

Who knew Spider-Man lived in Westboro?

BY CHARLIE SENACK

Jeffrey Laroque is a federal office employee by day and Spider-Man by night. When the Westboro dog dad is not hard at work for Agriculture Canada, he's shooting his webs for charity.

Laroque first fell in love with the marvel character after watching the first Spider-Man movie starring Tobey Maguire in 2002. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, he decided to purchase the superhero costume in summer 2021 and dress up for his nieces and nephews.

"People were generally not feeling well during the pandemic and it was a bad time. I built up the courage to go and take a walk out in the suit and chat people up. People stopped and took pictures. It got me thinking what more I could do with this," recalled Laroque.

The wannabe Spider-Man started filming videos to raise money for charity and soon started dressing up for community events. He later bought a better suit and launched a Facebook page in 2022 that has quickly been growing in popularity. In that time Laroque has raised over \$25,000.

"There are the core group of charities that I target like CHEO, the Distress Centre, Red

Cross, Ottawa Food Bank, Freedom Dog Rescue and Sit With Me Dog Rescue.

But if somebody wants to donate elsewhere, that's totally fine," he said.

Laroque grew up with dogs, and he began rescuing from local shelters about 10 years ago with his wife. The couple typically take in canines that are older or have other issues that might make them harder to adopt.

Danielle O'Leary, vetting director and chair at Sit With Me Rescue, said she admires Laroque for his kind heart.

"He adopted a dog who was not the easiest dog to adopt," said O'Leary. "After she passed away, he reached out and asked what our hardest dog was, the dog that's been in our care the longest with behavior and medical issues.

"That rarely ever happens," she continued. "When Scott was suggested to Jeff, he had no issues getting a dog that needed several meet-and-greets and more training at the start."

Local dog rescues have been facing new challenges lately. Economic pressures have resulted in higher bills and fewer donors, creating tough financial situations for



organizations like Sit With Me. O'Leary said the rescue is currently enduring their toughest months ever.

"As the vetting director, I book all our surgeries, dental and neuters. The average neuter can cost us between \$200 and \$500. Those funds can move pretty quickly," said O'Leary.

A recent fundraiser organized by Laroque was able to cover almost the entire \$3,200 vet bill for a dog with a triple hernia.

The premise of the Spider-Man film follows an apprehensive teenager named

Peter Parker who gains superhuman abilities after being bitten by a genetically engineered spider. With his new powers, the masked persona begins fighting New York's crime.

And while Laroque admits he doesn't plan to take on any bad guys in the future, he has started taking parkour classes to be a bit more like his fictional hero. Many kids who stop for pictures with the Kitchissippi superhero want to see their idol do some cool tricks.

"It's been a challenge. I think I'm a little bit older getting into it at 38, and I have a very big fear of hurting myself. The kids in these classes are nailing backflips and I have been trying for a year and a half and I'm still not there," he said.

But Dagan Mercury, owner of Ottawa Parkour near Westboro, disagrees. He said Laroque has been an inspiration to the younger generation and is always offering a helping hand.

"The nice thing about Jeff is you just need to say yes. He will come to me with a great idea that he's already set up," the parkour instructor said. "It's the sort of thing a lot of people would do once or twice to feel like they made a difference, but Jeff is truly dedicated to it. It means the world to him to make kids happy."

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Top: From left to right: Shelagh Jane Woods, Susan Brown, and Dianne Breton are set to walk over the Chief William Commanda Bridge on Sept. 8. Above: The bridge crossing is to raise awareness about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa and the work of the Stephen Lewis Foundation. PHOTOS BY AARON REID.

Granny advocates take to the Chief William Commanda Bridge for HIV/AIDS

BY CHARLIE SENACK

Ottawa grannies will be crossing the Chief William Commanda Bridge on Sept. 8 to raise awareness for the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Falling on National Grandparents Day, the walk is being organized by the Ottawa chapter of volunteer group One World Grannies. The group is just one in a network of "gran groups" in the Ottawa-Gatineau Region that are working to support and bring awareness to the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic, making up the global Grandmothers Advocacy Network.

Dianne Breton, who has been involved with the organization for about a decade, says One World Grannies is "all about advocacy."

"We will have some place where people can write their thoughts and notes in solidarity and pin it up," said Breton. "We are hoping people will walk and bike the whole way or at least to the island."

One World Grannies is inspired by the grandmothers and matriarchs who "stepped

in" as the AIDS pandemic began to sweep across Africa. As parents died from the disease, grandmothers began raising their grandchildren, One World says, keeping families alive while grieving their own children.

The early vision for the group started in 2006, three years after the HIV/AIDS grassroots organization Stephen Lewis Foundation was created. It brought 100 grandmothers from sub-Saharan Africa to Canada to meet with 200 grandmothers here.

Ottawa's Grannies were one of the first to start advocating and raising funds for African grandmothers. To date, over \$425,000 has been raised, and the chapter has supported national and international initiatives to improve access to medicine, education and the empowerment of older women.

"A lot of people think HIV and AIDS is over. There has been tremendous progress, but when you get to other countries (in) Africa where the devastation was so dramatic, there are other associated issues that go with it," said One World Grannies

member Shelagh Jane Woods.

In 31 African countries, it is still illegal to be gay. Some of the strictest laws are in Uganda, where Parliament passed the Anti-Homosexuality Act in March 2023.

The Act criminalized consensual same-sex conduct with maximum penalties of life imprisonment. Attempted homosexual acts face prison sentences of 10 years. In addition, the death penalty is on the table for those convicted of "aggravated homosexuality," which includes same sex acts with a person younger than 18, older than 75, or a person with a disability.

Susan Brown joined One World Grannies about two years ago, and she said many older African women have found their voice after being influenced by their Canadian supporters.

"They are becoming strong advocates for themselves. It's been a strong turning point and it's inspiring for us to see," she said. "Some have even started lobbying their politicians."

One World Grannies has raised funds in various ways, like with a market held at Lansdowne Park for over five years. The market sold a collection of new and used goods and food, but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the grannies had to get creative.

"What we've done for the last three years is have a cheese sale in December. We work with Abbaye St. Benoit in Quebec and we've been able to sell 600 boxes each year, raising over \$30,000," said Woods.

The Ottawa grandmothers say they are hopeful people crossing the bridge will stop to learn more about their initiative, donate to the cause, and perhaps join their seniors women's group.

"These are very poor countries with very unsafe conditions. The money we give to the foundation goes not only to treating AIDS patients but also to planting trees and building schools," Woods said. "The foundation is also very big in supporting LGBTQ+ communities in Africa, including in some countries where it's still illegal."

"I hope that people take away that there are huge unmet needs in parts of the world and that there are things that small donations can do to help," Woods continued. "We are here to help people help themselves."

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Why is HIV/AIDS progressively worse in Africa?

According to SOS Children's Villages, HIV and AIDS spread rampantly through Africa due to the polygamy and promiscuity practiced in different regions.

Due to poverty, prostitution is also widespread. The suitors are often men who move around freely in search of work and often have multiple sexual partners. It is also the country with the highest rates of rape in the world. In 2017, South Africa reported 70.2 per cent of rapes per 100,000 people compared to 1.4 per cent per 100,000 people in Canada (2012).

The World Health Organization suggests that 25.6 million Africans are currently dealing with AIDS. In 2022, about 380,000 people there died from AIDS-related infections.

HIV, which stands for Human immunodeficiency virus, is an infection that attacks the body's immune system, and progresses to AIDS at its most advanced stage. HIV targets the body's white blood cells, weakening the immune system, which makes it easier to get sick with diseases like tuberculosis, infections and some cancers. The disease is spread from the body fluids of an infected person, including blood, breast milk, semen and vaginal fluids.

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