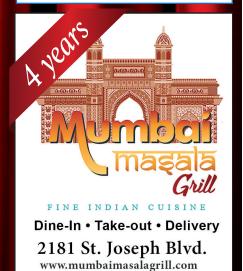






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## Several local businesses celebrating milestones in 2022

By Fred Sherwin The Orléans Star

A number of local businesses will be celebrating significant milestones in 2023 starting with the law firm of Grandmaitre Virgo Evans which will turn 45 in the coming year.

The firm was actually started in 1978 by Gerald Dust. He was joined in the 90s by partner Bradley Evans and the firm was renamed Dust Evans.



GVE office 2628 St. Joseph Blvd.

Dust is retired, but Evans is still a partner in the firm along with Phil Grandmaitre and Josée Virgo. Grandmaitre joined the firm in 2003 as a student and eventually became a partner in 2011.

Virgo started her career at Dust Evans in 2002. She left for a brief spell to work at a national law form based in downtown Ottawa but eventually returned in 2011.

The law firm specializes in Real Estate and Business Law as well as Wills and Estates and Family Law.

The Orléans Cumberland Community Resource Centre will be marking 35 years of service to the community in 2023.

The Resource Centre provides comprehensive community services, the goal of which is to meet the physical, emotional, social, economic and mental needs of English- and French-speaking residents living in Orléans-Cumberland and the surrounding areas.

Among the services they provide are family counseling, crisis intervention, financial counseling, child care, resources for military families, a diabetes program, services relating to pregnancy and infant loss and a youth sexual clinic and HIV testing. They also operate the largest food bank in Orléans.

The Heritage Funeral Complex, located in the Taylor Creek Business Park will be celebrating 25 years in business in 2023. The



The Heritage Funeral Complex located in the Taylor Creek Business Park had its beginnings on St. Joseph Blvd. in 1998. FILE PHOTO

funeral home was founded in September, 1998 by Germain Souligny and his late wife Denys, along with their son Guy Souligny. It was first located on St. Joseph Blvd. across from the Service Ontario office. They

moved to the new location in 2014.

The Blackburn Shoppes Dental Centre will be celebrating 20 years in business in 2023. The practice is owned and operated by Dr. Chantal



Dr. Chantal Plant

Plant. She started with two employees in 2003 and now the team has grown to more than 10 serving the local Blackburn Hamlet community and beyond.

Last, but by no means least, Sound and Sight owner Jason Miller will be celebrating 30 years in the audio and electronics field in 2023. Miller started with Stereo Plus and eventually began doing private consulting before launching Sound & Sight which is located at 2288 St. Joseph Blvd. at the corner of Orléans Blvd.

Sound & Sight specializes in home theatre sales and installation as well as selling all the major brand name electronics.





## Take advantage of 46 years of watch and clock repair expertise

By Fred Sherwin The Orléans Star

When it comes to repairing timepieces – whether they be a family heirloom or a watch you might have received as a graduation present or retirement gift – you can never undervalue experience.

Vantage Jeweler owner and master repairman Gamal Mansour, has been repairing watches and clocks for more than 45 years.

He learned his craft while working for his father back in his native Egypt. When his father died suddenly in 1988, Mansour took over the business at just 29 years of age.

He immigrated to Canada in 2001 in search of a better life for himself and his young family. He and his wife chose to settle in Ottawa, or more specifically Orléans, which they've called home for the last 20 years.

After arriving in Canada, Mansour got a job repairing watches at Eaton's, where he remained for five years. He later worked for a high-end watch company in Ottawa until one day he slipped on some ice and broke his femur.

Although he spent a month in the hospital and wasn't able to work for nearly a year, the accident turned out to be blessing in disguise and completely changed the course of Mansour's life. Because the company he had been working for had their office on the second floor, his injury prevented him from walking up the stairs.

With few options to choose from, Mansour decided to open his own watch repair business on St. Joseph Boulevard.

"It was nothing at the time, just an empty space," explains Mansour. "I had to do all the work, making the walls and the ceiling, and I only had three showcases for the jewellery."

The first year wasn't easy. He didn't have much of a budget to advertise and he didn't have any sort of customer base. Instead, he built the business one client at a time.

What Mansour was lacking in these other areas he made for with an unparalleled work ethic. (He worked six days a week for the better part of seven years until his grandson was born last spring. Since then he's cut down to five days a week.) He also had a wealth of experience and the desire to make sure his clients were 100 per cent satisfied – Mansour offers a one-year warranty on all his repairs, but it's rarely ever needed.

"This is the most important thing. We don't send anything out to get repaired by someone else. I do all the work so the buck stops with me," says Mansour. "I am



Vantage Jewellers owner and master repairman Gamal Mansour stands outside his St. Joseph Blvd. location. FRED SHERWIN PHOTO

responsible and I stand behind everything I do. If you have a problem I am here."

Because of Mansour's focus on customer service – along with competitive prices – the business has grown leaps and bounds, largely through repeat customers and referrals.

Mansour specializes in repairing older watches, including family heirlooms, but he can repair any make or model of watch or clock, usually in just a few days. He can also

resize jewellery and he carries a complete line of watch batteries.

If you have a watch, clock or jewellery in need of repair, then your first and last stop should be to Vantage Jewellers located at 2866 St. Joseph Blvd., beside the Service Ontario office. They are open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. from Tuesday to Saturday (closed Sunday and Monday) and there is always a free parking space in front of the store.







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## OCCRC thanks the community for their generosity during the holidays

By Jody Maffett The Orléans Star

The Orléans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre (OCCRC) has served the catchment area of Orléans, Cumberland, Navan, Sarsfield, Vars and Carlsbad Springs for 35 years. Their mission is to establish and operate a community resource centre that offers comprehensive services to meet residents' physical, emotional, social, economic and mental needs.

For many years, the OCCRC has launched its Christmas Program to ease the burden and help provide joy to individuals and families in the community who need support. Again, this past season the community generously answered the call to ensure that individuals and families had food and gifts.

Since 1988, the OCCRC food bank has seen a slow yet steady demand of about a four to five per cent increase for assistance with food in the community. However, in 2022, the demand for food assistance increased by 22 per cent.

"Because of inflation, high energy and food prices, and limited access to affordable housing, we've seen a record number of individuals coming to the food bank for help. It's been a difficult time for

many families in our community struggling and experiencing food insecurity," says Luc Ouellette, executive director of the

In 2021, the Resource Centre's Christmas Program assisted 958 individuals, comprised of 267 families and 470 children. However, this past Christmas, the OCCRC supported 1258 individuals, comprised of 351 families and 607 children for an increase of 24 per cent.

Thanks to the generosity of individuals, businesses, schools, community associations, clubs and organizations, the OCCRC was able to support the community's needs.

The funds raised helped those in need at Christmas and will help for some time after the holidays.

The response from the community has been overwhelmingly positive, and the OCCRC is incredibly grateful for all the support received this past holiday season.

The Resource Centre expects that 2023 will be another challenging year for many experiencing food insecurity in our

The OCCRC would like to sincerely thank everyone for supporting and helping



The Orléans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre and food bank is located at 240 Centrum Blvd. in the Centrum Plaza. FILE PHOTO

make the 2022 Christmas Program a success.

that many in our community had food and gifts for Christmas. Thank you!" says "Because of your generosity, we ensured





## Despite post-pandemic issues, Cayo Santa Maria remains one of the most beautiful beach destinations in Cuba

By Fred Sherwin The Orléans Star

When I received an invitation to visit my favourite resort in Cuba last month and write a story about its recent reopening, nothing or no one in this world could keep me from going, if for nothing else, it would afford me the opportunity to reconnect with some old friends who I haven't seen in years.

Some of you may recall that I have been to Cuba several times over the years, and each visit included a stay at the Starfish resort on Cayo Santa Maria, situated on the north side of the island facing Florida.

During the five previous times I had stayed at the resort I had met a number of amazing people who had worked there. People like customer service manager Alejandro Lema and lobby bar servers Denis Vasquez and Heriberto Rodriguez. There's also my three amigos at the beach bar – Alin, Yurien and Freddie. Yurien's wife, Mildrey, and her partner in crime at the pool bar, Kenny.

I have so many friends at the Starfish Santa Maria, they are like my second family. But for the past two and a half years I haven't been able to see them because of the COVID pandemic which swept across Cub like it did the rest of the world.

According to the World Health Organization, Cuba has recorded 8,529 coronavirus deaths since the global pandemic began. One of those deaths was Salvador Sanchez who was the executive director of the Starfish resort when I was last there in December 2019. Sanchez died from COVID in 2021.

After going through one of the most stringent lockdowns in the Caribbean, Cuba began to reopen last June, but the reopening was limited to a number of resorts in

Varadero near Havana. In the meantime, the Dominican Republic and Mexico had already fully reopened.

During the pandemic, a number of the resort companies like Blue Diamond, a Toronto-based company that owns the Starfish, Grand Memories and Royalton chain of resorts, paid its staff 60 per cent of there wages to help them make ends meet. It managed to help them survive, but only barely. Resort workers in Cuba depend for the most part on tips which they pool depending on where they work – housekeepers pool the housekeeping tips, the buffet and restaurant staff pool the buffet and restaurant tips, and so on and so on.

So the pandemic was a very difficult period for them all. Some of them switched resorts if the opportunity arose, like my friend Jordany who used to work the pool bar. Others who possessed dual Cuban and Spanish citizenship left the country, like my friend Alin who is now living in Miami.

Most, however, remained at home waiting for word to go back to work. Reopening Cuba and the various resort areas like Cayo Coco and Cayo Largo has been a long process. The resorts couldn't reopen until they had a sufficient number of tourists with reservations at them and the travel companies like Sunwing and Air Transat weren't offering packages to the various locations until the resorts reopened. Starfish, which is a three and a half star budget resort, didn't officially reopen until Nov. 15. I received my invitation two weeks later.

First, let me tell you that Cayo Santa Maria is not the easiest place to get to in Cuba. First you must fly to Santa Clara, which is located in the middle of the island, and then you must take an hour and 40 minute bus ride to your



Cayo Santa Maria has one of the best beaches in the Caribbean, if not the entire world. And it is so for a number of reasons. First it has no undertow or current to speak of. Second the water is crystal clear with barely any trace of seaweed or rocks. And third the limestone sand stays cool under your feet throughout the day.

As for the weather, I have been there six times now for 28 days in total and have only experienced one cloudy day. On this most recent trip, it was sunny and 26 to 28 degrees every day.

The Starfish Santa Maria also has one of the nicest pools I have ever seen, in case you get tired of the beach.

And last but not least they have one of the nicest staffs you will ever encounter. If you look up the Starfish Cayo Santa Maria on TripAdvisor you will read post after post from people gushing over the staff.

On this last trip, I had the good fortune of visiting Kenny in nearby Caibarièn, where I met his wife and they're eight-year-old daughter Keili who is my newest friend in Cuba

Starfish's reopening has not come without it's fair share of issues. Like other countries around the world, Cuba is experience severe supply chain issues, exacerbated by the American economic embargo that has been condemned several times over by the U.N., including Canada to no effect.

But despite the food shortages, and shortages in certain types of alcohol, the staff at the Starfish still manage to make the best of things. They still make some of the most amazing omelettes in the world and they still offer a varied menu in the Aroma á la carte restaurant. Also, Heriberto, has concocted one of the most amazing chocolate and espresso martinis anywhere, using rum instead of vodka.

The shortages will lessen over time as some items become more available, but in the meantime they will continue to do the best they can.

Besides the beach, the swimming pool and the amazing staff, the other thing that makes Starfish Santa Maria such a wonderful place to visit is the price, which is great for families that want to take a vacation down south together.

So next time you plan on taking a trip trip to Cuba, think about visiting one of the warmest and most friendly resorts on the island, Starfish Santa Maria. You won't regret it.



The beach at Cayo Santa Maria is among the best in the Caribbean.

### **COMMUNITY BILLBOARD**

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presents Tim Loten with special guest Emma Houlahan live in their taproom located at 501 Lacolle Way in the Taylor Creek Business Park. For more information visit facebook.com/ StrayDogBrewingCompany.

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TAPROOM 260 presents Not Broken live and in concert at 260 Centrum Blvd. in the Centrum Plaza starting at 7 p.m. For more information visit facebook.com/ Taproom260

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MUSIC TRIVIA NIGHT at the

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THE SHENKMAN ARTS **CENTRE PRESENTS** Contact Ontarois 2023. Discover francophone artists from all over the country with these showcases (20-minute performances followed by an interview to learn more about the artist) including Céleste Lévis, De Flore, Ferline Regis, JOLY, Léona, Les Bilinguish Boys, Les Rats d'Swompe, Mclean, Mehdi Cayenne, Mitch Jean and Stéphanie Morin-Robert will be performing. For more

#### SATURDAY, JAN, 21

information visit shenkmanarts.ca.

STRAY DOG BREWING CO.

**PRESENTS** the Hip Hop Shuffle Party in their taproom located at 501 Lacolle Way in the Taylor Creek Business Park. For more

information visit facebook.com/ StrayDogBrewingCompany.

#### THURSDAY, JAN. 26

THE SHENKMAN ARTS **CENTRE PRESENTS** Sophia

Lukacs live an in person for a performance rooted in love, empathy, and vulnerability, creating an intimate connection with listeners. A recent performer at the Nuits d'Afrique festival '22, her debut album was released in the fall, featuring two tracks with the legendary Habib Koité. Hailing from Montreal by way of Budapest, Hungary, Sophie Lukacs is a kora player, singer and composer. The kora is a 21-stringed harp-lute from the Mandingue empire. Tickets are 430 for adults and \$20 for seniors and can be purchased at the Shenkman Arts Centre box office or online.

### **IN MEMORIAM**



Marc-André Turgeon, 48 Passed away on December 25, 2022

Pierrette Ayotte, 84 Passed away on December 24, 2022

Paul Quenneville, 75 Passed away on December 23, 2022



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