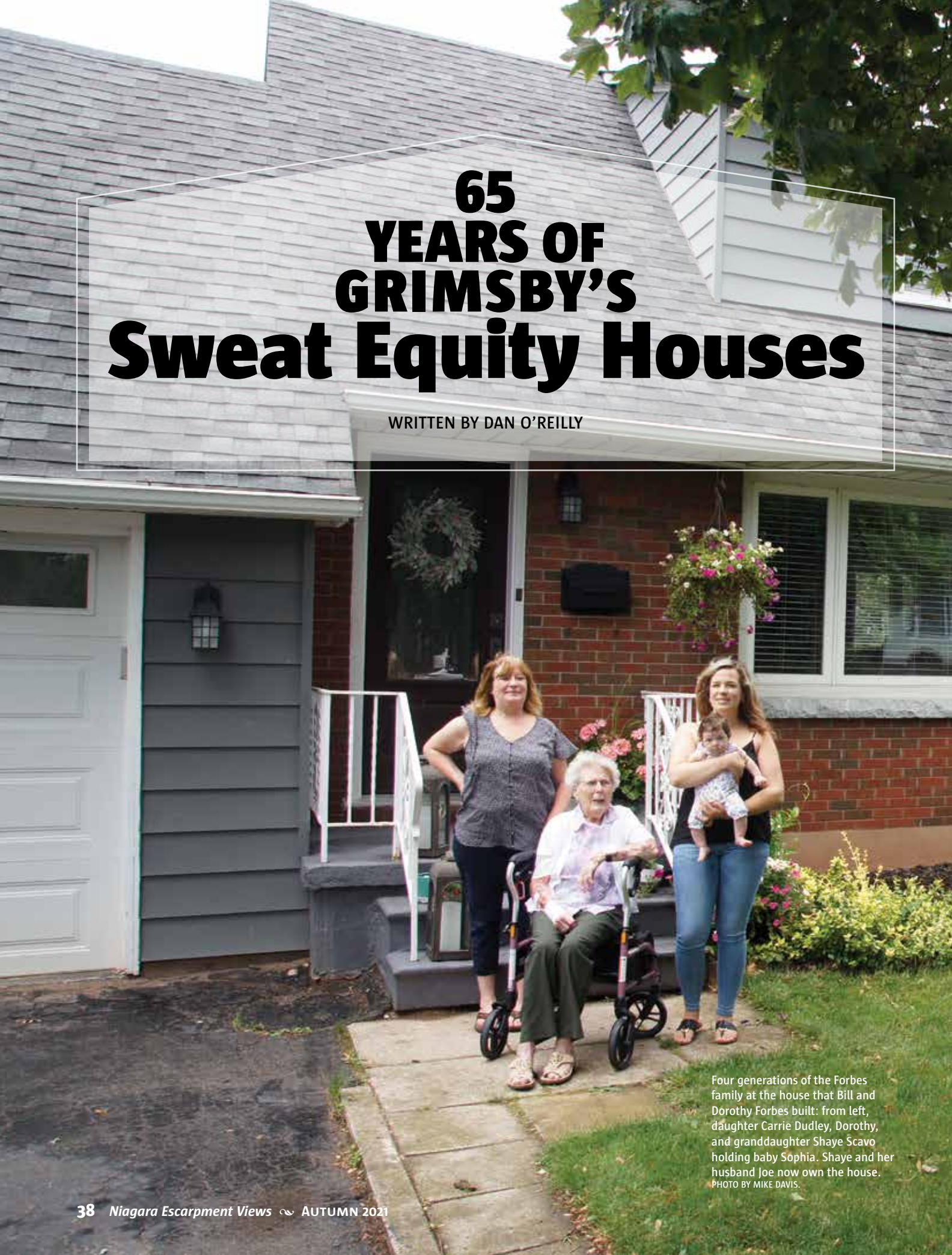


65 YEARS OF GRIMSBY'S Sweat Equity Houses

WRITTEN BY DAN O'REILLY



Four generations of the Forbes family at the house that Bill and Dorothy Forbes built: from left, daughter Carrie Dudley, Dorothy, and granddaughter Shaye Scavo holding baby Sophia. Shaye and her husband Joe now own the house.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



Around 65 years ago, a group of 81 families began building houses for themselves on 14 acres of farmland between Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment in Grimsby. Most of those houses still exist and some are still inhabited by the original builders' descendants. The catalyst for the project was the severe housing crisis in Hamilton at the time.



▲ Co-op builders John Blake (left) and Don Gay take a seat on the memorial bench in Marrocco Park following the exhibit opening in 2016. The houses they built 60 years earlier, overlook the park which they kept as green space for all to enjoy. John filmed throughout the co-operative build and 65 years later it has become a valued piece of history that proves the enormity of their undertaking and the comradery of the builders. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BLAKE FAMILY.

“We lived upstairs in a house. It didn’t have a sink in the kitchen, so we had to cart water back and forth from the bathroom,” says Grimsby resident Dorothy Forbes. Forbes and her late husband Bill were members of the Grimsby Housing Co-operative, an endeavour in which families pooled their money to purchase land and construction materials and build their houses co-operatively, a process known as “sweat equity.” Built according to Canada Housing and Mortgage Corp. plans, each of the single-family houses were owned by the individual families.

The couple were among

about 500 people who attended a meeting in 1953 to provide solutions to the area’s housing crises. Two priests spoke about the power of people working together to build their own houses based on financial, planning, and construction principles developed by the Institute of Social Action (ISA). A division of the now-defunct Saint Patrick’s College in Ottawa, it advocated a co-operative building approach as one answer to Canada’s housing shortage.

Although many became disheartened, others made the commitment to pursue home ownership and participated in weekly study meetings. The course material was the ISA-produced *A Guide to*

Co-operative Housing booklets which covered every aspect of house construction.

Paralleling those efforts was an intense search for affordable land, culminating in the purchase of 14 acres of primarily agricultural land in Grimsby, a very rural and farm-oriented community at the time.

81 Houses

The 81 families divided into three smaller co-ops which began building their houses in the winter of 1955. That was no small feat as many didn’t have cars and had to carpool, says Janet Muise, daughter of co-op members Walter and Albertine Muise.

While such contractors as electricians and plumbers

were hired, most of the construction was done by the co-op men who divided their time between their jobs and a required 30-hour-a-week commitment to the venture.

“You had to educate yourself to the work,” said John Dalgleish, in an interview shortly before his death in 2020. He was 95 at the time and still living in the house he built.

Erecting the houses was an almost assembly-like process consisting of teams of workers specializing in different tasks and using, almost exclusively, their own hand tools, says another builder, Don Gay. “I got to be a very good trimmer and roofer.”

After 18 months of labour, most of it after work and on



▲ Bill Forbes, fifth from right, on the Lakedale Co-op worksite with his fellow co-operators. Sixty-five years later his granddaughter and husband live in his co-op-built home with their new baby. This is one of the few colour still photos of the build and was taken by builder Doug Wilson.



▲ Home construction was underway in 1955. The Escarpment, ever present to the south, would become a wonderful place of discovery and adventure for the children of the co-op-built neighbourhood. PHOTO COURTESY GRIMSBY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES.



◀ Preparations for the 60th anniversary began with an initial meeting in 2014 among co-op daughters Bernadette Walsh, Janet and Carolin Muise. Here, Bernadette and Janet hold the inspiring photograph of some of the original parent builders who had planned the 50th anniversary event for the co-op families. Bernadette is one of a few co-op sons and daughters who have returned to live in their family's home. PHOTO COURTESY OF J. MUISE.



▲ “The Point” on the Escarpment, visible here at the end of the road, is now known as the place in Beamer Memorial Conservation Area where the annual Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch conducts counts of raptors in flight. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

weekends, the homes were built and by July 1956 all the families had moved in. Eventually they became an integral part of the community.

As part of his later work as a Grimsby councillor, Walter Muise fought for the protection of the Lake Ontario shoreline and his efforts were recognized with the 1997 installation of a plaque in Murray Street Park. John Dagleish became a constable with the Grimsby Police Force, later merged with the new Niagara Regional Police Force. Bill Forbes fell in love with the Niagara Escarpment and was a 30-year-long volunteer trail maintenance captain for the Bruce Trail Conservancy’s Niagara Club.

The Point on the Escarpment

“My father loved the outdoors and hiking the Bruce Trail,” says Tracey Danowski, one of Bill’s daughters. So did the co-op children.

“Every Saturday morning a gang of us would head to the Escarpment. It would take us about an hour and half. I was about seven when we started doing that,” says Grimsby resident Steve Cheverie.

Their destination was “The Point,” a prominent feature overlooking the town. They would scramble down fallen rock which became known as “Initial Cave” because the children scratched their initials on the rock, says Cheverie, who still hikes

up the Escarpment.

In 1981 the families held a 25th mortgage burning anniversary. As part of the celebration, another builder, Bob Walsh compiled a short history. Follow-up five-year anniversaries were held and archival material was donated to the Grimsby Archives. “But then we (the second generation) realized that the 60th anniversary was coming up,” says Muise.

In 2014 Muise, her sister Carolin, and Bernadette Walsh, Bob’s daughter, established “The Co-op at 60 Working Group,” which organized a reunion for which photos, memorabilia, and stories were collected. Plans were also made for the staging

of an exhibition at the Grimsby Museum in 2016.

“It (the exhibition) opened the eyes of the second generation, their children, and the community at large to what our parents had accomplished,” says Muise.

After submitting a successful application, the group also began work on a history for the Community Stories section of Digital Museums Canada (DMC). Comprised of written materials, photographs, documents and parent interviews, it will go online at the end of this year, says Muise, adding, “It will be wonderful to share this story across Canada and the world.”

Although 65 years have



◀ This house now owned by Bernadette Walsh, daughter of co-op builders Bob and Adele Walsh, faces the lakeside park.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



▲ Bill Forbes, a long-time Bruce Trail volunteer, pictured on the Escarpment with one of his companion dogs. He was often spotted on the Grimsby trails leading up to The Point.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FORBES FAMILY.



▲ A plaque in Marrocco Park in honour of Walter Muise reads: "Murray Street Park/ Shoreline Protection Project/ Dedicated to the memory of Alderman Walter Muise in recognition of 13 years of service on Council and his vision for this project completed in 1996 in partnership with the federal and provincial governments as part of the infrastructure program. The Corporation of the Town of Grimsby." PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

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▲ Thanks to Walter Muisse, the shore of Lake Ontario is protected here by special construction features. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

passed, trees planted and additions made to some houses, the co-op community has retained its appearance and character. Some second-generation family members still live in the houses, says Muisse.

And a fourth generation resides in Bill and Dorothy Forbes' original house. A few years ago their granddaughter, Shaye Scavo and her husband Joe purchased the house and now have a baby daughter, Sophia. Before she was born the couple began transforming a spare bedroom into a nursery

and in an attached crawl space, discovered a box of co-op material, including a list of other co-operative projects underway in 1955.

"My grandparents never threw anything out," says Shaye, who donated the box to The Co-op at 60 Working Group for inclusion into the DMC history. **NEV**

Dan O'Reilly's last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Hockleycrest's Trees for the Trail," Winter 2016-17. Some photo research and captions provided by Janet Muisse.



Playground equipment in Marrocco Park on the shore of Lake Ontario. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

WALSH AND MARROCCO

Now living in the home her parents Bob and Adele Walsh built as part of the Grimsby Housing Co-operative project, elementary school teacher Bernadette Walsh has many stories and memories to share and has a front view of Marrocco Park.

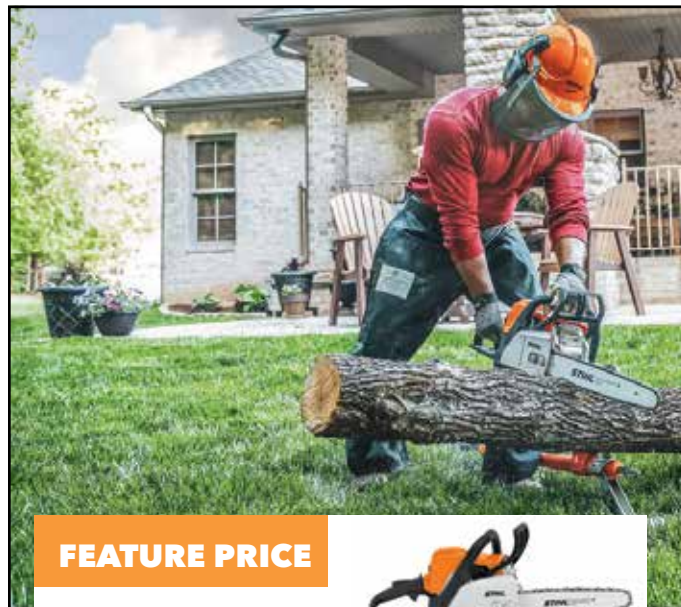
Dedicated in 1989, it is named in honour of Bishop Francis Marrocco who, as secretary of St. Patrick's College's Institute of Social Action (ISA), advocated for co-operative-built housing and is credited with being the inspiration of the building of 700 to 800 houses in co-operative projects throughout Ontario in the 1950s. Under his leadership, ISA published a series of booklets detailing an approach to home building.

As Walsh describes it, her father wasn't initially keen about the Grimsby project, but became an enthusiastic supporter after meeting with Marrocco in Ottawa in the early 1950s and visiting Lakeview Terrace, the first co-op built under ISA principles, near Hull, now Gatineau, in Quebec.

Quoting a line from the book on Marrocco's life, *The Light from One Candle*, Walsh says her father returned home "on fire."



▲ Another plaque in the park. This reads: "Marrocco Park/ In Memory of/ Bishop Francis A. Marrocco/ Founder of Co-op Housing in Ontario/ Eighty-one co-op homes were built on this site, Lakemount Terrace, commencing in 1955/ A special thanks to Bishop John Sherlock and Monseigneur William O'Brien for their leadership and contribution to our success. Dedicated in the year of Our Lord 1989." PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



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