

## LOCAL FUND-RAISER HELPS FILL RESTORED PIPE-ORGAN WITH A LITTLE “AYR”

-- Rescued and restored Canadian organ to be unveiled in October 14 dedication recital --

*Story and photos by Pauline Finch – Special to the Ayr News*

When St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church in Kitchener took the radical step of acquiring a second pipe organ a few months ago, the idea didn't strike a harmonious note with everyone in the congregation at first.

Why get another, when the one you already have is a fine Casavant? Aren't there other things an inner city church needs more? That's what longtime Ayr resident Allan McKay thought too, until he learned the full story of a special Canadian organ's past -- and its uncertain future after the Chatham Ont., church where it was housed closed down.

“You could say I became a convert,” the retired industrial chemist acknowledged. “I understand now how important it is to save something like this...”

Back in January, when St. John's congregation held their annual general meeting, parishioners were told that a 1977 hand-built mechanical tracker (non-electronic) pipe organ by Canadian maker Gabriel Kney had been disassembled last year and stored in a Chatham warehouse because no facility could be found to accommodate its 20-foot high by 12-foot wide structure. It could be acquired for a small fraction of its original cost, if the church could act quickly and decisively to save it before the instrument ended up being dispersed for parts, or even scrapped altogether.

McKay was intrigued, but concerned: his scientific training led him to pose many logistical questions that weren't precisely answered right away, while the churchman in him saw a rich opportunity to take a leap of faith that could reap great cultural and spiritual rewards. He went home still unsure of whether to support the organ project or not; but his dilemma was soon resolved by a phone call “that changed everything.”

Someone else had noticed McKay's passion for detail and understanding. The voice on the phone was that of St. John's music director, Marlin Nagtegaal, who besides being a virtuoso on the keyboard and pedals, knows his way around the complex internal mechanics of the “king of instruments.” Nagtegaal personally answered every query McKay could think of about the homeless organ, explaining as well the different styles of pipe organs, their history of longevity, and the advantages to both parish and city of having two excellent and unique instruments sharing the same space.

“It really impressed me, that someone would take the time to answer my questions so well,” McKay said. “And then he asked me if I would head the committee to raise funds for the organ!” Almost as quickly as a powerful chemical reaction, McKay moved from doubter, to convert, to leader.

In a sense, however, the “catalyst” for McKay's wholehearted adoption of the organ-rescue project was already in place. Although he and wife Anne have normally attended the spoken 8:00 a.m. service since joining St. John's in 1980, they occasionally go to the full musical liturgy, complete with choir and organ, at 10:00 a.m.

“One Sunday not too long ago, Marlin played an organ postlude that was so brilliant, I just had to write and compliment him ... His music was so inspiring, I wanted him to know that his skills are appreciated,” McKay recalled.

And like many have done since, the McKays donated to the \$55,000 bill for removing, storing, and refurbishing the Kney organ, even before an official fund-raising campaign got underway. Today, the church owes a mere \$20,000 on the project, which will officially wind up with a gala dinner in late November. If St. John’s had commissioned a similar handmade 1,200-pipe, 19-rank, two-manual tracker organ “from scratch,” the price would have soared well into the \$350,000-\$450,000 range.

Seeing an entire congregation come on side for a project that didn’t even make it into the parish budget line until this year doesn’t surprise McKay one bit. “When there’s a special project, St. John’s people always come through,” he said. “It sounded like such a great deal, we really couldn’t let it go.”

More importantly, he added, “I’m a strong believer in getting people at church to work together on something like this, because when they do, it brings them closer in their faith as well.”

McKay’s confident words have grown feet on many occasions since May 19, when more than a dozen volunteers got up before dawn to drive a small convoy of cars and a donated tractor-trailer rig to Chatham to load up the 6,500 lbs of organ parts and bring them back to Kitchener. Throughout the summer, a handful of dedicated volunteers worked with Nagtegaal and professional technician Les Smith of Fergus, Ont. (the only paid participant) to repair, restore, reassemble and revoice the instrument.

And in a spectacular finishing touch, more than 30 parishioners answered a last-minute appeal a couple of weeks ago to help at a Saturday morning pipe-polishing bee, ensuring that the outside of the instrument would look as beautiful as it sounded.

This isn’t the first time that St. John’s parishioners have taken on the seemingly impossible. For more than two decades the church hall hosted St. John’s Kitchen with The Working Centre, feeding hundreds of nourishing meals a week to the city’s homeless, impoverished and unemployed. And for even longer, the annual November “Pudding Factory” has been a tasty local tradition raising thousands of dollars for ministry outreach. Saving a unique Canadian pipe organ from oblivion has been just one more leap-of-faith challenge for the 151-year-old congregation.

And for Allan McKay, who is an accomplished woodworker-artisan between church projects, the “secret” to thriving as a volunteer is, “take on one project at a time, get it done right and then retire for a while.”

Since mid-September, the fruits of St. John the Evangelist’s “organic” labour-of-love have been shared with the entire congregation in a series of impromptu coffee-hour demonstrations.

Final touches to the pipe tuning, and a careful matching of the Kney organ's pitch to that of the existing Casavant will have both instruments in top musical form for a special dedication service and recital this coming Sunday at 3:00 p.m. Noted Canadian composer Barrie Cabena (also a former St. John's music director) is the featured guest artist and will give the world premiere of a new work for duo organs, created especially to showcase the colours of both instruments. Admission is free; donations to the Kney Organ Fund will be gratefully accepted.

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