

Community Help After Loss

WRITTEN BY CHRIS HAMILTON

It was a dreary, overcast Tuesday afternoon in late August last year when the fire started. Those of us working that day at Foodland in Lion's Head were saying our goodbyes to the summer students and getting ready for the last long weekend of the summer. Upstairs in Grandad's Attic we first saw the thick, brown smoke begin to billow up through the wooden floorboards, and then the ceiling on the main floor. That's when staff immediately evacuated the store and called 911.



▲ In late August 2023, Hellyer's Foodland in Lion's Head suffered a significant fire. PHOTO BY MIKE HALL.

Fire at Lion's Head Foodland





▲ Fire crews from Lion's Head, Tobermory, Wiarton, and Owen Sound stopped the fire after a five-hour effort. There were no injuries. PHOTO BY MIKE HALL.

Outside the store, a small fire had begun in the old wall, built around 1934. Contractors performing the work used all the store's fire extinguishers, then all those at the hardware store. Fire crews from Lion's Head, Tobermory, Wiarton, and Owen Sound contained the burn after five hours with no injuries reported. Even though flames never burned anything inside the store, contents, equipment, and all were lost to smoke damage.

News travels fast. The streets were lined with people with their phones out, so naturally the word was out on

social media. The question everybody seemed to settle on was "What will we do now?"

You see, Lion's Head is in cottage country. Once you travel north on Hwy 6 past civilization, or Owen Sound, you are on the Saugeen Bruce Peninsula, a thin spit of land with one main road that ends in Tobermory. Wiarton is 25 minutes south of us and Tobermory is 40 minutes north: the nearest grocery stores. Lion's Head serves its 700 residents but also 4,400 from the surrounding municipality. Farms, rural businesses, neighbouring villages rely on a local food source. We have a significant

senior population, many of whom have no other way of getting food.

Fifth-generation owners Kyle and Kara Hellyer made the decision to repair the store rather than move out of town and build new. "This is more than just a grocery store, it's a place where the community connects every day," says Kara. "The customers are our neighbours, so they get a really personalized service in the store; especially some of our seniors who may need more help." At the time of writing, they are hoping for a re-opening in early summer.

Until then, we all will have to add an hour's gas

to our grocery bills. Those working in town at the bank, shops, hospital, school have less options for lunch or dinner. Perhaps 30 students will have to find part- and full-time jobs elsewhere. The school's Foods and Life Skills classes are unable to use the store. "Inconvenient" became the word around town.

Community Action

Yet on the day of the fire something remarkable began to happen. The community was already springing into action. Lifelong resident and long-time business owner Marydale Ashcroft's first thought was "How are



▲ The fire started between these studs, reached up to the second floor and then spread. PHOTO BY TONY AGUILAR.

► On the second floor, the fire spread through the floor, wall and ceiling. PHOTO BY TONY AGUILAR.



the seniors in this town going to get food? The community supports itself and its residents. People's first response is to help." Local business owners came together to bring staples, dairy, bread, and toiletries into their stores, working cooperatively, not competitively. At Marydale's business, The Shops at 84 Main, she also opened her community pantry: a free grocery rack with dried and canned goods and toiletries all donated.

Cindy Lou's Ice Cream Shop began bringing in more dairy, grocery and hygiene products until their seasonal closure. Scott's Home Hardware set up an area for dry goods and then opened a dairy cooler. The Garden

In Thyme Country Market stayed open all year offering produce and baked goods. In Ferndale, Bear Tracks Inn offers in-stock items for sale as well: bread, vegetables, and dairy. Bain's General Store opened in February of 2024 offering another option for common groceries, produce, and dairy. By the Bay General Store in Pike Bay was another business stepping up. These shop owners are taking the time to shop for bargains so that they can keep prices and markups low.

The Golden Dawn Senior Citizen Home shuttles anyone to Peacock's Foodland in Tobermory free every Thursday. Some have no other way to get groceries. The day I rode, we had a few people

from Lion's Head, Ferndale, Stokes Bay, and Pike Bay.

The store's grocery delivery program was continued by volunteers Dona Ashcroft and Leann Rouse. They take phone orders, drive, shop, and deliver to those with mobility or support issues.

Now, eight months after the fire, we've all felt the added cost and inconvenience of travelling for food, but has there been a heavier toll?

The Lion's Head Food Bank has felt it. Donations are down, travel costs are up, and they have had to source grants from Community Foundations Grey Bruce and the United Way Grey Bruce to assist with their programs.

The Lion's Head Daycare has been hit, too. The receipt



▲ Kara and Kyle Hellyer worked with contractors to rebuild the store. PHOTO BY CHRIS HAMILTON.





◀ Scott Hellyer added dry goods and then a dairy cooler to Scott's Home Hardware to meet the need. PHOTO BY CHRIS HAMILTON.



▲ Don and Molly Bridge of The Garden In Thyme, remained open all year to provide produce and baked goods. PHOTO BY CHRIS HAMILTON.



▲ Marydale Ashcroft in The Shops at 84 Main at the community cupboard where donated items are available for free. PHOTO BY CHRIS HAMILTON.



◀ The Golden Dawn Senior Citizen Home offered a free bus ride for anyone to Peacock's Foodland in Tobermory every Thursday. PHOTO BY CHRIS HAMILTON.

program allowed customers to deposit their grocery receipts, with the store donating a percentage to the daycare. This and regular in-store fundraising programs don't exist now.

Resiliency

Yet we've seen some unexpected results. The town did not turn into a ghost town. Churches and community groups have provided meals and rides and support. Many of the regular clientele continue to shop in town, some shops even noticing new customers. Scott Hellyer spoke about the town's resiliency. "People can come to town, get their mail, stop at the pharmacy, the hardware store, the bank and get lunch. The community supports its businesses, and the businesses support the community."

If there ever was an ad for shop local, this was it.

Kyle and Kara Hellyer have continued local youth sponsorships, Rotary, and are working tirelessly alongside family to get the store re-opened as soon as possible. Now, as the local shop owners wonder if they will have the resources to keep groceries in stock as peak season approaches, welcome news has arrived. Hellyer's Foodland should be reopening in June.

Lion's Head residents have been hoping for the return to normality, and the convenience of not having to drive out of town for a banana. So, if you're travelling up this way, you may just find it business as usual. **NEV**

Chris Hamilton's last article for this magazine was "Interpreting The Giant's Rib: Telling the Story of the Niagara Escarpment," in Autumn 2017.



▲ Linda Bain opened Bain's General Store in Ferndale in February 2024, giving another option for groceries. PHOTO BY CHRIS HAMILTON.