

# KEEPING STORIES ALIVE:

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY RAYMOND JOHNS

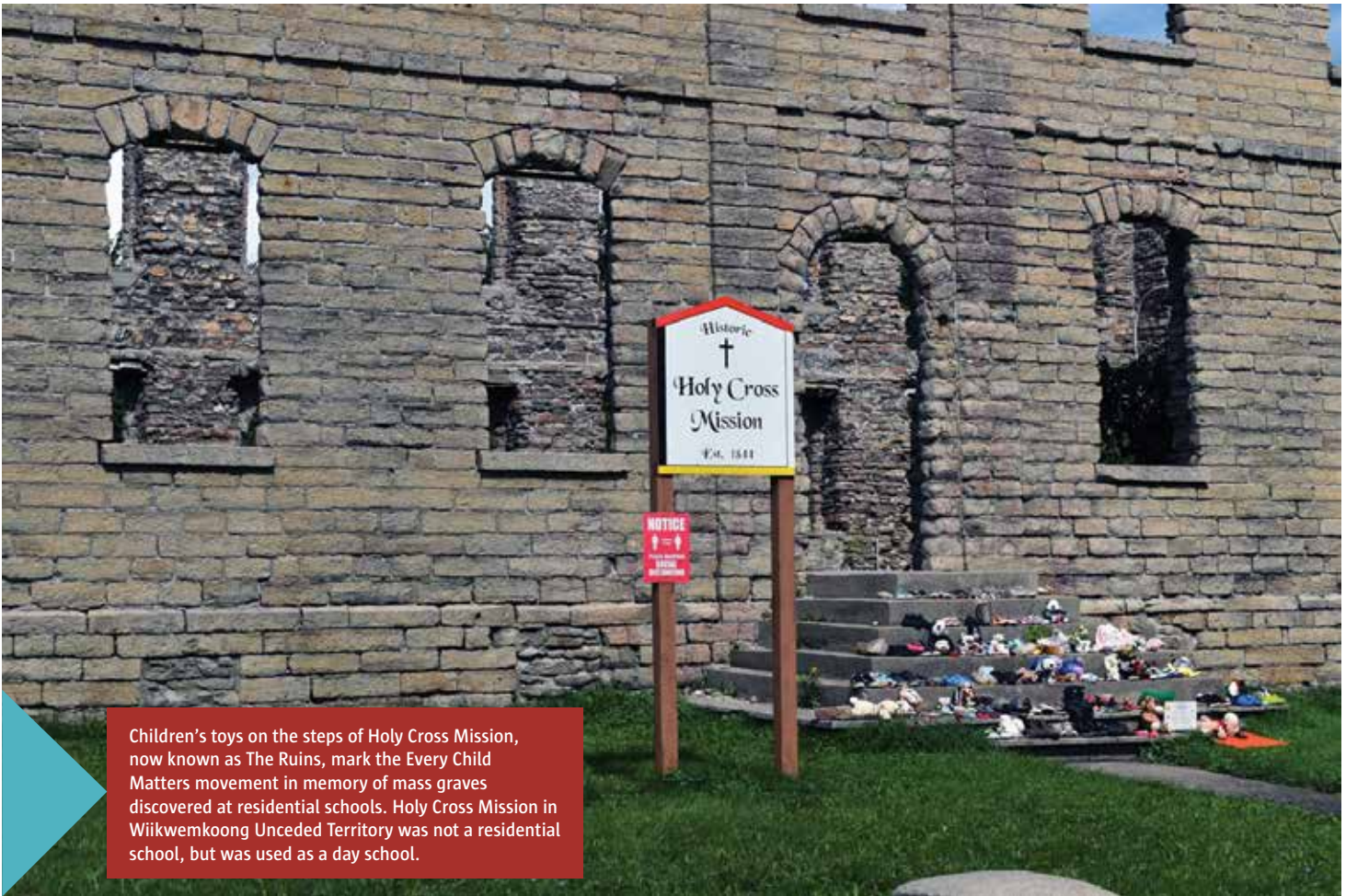


Some of the current and recent people involved with Debajimajig Theatre Group. From left, front row: Lorraine Bebamikawe, Mary Lou Manitowabi, Paige Allerton, Courtnee Osawabine, Tyler Pangowish, Cotnee Kaboni, Lynda Trudeau, Cecilia Pitawanakwat. From left in back row: Bruce Naokwegijig, Joahna Berti, David Osawabine, Samantha Brennen, David McDonald, Dustin Trudeau, Micheal Oshkabewisens, Carlos Garcia Estévez.

# Debajehmujig Sharings



**S**torytelling has been the cornerstone of passing on history from one generation to another. When these words are put into action along with some creative music, you have summed up Debajehmujig Theatre Group on Manitoulin Island. The word “Debajehmujig” is pronounced “De-Boch-A-Mi-Gig,” which means educating and sharing with Native and non-Native people alike. In the Cree and Ojibway languages it simply means storytelling.



Children's toys on the steps of Holy Cross Mission, now known as The Ruins, mark the Every Child Matters movement in memory of mass graves discovered at residential schools. Holy Cross Mission in Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory was not a residential school, but was used as a day school.

**F**ounded in 1983 by Shirley Cheechoo of Cree Nation, who now resides in M'Chigeeng First Nation, Debajehmujig was begun so that Native people could hear and see their own views represented on stage. It is a unique theatre group, training centre and multi-art facility for both young and old. All newcomers, with little or no experience, are welcome to become part of the production. Productions are all family oriented and aimed towards the family. Debajehmujig is located in Manitowaning with the head office in Wiikwemkoong First Nation. All new personnel

are introduced to Sunny Oswanabie and Ashley Manitowabie who are the Knowledge Keepers of Debajehmujig. One of the first things newcomers are taught is the knowledge of the land, working with gardens and plants. Since COVID-19 started, Sunny has performed teachings online every Friday to keep those interested up to date on teachings. This way they can enjoy and learn in the comfort of their own home. The teachings are on how to respect Mother Earth and take pride in the land.

People of all walks of life are encouraged to attend any production in order to open their minds

and further understand an Anishinabe point of view.

Linda Trudeau is the executive general manager of Debajehmujig while Bruce Naokwegijig of the Odawa is the artistic director. Bruce has been involved with Debajehmujig since he was 11 years old. He learned to speak and write in his native language Ojibway.

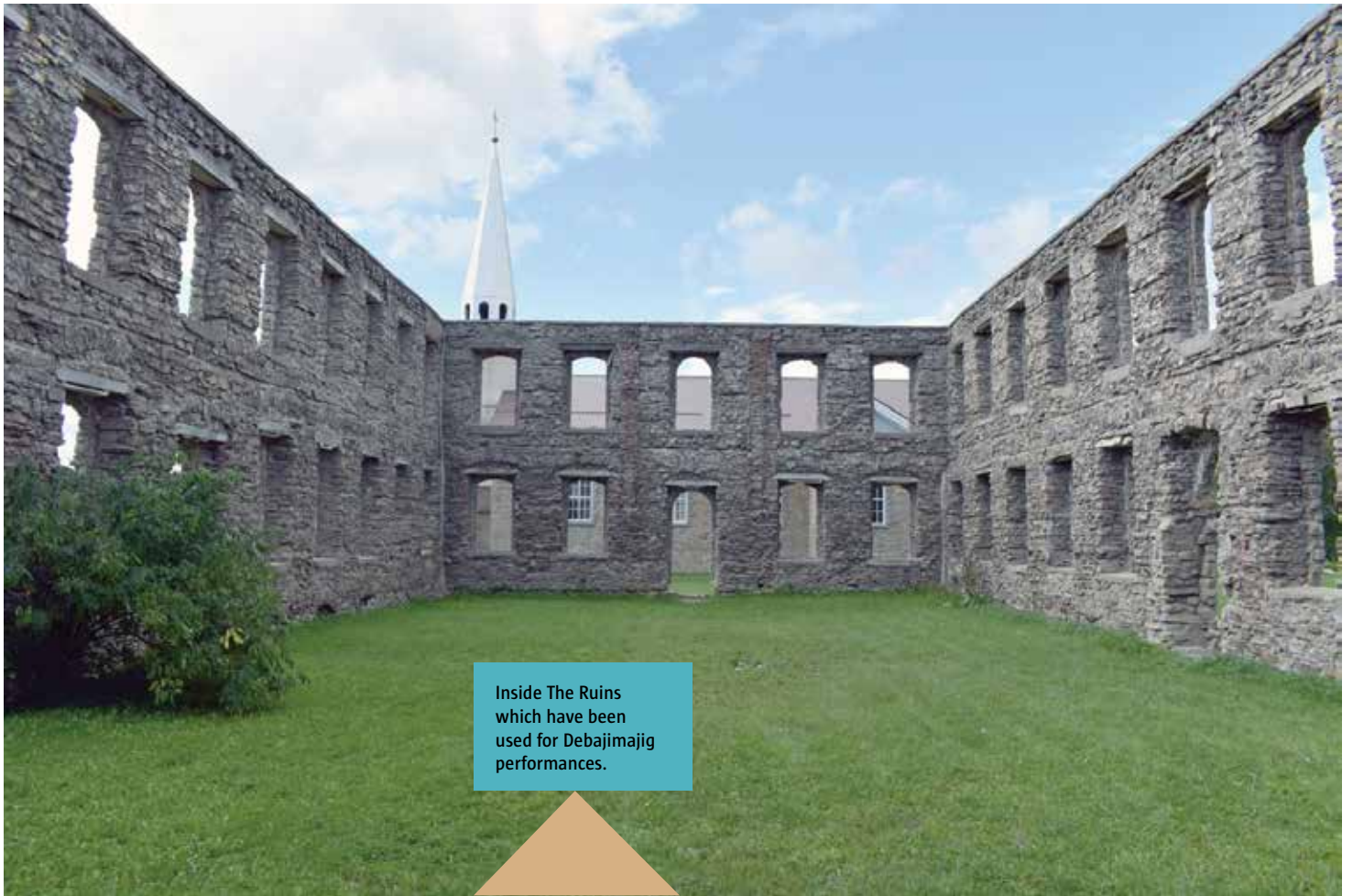
### Sensitive Stories

"That sticks with me from this day on," Bruce says. "Stories are told every day and are very crucial to Indigenous culture. When we gather as a group or meet with friends there are stories being told that are educational and

also controversial." Before the pandemic Debajehmujig was working on the theme "The New Elders," which portrayed survivors of residential schools.

"This was a sensitive topic since we did not want to set off any triggers," adds Bruce. "The healing process and moving forward can take time so we have to start at the beginning, going back to our traditions, culture and spirituality. This was the message Debajehmujig was trying to restore as well as rejuvenate the inner spirit to move forward as an individual."

Debajehmujig also does commissioned performances, travels and performs for



Inside The Ruins  
which have been  
used for Debajimajig  
performances.



Artistic  
director Bruce  
Naokwegijig.



Actors Michael Oshkawbewisens and Carlos Garcia Estevez, standing, while rehearsing “In the Name of Humanity.”



businesses. Having the studio on site is an added bonus, which allows Debajehmujig to host an outside group from anywhere. The media department consists of Jason Manitowabi, who runs the sound recording, Justin Deforge, who runs the video editing, and Chris Deforge, technical director and physical plant manager, who makes sure everything is operational.

Accommodations are also provided since Debajehmujig owns a fully furnished apartment next door along with a bachelor unit. In the past students would occupy the space but they have all moved on and since the pandemic there has been no use for the accommodations.

Debajehmujig creates shows for a specific purpose or strictly for entertainment. When new scripts are initially created, a brainstorming session occurs. Everyone

comments on a word. Then a scene is acted out with four or five actors on stage relating to specific themes. The group then plays exploratory games where they share anything relating to that particular theme. Referred to as vignettes, these games are sometimes demanding.

### Summer Productions

July and August are the busiest for the group. An outdoor venue for summer productions is the Holy Cross Mission, known as “The Ruins,” located in Wiikwemkoong overlooking Wikwemikong Bay on Georgian Bay. The Ruins are recommended as a must-see place for newcomers.

Debajehmujig normally holds a two-week performance. There are “staple” events and there is the “Summer Mainstage” which used to be held at The Ruins. Unfortunately, because

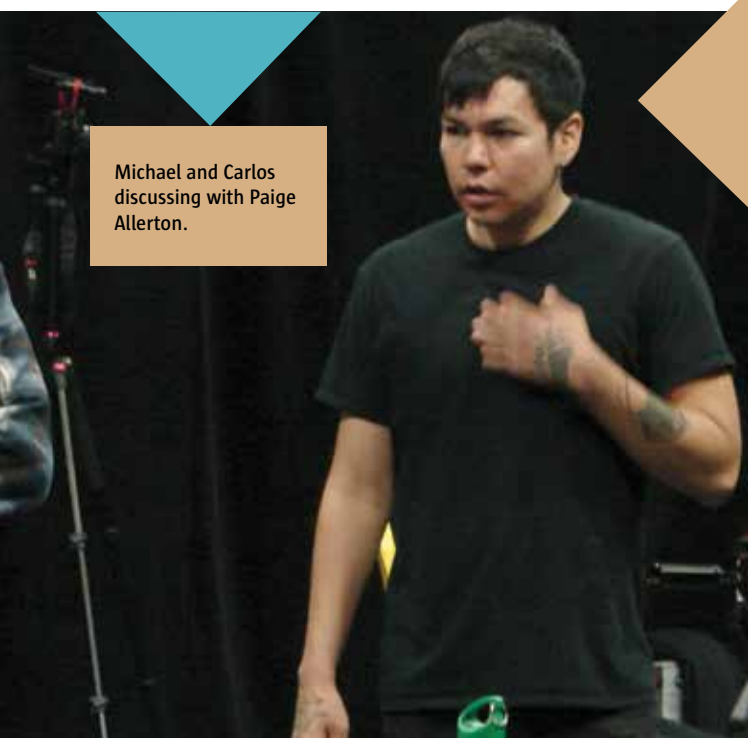
of safety issues, The Ruins has temporarily been out of service, but it is hoped that it will be restored in the near future. This summer, a production called “In the Name of Humanity” will be offered in Manitowaning.

Although Debajehmujig was mainly funded for theatre, there are many offshoots relating to music which is why everything can be accomplished right on site. There are also workshops that teach individuals the skills needed to enhance their ability to move forward in life. There is no cost to enter these workshops but they are planned in advance and may last up to a week or two. The workshops may include painting, drawing along with playing musical instruments to generate interest among those who attend.

Debajehmujig is a great place to collaborate and



Left, Michael Oshkawbewisens on the soundboard and David McDonald, both at work on "In the Name of Humanity."



Michael and Carlos discussing with Paige Allerton.

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The renovated exterior of Deabajemujig Creation Centre in Manitowaning was revealed last winter.



gain knowledge of cross-cultural understanding. To become involved you could join to become an educator, collaborator or assistant. There is also the chance you could end up being a performer.

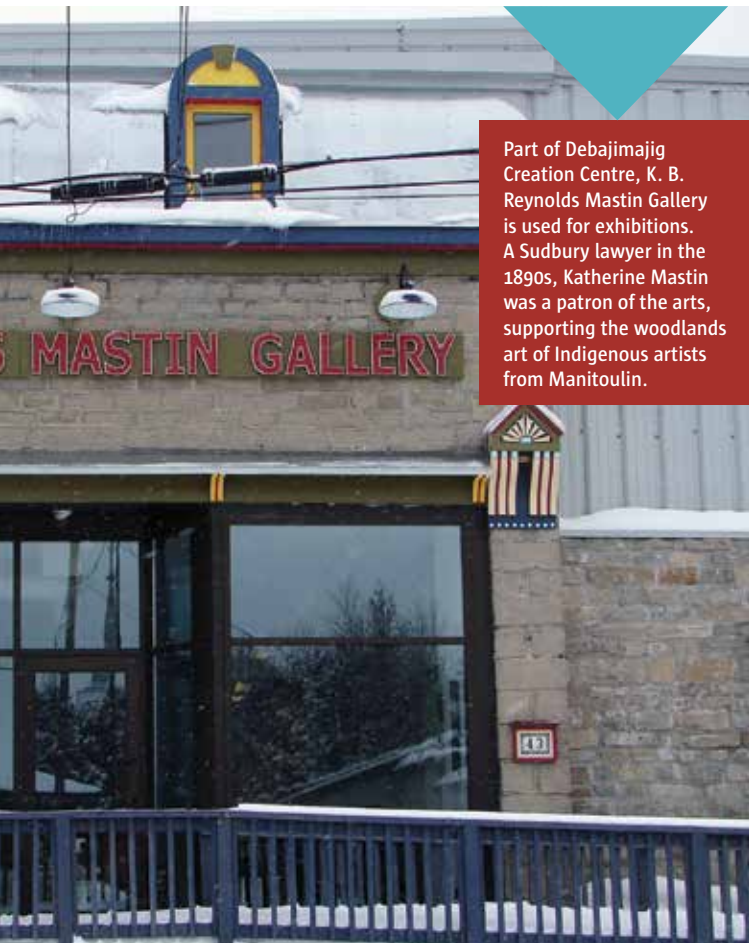
There are many ways to support Deabajemujig: simply by following their website [Debaj.ca](http://Debaj.ca) or on Instagram, Facebook and

YouTube. You can also donate at events if they are able to be held this summer. **NEV**

*Photographer, artist and graphic designer **Raymond Johns** is a member of the Ojibway First Nation who lives in Manitowaning. His last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Manitoulin Powwows," Summer 2021.*



Linda Trudeau, executive general manager.



Part of Debajimajig Creation Centre, K. B. Reynolds Mastin Gallery is used for exhibitions. A Sudbury lawyer in the 1890s, Katherine Mastin was a patron of the arts, supporting the woodlands art of Indigenous artists from Manitoulin.



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