

Seniors find friendship in Family Roots project

JENN WATT

Editor

Jackie Metcalf stood in front of the audience at the Haliburton Highlands Museum on Wednesday evening, beaming, as she held up a thick binder of papers.

"This is full," she said, holding it up so those in the back could see. "This is full with all the wonderful things she's helped me get and I'm just so delighted."

Metcalf was referring to her research partner, Maureen Blakelock, who was partnered with her through the Family Roots pilot project run for 12 months by SIRCH Community Services. The project paired volunteers trained in ancestry research with seniors in the community.

Together, they would research the senior's family history together over the course of many sessions.

As the project's co-ordinator Donna Gagnon pointed out, Family Roots was about more than finding long lost ancestors, it also reduced social isolation and loneliness.

"We did the connecting through family research, through genealogy," she said.

Metcalf said that she had found a new friend in Blakelock and that the time spent looking into her mother's side of the family had revealed details about her grandfather Simpson that she never knew. It also brought back fond memories.

"I enjoyed, honestly, every minute we were together for those 10 sessions because three or four hours would go by and we'd certainly say, 'what time is it?'" she said.

Some of the research revealed parts of the family tree previously unknown. For project partners Deborah Ouellette and Joan McDonald, research unveiled that McDonald, 98, had three half-siblings she never knew about.

"Unfortunately, those three children were placed in a Catholic orphanage, Joan was unaware that she had half-siblings before we started this journey," Ouellette said.

McDonald's father served in the First World War, as did her uncle, who died in the conflict. Once she became an adult, McDonald moved to Ontario to attend university.

Though she served as a deaconess for the Metropolitan United Church in Toronto, McDonald had to give up that job following her marriage to Dick McDonald in 1955.

"Because the church did not allow a woman to stay on as a deacon when they got married, she was defrocked," Ouellette said.

The couple had two children and Joan eventually became a teacher.

Another surprising discovery came when volunteer Sharon Foster and partic-



Deborah Ouellette, right, and Joan McDonald hold up some historical photos of McDonald's ancestors during the reveal night event. Research found half-siblings that McDonald never knew about. / JENN WATT Staff

ipant Chuck Viner decided to go beyond the scope of the project and submit their DNA for analysis.

"We were looking online at the DNA connections that we had and I can't even begin to tell you how shocked and surprised I was to discover that we're actually distant cousins," Foster said. "Where this connection is, is obviously going back seven or eight generations. ... I'm getting shivers down my back just talking about it because what were the odds of us being matched?"

Foster and Viner said during their weeks of working together they developed a rapport and now consider themselves "lifelong friends."

For Family Roots participant Ellie MacNeil, the project offered her new skills for doing her genealogy research and volunteer Carol Simmons helped her track down books that chronicled the history of her ancestors.

MacNeil, who grew up near Coboconk, was able to trace nine generations of her ancestors, the Orvis family, who travelled from the United States to Canada in the 1820s. The details of their journey amazed those in the room.

"They headed north, they took with them one horse team, one yoke of oxen, and household goods and family members. They crossed at Prescott. From Ferrisburgh [Vermont] to Prescott [Ontario],

that's 164 miles. From Prescott to Pickering's 199 miles. About 360 miles they travelled in five and a half days. That averages 48 miles a day," MacNeil said.

"Three days after they arrived in Pickering, she [Sarah Orvis] had her third child. These Quakers are tough people." Sarah would end up having 18 children during her life.

Family Roots also made connections with residents at Extendicare in Haliburton, where volunteers would visit and work to track down ancestors. David McGill was paired with Mike Sisson and spoke highly of the experience.

"Here was a chance to do something I like to do with people who need some connection to the outside world ... Then I met Mike. He really is a neat guy. ... He could take me back to his great-great-grandparents. He has that kind of memory," he said.

Together they traced Sisson's relatives back to 1871, when a father, five sons and a daughter left England, settling in the Manvers, Ont. area.

McGill said he and Sisson intended to continue with their work beyond the project.

Gagnon spent time with another Extendicare resident, Maria Basciano, 95, who speaks primarily Italian and French. With the help of her family members, Basciano was able to participate in Family Roots,

Gagnon explained.

Basciano was raised by her maternal aunt following the death of her parents.

"During our time together at Extendicare, Maria spoke often of how hard life was in Italy in the 1930s and 1940s. She worked in a factory and there was often not enough food to eat," Gagnon said.

Following the end of the Second World War, Maria and her husband settled in Scarborough.

"We were able to do a virtual drive one day using Google Maps through the village of Pont Canavese [Italy]," Gagnon said, adding it looks a bit like Haliburton.

Gagnon said she thought even though the project was over, volunteers would continue visiting the long-term care home. "Even though these people are together in a facility, they can still be very lonely," she said.

She thanked Nancy Brownsberger of Community Support Services, Tina Jackson from the Heat Bank, Margery Cartwright of the Aging Well Committee and Nancy Baker from the Family History Library in Cardiff for their help during the training portion of the program. She also thanked program partners Kate Butler of the Haliburton Highlands Museum and Haliburton Highlands CARP Chapter 54. SIRCH Family Roots was funded by a grant from Canada's New Horizons for Seniors.

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