



CHRISTIE ZIMMER
voluntarily speaking

E-volunteers: we have the technology

They have the letters N E S T over the couch in their living room, this young couple from Guelph. They're artists with demanding careers, his in advertising and hers at the University of Guelph. And they're virtual volunteers.

For the past five years Natalie and Peter Giesbrecht have designed the quarterly newsletter for the Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington. They work under the direction of Cathy Taylor, the centre's executive director, yet they've only met her in person three, maybe four, times. Almost all of their conversations take place via e-mail.

As TV's six-million dollar man, Steve Austin, might have said — before being cancelled in 1978 — "They have the technology."

Virtual volunteerism, the catchy name for volunteering done online, is all about technology. It is not new, but it is evolving, right along with increasingly sophisticated web and teleconferencing tools.

Thanks to the Internet, virtual volunteers can design, consult, teach, mentor, keep the books and provide one-on-one support from just about any computer terminal in any location and they can do so at times that accommodate their individual schedules.

Volunteering online allows people like the Giesbrechts, who cannot offer their considerable skills during traditional work hours, to give of their time and talents.

It also provides large organizations and those in remote locations with access to an extensive pool of volunteers.

Volunteer Canada, the national organization devoted to volunteerism in Canada, benefits considerably from the work of virtual volunteers.

"It's a pretty big part of what we do at the national level," says Ruth MacKenzie, the executive director of Volunteer Canada. "Our steering committees, for example, connect by teleconference."

For MacKenzie, who is witnessing firsthand the increasing utilization of technology by voluntary organizations and their members, virtual volunteerism is a unique way to promote and foster volunteerism as a whole.

There is just one thing to keep in mind, if you find yourself swayed by the futuristic allure of virtual volunteerism: the work is real.

"It takes commitment and self-discipline," Peter Giesbrecht says. "It's completely independent. You have to want to do it."

He and Natalie agree, however, that they enjoy the work immensely.

"It's a pleasure to do it," Peter says. "We've integrated it into our lives."

If you'd like to offer your time and skills on a virtual basis, let your fingers do the walking. Search the Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington's community database at volunteerguelphwellington.on.ca.

Christie Zimmer lives and writes in Guelph. She can be reached at christiezimmer@rogers.com.

REFLECTING ON HER WORK



Guelph author Sylvia Markle-Craine discusses her collection of short stories, 'Swimming to Fatima.'

Noticing the unnoticed

Sylvia Markle-Craine explores marginalized characters in stories

Joanne Shuttleworth
jshuttleworth@guelphmercury.com

GUELPH — It took many years for the stories to be written but the characters have been simmering inside Sylvia Markle-Craine ever since she started people-watching and imagining their stories.

"I used to watch those guys who pick up cigarette butts (to smoke later)," Markle-Craine said from her apartment that overlooks the Speed River. Her former apartment on Quebec Street afforded her a bird's-eye view of downtown Guelph, and after the revelry Saturday nights, there were always a few who picked through the rubble Sunday mornings.

"I'd give them a name. I'd wonder what kind of life they had that they'd pick up used cigarettes. Who would their friends be?" Markle-Craine wondered aloud.

"These aren't strange, exotic beings. These are the marginalized, the people most people don't even notice."

Markle-Craine will launch her first published collection of short stories, "Swimming to Fatima," Monday evening at the Bookshelf's eBar.

It's not that Markle-Craine is marginalized herself, but a single mom with little education, limited funds and four kids sees a certain amount of hardship around her.

Suicide, abuse, infidelity, poverty — these are the broad and gritty subjects she covers. Her stories are less about plot and more about character development though.

"In the end they are about hope and redemption," she said. "These people have strength. And though they are marginalized, they still make their own community. They can count on each other."

Married young with four children by the time she was 27, Markle-Craine was in her 30s before she got her Grade 10 and in her 40s when she graduated from university. Now 64, Markle-Craine feels rejuvenated and ready to start the next chapter of her life.

And that means getting her stories on paper. "I started with poetry — really bad poetry," she said with a laugh. And she was always a storyteller, soothing her seven younger siblings to sleep with tales she'd make up on the spot.

But it was after reading "The Flying Troutmans," by Miriam Toews, about a single woman searching for the father of two children, that Markle-Craine realized her dark characters might resonate with a wider audience.

"I thought, 'Hey, people can write about this stuff?'" she said.

Stan Johannesen, managing editor of the year-old Kitchener-based publishing house Blaurock Press, said he loved Markle-Craine's stories when he read them.

"She's an undiscovered gem," Johannesen said. "You recognize the small town characters, but these have quirks. They are very odd and you're never sure if they are supernatural. But they are ironic and humorous, too."

Artistic talent runs in the family. Markle-Craine's daughter Holly is a filmmaker and her son Nick is a graphic artist with three books to his credit.

For her own part, Markle-Craine plans on taking a French class, doing a little acting, and getting her stories written.

"I get excited about the characters. They are real to me and I want to give them a voice. Give them their dignity," she said.

if you're going

what: Launch of Sylvia Markle-Craine's 'Swimming to Fatima'
where: eBar
when: 7:30 p.m. Monday, Sept. 22
cost: free

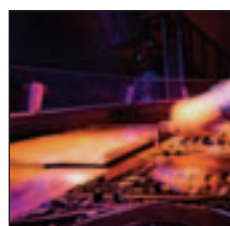
“These aren't strange, exotic beings. These are the marginalized, the people most people don't even notice.”

Sylvia Markle-Craine on the characters in 'Swimming to Fatima'

guelph

after dark

Find out what there is to do in Guelph after the sun goes down.



music tonight

Kazoo! Festival
Casey Mecija and Sandro Perri

where: University Centre U of G
when: noon
cost: no cover

The Hylozoists
with Forest City Lovers and Timber Timbre

where: Dublin Street United
when: 7:30 p.m.
cost: \$10 to \$14 available at U of G's CSA office and Ground Floor Music

The Raccoon Wedding

with Brides and Slim Twig
where: Jimmy Jazz
when: 11 p.m.
cost: no cover

saturday

Richard Lavolette
and the Oil Spills,
with the Magic, Harri Palm and Molly Kurvink

where: St. George's Square
when: 10 a.m.
cost: no cover

etc.

monday

Launch of Sylvia Markle-Craine's 'Swimming to Fatima'

where: eBar
when: 7:30 p.m.
cost: free

Le Cyc

A bicycle-themed graphic novel presented in slide-show format.

where: Guelph Youth Music Centre
when: 3:30 p.m.
cost: \$10

Guelph Speaks book launch

with musical performances by Chris Yang, Kevin Barnhorst and others

where: Guelph Youth Music Centre
when: 7 p.m.
cost: no cover

Beautiful your garden with our:

- Mossy rock
- Many colourful crushed stone types
- Bulk triple mix from \$39 per yard
- Red, black shredded pine from \$45 per yard

Square Cut Flagstone

GET A GIFT VOUCHER NOW FOR CHRISTMAS!

Build your walls with our many natural wall stones, edge your garden with a great variety of coursing.

Armour Stone

Retain medium or large walls with the Easy Install Rosetta Stone retaining system

Random Flagstone

A Choice as Smart as it is Beautiful

Southern Ontario's Largest Selection of Mulches & Decorative Aggregates

GRAND RIVER NATURAL STONE

R.R. #2/ Highway 6, Elora ON • 519-843-2854 or 1-877-434-7367 • www.grandriverstone.com • Monday to Friday 7am - 6pm • Saturday 8:30am - 4pm • Sunday 10am - 4pm