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# The Voice

of Pelham and Central Niagara

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REVEL

## Rapid response team expands to Pelham, Welland



Members of Niagara's mobile crisis rapid response team (MCRRT), Vicky Looby of the Canadian Mental Health Association, and Constable Robin Bleich of the Niagara Regional Police Service. The MCRRT has expanded to include Welland and Pelham. DON RICKERS

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, local politicians, social activists, and health organizations have warned that our communities are suffering through an escalating mental health and addictions crisis, which affects not just the afflicted, but our hospitals, police, health-providing agencies, and court system.

Of particular concern is the volume of 9-1-1 calls received for people in distress.

A successful crisis-response program is now in place in Niagara, a partnership between the Niagara branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and the Niagara Regional Police Service (NRPS). Working together, they have drawn on statistical analysis of police calls for service in relation to people in crisis and mental health-related incidents throughout

### Pilot program offered jointly by NRPS and Canadian Mental Health Association

BY DON RICKERS  
CONTRIBUTING NEWS EDITOR

the Region, and implemented teams to de-escalate crisis situations, and immediately assess individuals' mental health and addiction care needs.

The Mobile Crisis Rapid Response Team (MCRRT) program was activated in 2015 in St. Catharines and Thorold, followed by Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake in 2021. The teams consist of a full-time mental health worker, who works 12-hour shifts (noon until midnight), seven days a week alongside a specially trained police officer responding to 9-1-1 calls.

The program has recently been further expanded to include a one-year pilot project in the NRPS 3 District, which covers Welland and Pelham.

The latest data shows the team had some 1,800 face-to-face visits in 2021. Of those interactions, some 1,300 individuals were diverted from hospitals, and almost 950 were connected to various mental health and addictions services, without the need for police to make arrests. Between 2015 and 2019, the MCRRT had some 3,800 face-to-face interactions involving almost 2,800

people, which resulted in 73 percent diverted from hospital stays, and 84 percent de-escalated to the point where apprehension by police was not required.

NRPS Superintendent Marco Giannico oversees the program, and told the Voice that the service received a grant from the Solicitor General's office to fund the pilot project in Welland and Pelham, while the CMHA also received funding through their ministry.

"Mental health is one of the NRPS' highest 9-1-1 call volumes," he said, noting that "persons in crisis" is the proper term. "We attend numerous calls on a daily basis in that capacity."

Giannico said that the NRPS provides training for the crisis intervention team, and that many other

See TEAM Page 14

## Column Six

### My father and the ever elusive SuVaGa

Mom said thanks but no thanks

BY VICTORIA BALFOUR  
SPECIAL TO THE VOICE

One day in October 1962 when I was eight years old and bored with watching *Leave it to Beaver* at home in Ancaster, Ontario, I went upstairs to snoop around in my father's study. Most of the stuff in this room, like the news clippings on the tragic death of Marilyn Monroe that my dad stored in a shirt box under a tallboy dresser, I already knew by heart. But on this visit, on my father's desk, right next to an old Valentine I'd given him, I spotted a booklet I'd never seen before. Its cover photo showed a rustic log gate in a deeply wooded area with a sign that said, "Sun Valley Gardens. Members Only."

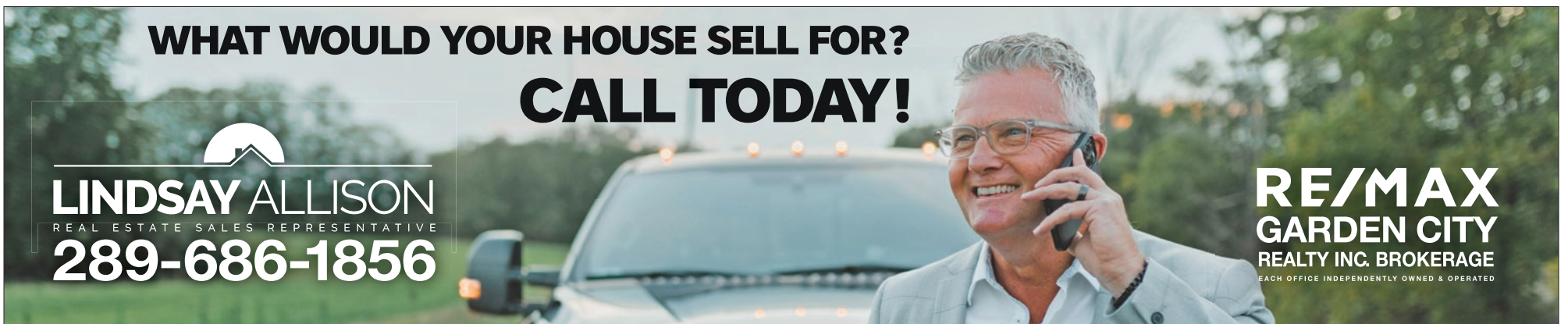
I figured Sun Valley Gardens was one of the summer camps my parents had been looking into for me for the following summer.

Boy, was I wrong.

When I opened up the brochure, my eyes just about

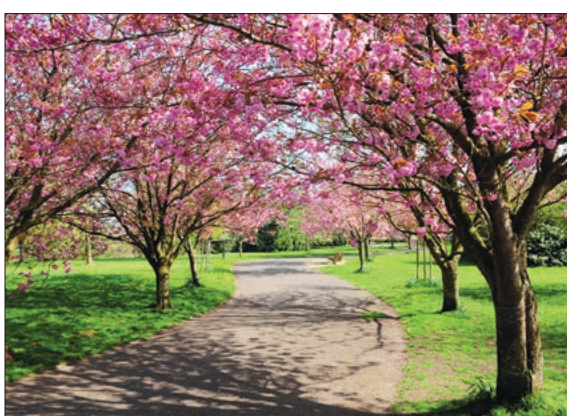
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**COLUMN SIX**

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popped out of my head. Sun Valley Gardens, it turned out, was a camp for grownups who didn't wear clothes.

I gaped at a photo of a woman diving into a kidney shaped pool wearing nothing but a white bathing cap. I gawked at a picture of a group of men and women baring their breasts, bottoms and other private parts as they stood around a volleyball net. What I couldn't get over is that no one in the photos was acting the least bit embarrassed about being naked for all the world to see.

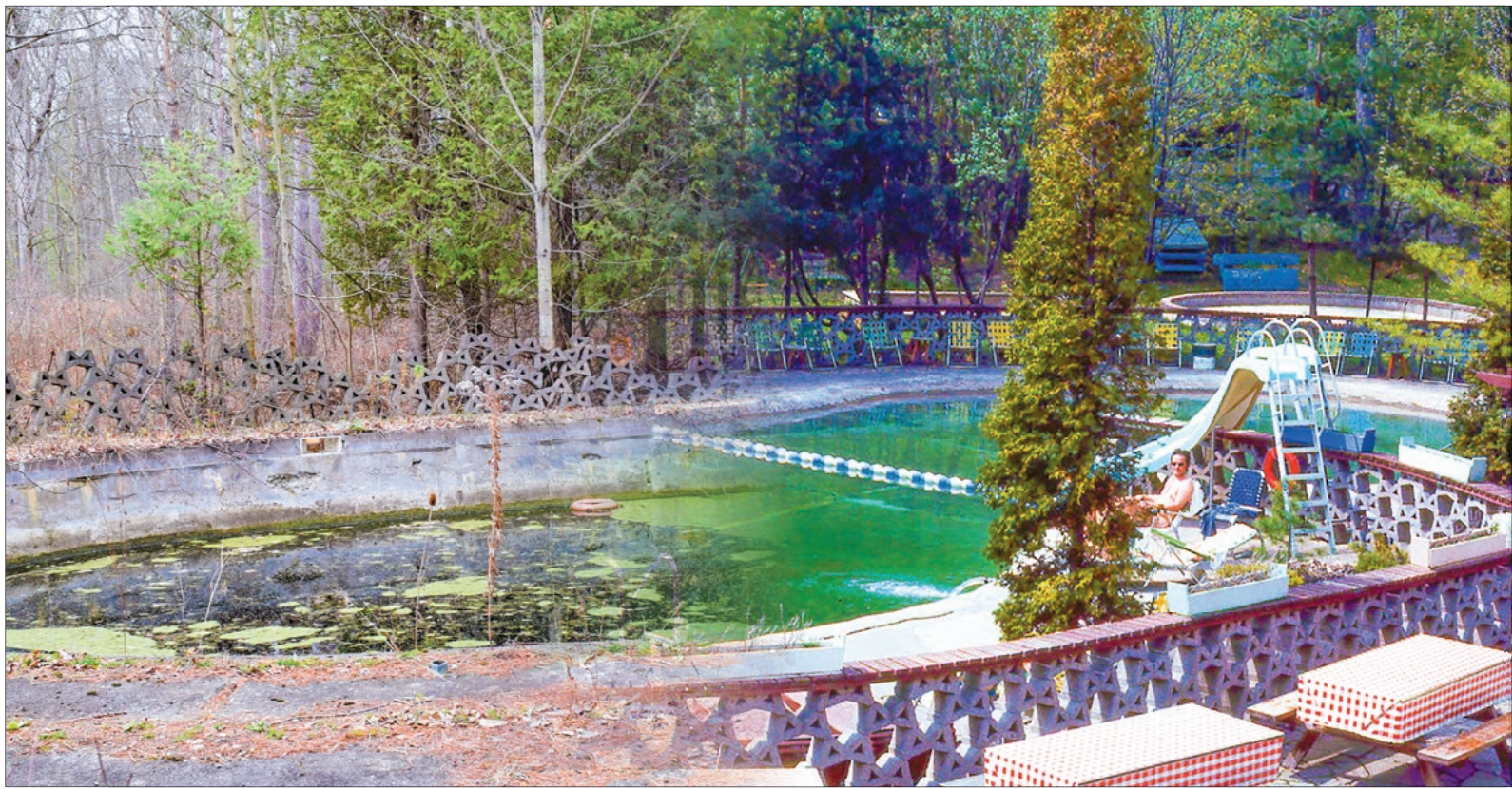
I ran to the kitchen to quiz my mother about this camp for naked grownups. In our family, I was known as the quiet and obedient child. But every once in a while I liked to puncture my good-girl reputation by asking my mother blunt questions on shocking subjects, just to stir things up. And I knew the question I was about to ask was going to be a bombshell.

"Mom, what's 'SuVaGa?'" I asked. This was the acronym that Sun Valley Gardens used on their mailing envelope. I pronounced it, "SUEVaGa."

I fully expected the usual frosty, "Never mind" response I got whenever I asked my mother how babies were born. But to my surprise she seemed relieved.

"SuVaGa is short for Sun Valley Gardens," she said. "It's a nudist camp in Fonthill, near Niagara Falls. People don't wear any clothes there. Your father is a member. He's tried to make me join but I won't."

She then launched into a wild tale about how the year before, while driving home from a trip to Cape Cod, my father had made a mysterious detour on a road that ended up with them right at the wooden gates of Sun Valley Gardens.



**FADING INTO THE BUSH** Right, the famed kidney shaped pool at Sun Valley Gardens, in 1974. Left, its remains in late 2020, as nature reclaimed the former resort.

RUEHLE FAMILY ARCHIVES (1974) / BRUCE FORSYTH (2020)

"Your father wanted me to go in with him," my mother told me. "I refused. We had a huge fight. So he went in without me and I hid in the woods by the gate. I was never so embarrassed."

That my father had joined a club where people ran around nude did not come as a total shock to me. Ever since I could remember, every morning in the hallway on the second floor of our house my father made a point of sauntering back and forth multiple times between the bathroom and his study in his birthday suit. In clothes, his body encased in trousers and belt and a button-down shirt, my father looked trapped and timid. But in the

hallway, naked, my father walked with a freeness and a swagger that you might see on a male model on a runway. Nevertheless his *au naturel* strolls made my siblings and me very uncomfortable. My mother, powerless to get my father to quit walking around in the nude, tried mockery, dubbing him "The Marble Statue." My father would just laugh.

In summers up at the family cottage in Muskoka my father never wore a bathing suit when he went for a swim. There were no exceptions to this rule—even when we had guests. Like clockwork, late in the afternoon on a summer Saturday, my father would stride down

from the cottage to the dock where the guests in Adirondack chairs would be having drinks. He always wore the same skimpy wrap-around over his lower half that was only slightly bigger than a tea towel. Then with a defiant expression on his face, he would climb to the top of the diving tower. I knew what was going to happen next, but the guests did not. As long as I live, I'll never forget the nervous titters and guffaws from our guests as my father executed one of his signature soaring swan dives from the top of the tower, always performed in the raw.

Had my father done this at Sun Valley Gardens, of course, no one

would have batted an eyelash.

Sun Valley Gardens nudist resort was founded by a German couple named Karl and Marlies Ruehle on a secluded 24-acre site in Pelham in 1955. In the beginning there were only 18 members. When my father joined in 1960, that number had grown to over 100. According to Michael Ruehle, the owners' son, who wrote about his experience growing up at the resort for the *Voice* two years ago, at the club's peak in the early '60s to the mid-'70s, there were about 500 adult members. At one point it was believed that Sun Valley Gardens

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was one of the largest nudist clubs in North America, with members coming from all over Canada and the US. My father was a member of the resort twice, first from 1960 to 1963, and then again from 1966 to 1970. Unbeknownst to my mother, both times my father signed her up for a membership, too.

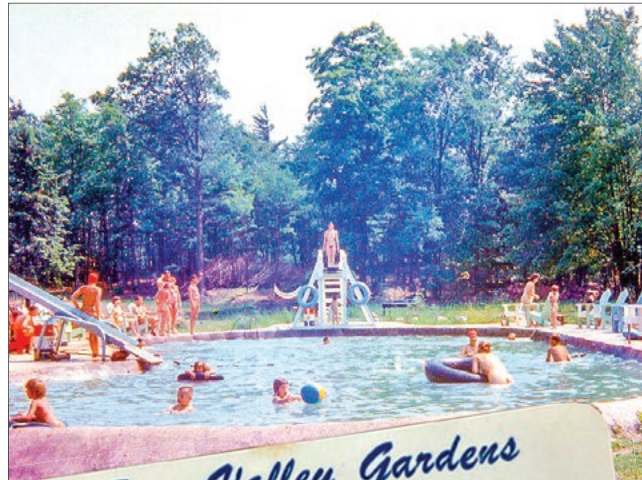
While the Sun Valley Gardens brochure I'd stumbled upon claimed that the pictures of the place will "let you see the wholesome and decency generated by human nudity," I'm pretty sure my father joined for the same reason that he took along a pair of his mother's opera glasses when the whole family went to see a production of *Hair* in Toronto at the Royal Alex in 1969: to see naked women. Before marrying my mother when he was 21, my dad had only kissed one other girl, a fact that I suspect by the time he hit his mid-30s, he was regretting. But when he finally got a chance to see naked women at Sun Valley Gardens, he confided to me years later that he had been a bit disappointed. "The women certainly weren't models," he said.

I suspect my father also joined to break up the monotony of his life. He was living in the same town where he had grown up, one that he had always yearned to escape. He was working at a dead-end job as a salesman for his father's wholesale food company. He was trapped in an unhappy marriage. I think he

saw Sun Valley Gardens as an escape, a means to spice things up.

I don't know what my father was thinking when he signed up my mother for a membership. When I was growing up, my siblings and I never once saw her naked. The closest I ever came to seeing her in the nude was when I was seven, when I walked into my parent's bedroom as my mother was getting dressed. She was in a bra and skirt, but given the look of panic in her face and how fast she moved to cross her arms over her bra you would have thought I was some thug who'd walked in off the street and caught her totally naked.

Despite my mother's ongoing refusal to visit Sun Valley Gardens, my father and the owners kept working on her to change her mind. Imagine my mother's astonishment when one day my father announced that the Ruehles themselves were going to be making a house call to show home movies and to preach to her about the benefits of nudism. My mother told me years later that she dreaded their visit and on the appointed day, stayed out shopping as long as she could in the hopes of missing them entirely. But when she got home, there were the Ruehles on our chintz couch in our living room, with big smiles, their movie projector set up and ready to go. My mother had no choice but to sit and squirm through their home movies about the joys of nudism. But in the end she was not swayed by their pitch. As



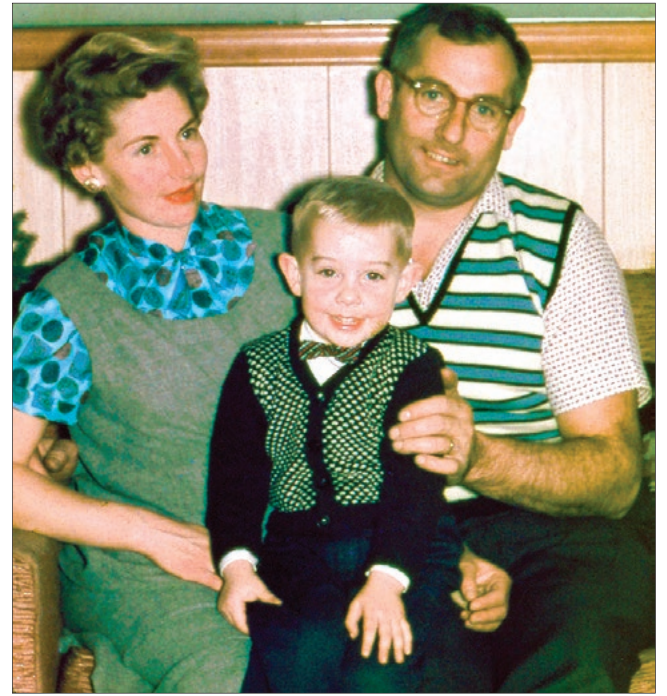
long as she lived, my mother never set foot inside the gates of SuVaGa.

Over the years though, she would make jokes about my dad belonging to a nudist club. Sometimes, out of the blue, she would warble, "Su-Va-Ga" (using my original pronunciation of the resort's acronym) to the tune of "Do-Re-Mi" from *The Sound of Music*. This would make everyone in the household, including my dad, break out into a fit of giggles.

Sun Valley Gardens did not permit single men to visit on their own, so my dad ended up going to the resort only a handful of times

during his lifetime. But that original Sun Valley Gardens brochure I had spotted in 1962 always remained a fixture on his desk, year in and year out, through the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, through the Vietnam War, and the Watergate hearings.

In 1977, my mother left my father for another man. This meant that in theory my father was free to find a partner who shared his enthusiasm for nudism. By that time, however, he'd developed an almost pathological fear of skin cancer. No more skinny dipping and diving during the daylight hours for him. When he went out in the sun, he



Above left, club members enjoy a dip, 1956. Above, Marlies and Karl Ruehle, and their son Michael. Left, the guest card kept by the author's father.

RUEHLE FAMILY ARCHIVES / VICTORIA BALFOUR

always covered up with long sleeves, long pants and a hat. After my mother left, he never returned to Sun Valley Gardens. The resort itself closed for good in 1982.

In 2013 my father died, at 90, from complications from a fall in my childhood home where he lived alone. He left behind a mountain of stuff collected over the years. In my childhood bedroom I found a 1962 *Life* magazine with a wistful looking Marilyn Monroe on the cover that I had loved to pore over in my father's study as a child. Even better: I found an old, unused guest card for Sun Valley Gardens. The message on the card, signed by owner Karl Ruehle in red

ink, does not mince words: "This one day visit is to introduce you to nudism."

I keep this Sun Valley Gardens Guest Card in a box with a brick from my childhood home that was torn down in 2014.

Like my mother, I've never visited a nudist resort and have no plans to. Nevertheless, along with his stint in the Navy during World War II and becoming a chartered accountant well into his 50s, I consider my father's long-ago membership in Sun Valley Gardens to be an essential and colorful element of his complex personal history, one of the many facets that made him who he was. ♦

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

**Annual Strengthening and Resurfacing Program**  
Various locations throughout the Niagara region  
Commencing Spring 2022 - weekdays

Motorists and the general public are hereby advised that Niagara Region's Annual Strengthening and Resurfacing Program has commenced. For updates on this project please visit [niagararegion.ca/roads](http://niagararegion.ca/roads). This project is required to increase the lifespan of the road sections by improving the structural integrity.

The proposed work includes:

- Replacing selected cross culverts
- Milling off the top course of asphalt or doing a cold in place strategy of the road section
- Repairing cracks in the base course asphalt and replacing concrete curbs that are in poor condition
- Paving new top course asphalt, line marking and adding granular to shoulders

Please expect traffic delays and that daily road closures and detours as identified will be required for paving operations during construction.

The contractors' anticipated hours of operation from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., weather permitting.

Businesses and residents will have access during the closure but may be directed to take an alternate route to get to their destination.

Emergency services will also have access if required.

Any inquiries concerning this project may be directed to Niagara Region Dispatch at 905-984-3690 or **Melissa Tomascik, C.E.T.**, Project Manager Transportation Engineering, at 905-980-6000 ext. 3189.

Your co-operation and patience during this period of inconvenience is appreciated.

Bruce Zvaniga  
Commissioner of Public Works (Interim)  
Niagara Region

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