



The Kermesse community

ONE FAMILY'S STORY GROWING UP AROUND
AN IMPORTANT IWK FUNDRAISER

BY JESSICA PATTERSON

There's this giddiness, excitement and anticipation that starts as an uncomfortable ball of energy in my stomach and vibrates down my legs until my feet are dancing.



It's the morning of Kermesse, the IWK hospital's annual fun fair and auxiliary fundraiser.

And I can't sit still.

Beside me, my mother, a 48-year veteran of the event, checks her watch for the umpteenth time. "Five minutes," she says. She's as excited as I am. Her purse and pockets are filled with loonies, twoonies, and indiscriminate wads of cash—her annual donation to the hospital.

This is a major day for my mother, for shopping and finding gems among the bargains at the Kermesse flea market. Originally called the super-fluidy, perhaps for the rate at which things are sold, this gymnasium-sized flea market at Gorsebrook Junior High School in behind the IWK, has a bit of everything on sale.

My mother, Carolyn Wright-Patterson, has been going to Kermesse since she was a little girl. She probably has some of the same rose-tinted memories from childhood, as I do, as she's been going to the event for decades. She says she goes because it's her way of giving back to the hospital that saved my life.

We all have our own connections to the IWK. I was born three months premature at what was the old Grace hospital. I weighed 1.13 pounds. I had a collapsed lung, my organs weren't fully developed and there were times when my parents didn't know if I was going to make it.

"I make sure I spend \$100 or more, every year, as a donation to the IWK. That's because of you," she tells me. "When you were born, that's when I started spending a little more. That was my annual donation to the IWK."

My memories of Kermesse stretch like a reel of technicolour film. Like my mother, I have been attending Kermesse for as long as I can remember. There are moments of pure glee and of wonder and excitement. I remember the event at Dalhousie campus when I was a child, winning prizes at the fish pond with the help of Dal student council, of delicious baklava, cookies and baked goods. I remember casts on fingers and stickers at the M.A.S.H tent, and clowns, balloon poodles, and Razzmatazz. I remember watching the graceful Amythest Dancers for years and wanting to be one of them when I grew up.

Kermesse for me was also about getting together with aunts and uncles, and cousins and grandparents. All of whom had been touched by the IWK in some way, shape or form. As kids, we'd all been into the hospital for one thing or another.

"I think Kermesse is a very special event,"

says Anne McGuire, president and CEO of the IWK. "I do not believe there is another Kermesse like this in the country.

"The thing I love best about Kermesse is that it brings the community to the IWK," she says. "It brings kids here and they see the children's hospital, there's lots of fun here and not just hard things if you have to come here as a patient. The Kermesse gets kids involved and demystifies the place."

Over the century, Kermesse activities and locations have changed, but the intent and support for the IWK's Kermesse have never wavered. It has been held at Saint Mary's, Dalhousie over the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the Halifax Forum, and the Atlantic Winter Fair Grounds.

In 1912, 26-year-old Princess Patricia opened Kermesse in Halifax, "bringing bright sunshine," with her, according to the *Halifax Mail*. "The broad lawn at Gorsebrook looked vividly fresh and green after the rains and the venerable and gracious trees which individualize the estate looked down open an ever moving, ever changing throng of people, including many small people whose enjoyment was of the blissful, unalloyed sort which you never know after you are, say, six years old."

That year, Kermesse netted \$1074.40 for Children's Hospital, the newspaper noted.

In 1967, it was the 60th anniversary of Kermesse. The event was held May 27, at the King's College grounds on Coburg Road. Newspaper ads were run concurrent with Kermesse, like that of Simpson-Hurst Ltd., insurance counsellors on Argyle Street, who wrote, "The Kermesse has become an institution in the city... It's an event which many families in the Halifax area place high among the Rites of Spring and one which we are most happy to recommend to you."

Kelly Cameron, IWK Auxiliary secretary, who received her 35-year pin last year, says she has seen Kermesse change over the years. "Ladies painted all year to produce articles that were sold at Kermesse," Cameron says. "Do you remember the lineups for painted articles outside the arena at Dalhousie? People brought lawn chairs."

I do. I remember the arena at Dalhousie in the early 1990s, filled with the ceilings with books, plants, baked goods, knitted goods. I remember painted articles took up a good portion of the arena. I remember my grandfather, who volunteered as security for the painted articles group, letting us into the arena early, so Mum could have a quick chat with my grandmother.

My grandmother, Jinny Wright, was a





member of the painted articles group. They were local artists and members of the Auxiliary who painted aprons, barrels, bottles, bird houses, clocks, hats and tables, napkin holders, rocking horses and planters—anything they could get their hands on.

My grandmother joined the Auxiliary in 1967, when the family moved to Halifax.

“I joined the painting group because it was more my field and the painting group always, always was part of the Kermesse,” she says. “The first people I met were Jeanette Lomis and Betty Grant, and they welcomed me into the group. They were so wonderful, I stayed.”

The group painted painted baskets, round tables, and big milk jugs the farmers used, my grandmother says. “We used to put big daisies and poppies on them. They were so gorgeous,” she says.

“One year, and this was in the middle of our era, the baskets and trays were so popular, that the crowd was six-people deep and they pushed our table over, because they were so enthusiastic,” she says. “They literally pushed our table over. That was the year that our table made \$21,000 between 10 a.m. in the

morning and 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon. We were really successful that year.”

As the years passed, the painted articles fell out of fashion. By 2007, they were no longer at Kermesse. Though, my grandmother still contributes paintings to the art gallery, and has for 40 years.

Brigid Langill grew up in the neighbourhood, and as a child, attended the event at the Dalhousie campus each year. “I must have been 10-years-old, and we’d ride our bikes over with some friends and away we’d go,” says the current IWK Auxiliary president. “We’d come back home hours later, with casts on our fingers, sunburnt, soaked to the bone.”

These days, she’s more concerned with staffing the Kermesse. The Kermesse is run, organized and staffed by members of the IWK Auxiliary, which is struggling for members. “We say it takes about 250 volunteers to run Kermesse at the scale it is now,” Langill says. “In years gone by, I would say it was closer to 500, but now, realistically, if I tallied them all, it would be 250.”

It’s been a challenge to find younger

people to join the Auxiliary, to make a commitment to help out, Langill says. "The only commitment members have to make is this," she says. "Kermesse is our biggest day of the year. So, if you're part of the Auxiliary, that's the one thing we require, is that you come out on Kermesse day and volunteer in some aspect."

Jennifer O'Connor is a 10-year member of the auxiliary and a Kermesse volunteer who operates the flea market. "When I came on, I was young for the group," she says. "When you get involved with the auxiliary, you start to feel like you're helping the hospital in a very comforting way."

Kermesse proceeds have purchased mini-fridges for the PMU Pediatric Medical Unit, and mobile carts, cart supplies and mental health resources for Child Life Services.

"Over the last 10 years Kermesse has turned over approximately \$815,000 to the Auxiliary, which is used for the "Special Request List" in the fall," says Lois Bowser. The Auxiliary funds comfort items for various units including televisions and DVDs for clinic waiting rooms, laptop computers

for School Services; iPads; toys for the central playrooms on two of the floors, furnishings for the teen lounge.

"Funds raised from Kermesse support Child Life programs, it helps purchase equipment for the "Recreation Therapy" loan bank; recliners, portable breast pumps, murals on the walls, interactive games/toys, sports equipment, musical instruments and other items to support the mental health inpatient and day treatment units and other articles too numerous to mention," she says.

In the past three years alone, the Auxiliary has returned over \$300,000 to the Health Centre for the items listed above.

While some things may have changed, the spirit behind the Kermesse still hasn't. People like Sue Bain, director of the Kermesse, who has been an Auxiliary member since 2005, continue the tradition. "I've been very lucky in my life, and I feel an obligation to give back," she says. "It's as much putting the pieces together, or selling raffle tickets if we can't find someone to do something."


Kermesse in the future will evolve to keep current. It means an Angry Birds toss instead

of a beanbag toss. It means involving younger people, who aren't auxiliary members.

"The younger people can give more in terms of shorter time-commitments. Whereas they used to have a meeting every month, now we're doing a lot more by email, phone and meetings are in the evenings," Bain says.

Attendance at Kermesse depends entirely on the weather, says Lois Bowser.

"I would say attendance has remained steady over the last 10 years going back over the amount that has been taken in each year for "Children's Activities" with the occasional dip due to inclement weather inasmuch as a lot of the activities for the children are held outside. Weather does affect the numbers - you hope for a sunny day."

The 104th Kermesse is on May 24. It starts at 9 a.m., when the big doors at the Gorsebrook Junior High open to the crowds of bargain seekers. My mother will be there. 

tadams@metroguide.ca  Halifax Magazine



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