

Visionary has big plans for Bracebridge

By Ken Black

Where in Muskoka can youth explore and acquire skills in computer animation? Where can emerging artists display, promote and sell their works? Where can anyone with an interest in architecture, science and nature complete research on their favourite topic from a private collection of several thousand books?

The short answer is Six Degrees Muskoka, right in the heart of downtown Bracebridge, just across from the old town clock tower. Best of all, this multi-disciplinary space is located in one of Muskoka's true historic sites, the former Queen's Hotel circa 1885.

Six Degrees Muskoka, which has a focus on culture and youth, is the brainchild of Don and Jen Skinner. It was founded on the belief that it is possible to not only provide young people with the opportunity to acquire skills, but also engage and empower them through mentorship, interaction and displaying the results of their efforts.

That approach reflects the writings of an Austrian by name of Karinyth who believed that despite the physical distances that separate people on this planet, human networks and the interactions that happen within them make those actual distances much smaller.

Karinyth's concepts were popularized in a play from the pen of John Guare that eventually became a 1993 award-winning movie entitled *Six Degrees of Separation*.

Within the 3,000 square foot space occupied by Six Degrees Muskoka is a 10-seat state-of-the-art digital studio operating under the name of Pixels on the Parallel. Described as a place "where anything is possible," it offers young people an introduction to computer animation using specialized software.

Special advisor on this part of the project is Michael Carter of theskonkworks, a successful computer animation firm in Burlington. Carter is also a faculty member in the highly regarded arts, animation and design department at Sheridan College.

However, the offerings at Six Degrees Muskoka are not limited to youth. A gallery will feature rotating content of contemporary and traditional works of arts. This gallery is intended to provide emerging artists and artisans of all ages the opportunity to interact with others while also displaying, discussing and selling their work.

The third component will be a unique private book collection whose contents can be explored by computer on-site, and eventually via the Internet. That collection was begun by Don Skinner Sr., a practicing architect in Toronto with a passion for books on a wide range of diverse topics. His original collection of over 4,000 books has been expanded over the years by his son.

Like so many others, the younger



Photograph: Zander Shuman

The inner workings of the clock tower is something most people don't see. Don Skinner, his wife Jennifer and their son Jasper hope to change that.

Don Skinner began his love affair with Muskoka shortly after his birth with trips to the family cottage. He completed his elementary and secondary education in Port Credit before studying art

took her to University of Western Ontario for studies in political science.

A chance reunion at the wedding of mutual friends led to their own wedding bells, more visits to Muskoka as

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and architectural history at Carleton University in Ottawa, and eventually completing his degree in architecture at Dalhousie University in 1993.

Don's wife Jen grew up in Oakville. Their paths first crossed in secondary school, before her academic interests

seasonal residents, and the eventual decision in 2001 to live and raise their family in Bracebridge.

Since their relocation to Muskoka, Don and Jen have been actively involved in the restoration of several Bracebridge landmarks, including the

former Muskoka Trading building and their current efforts at the old Queen's Hotel, renamed the Patterson Hotel several decades ago. Their to-do list includes the former Albion Hotel building just down the street and the original post office building. They also hope to rethink the community's relationship with the clock tower by revealing the inner workings of the clock in downtown Bracebridge to coincide with its 100th anniversary in 2014.

"The work and our program is a marathon as opposed to a sprint," Don Skinner explains. "These adaptive renewal projects take years – even more so when your starting point is 100 years or more old."

But their plans are not limited to restoration projects, as satisfying and worthwhile as that work may be. While both have a genuine respect for the past, and an avid interest in being stewards of local history and a sense of community, they are also advocates for the opportunities and challenges of the future.

As an architect, Don is committed to using current "best available practices" in the preservation of the old buildings with which he works. For example, the restoration of the Queen's Hotel will include the creation of what he describes as a "living, breathing wall" between the historic north and south halves of the original building.

Displaying the original brick/balloon frame construction popular at the time of construction, it will also serve as a thermal heat sink and conduit for a managed outdoor air exchange. New steel columns and beams supported by the underlying Canadian Shield bedrock will level the existing timber frame floors. The original bricks, stonework and maple flooring will be reclaimed and reused wherever possible throughout the building.

And looking ahead, Don and Jen speak passionately about some of the "touchstones" they see in the future. An "urban observatory" could give a community access to observations of space and gazing at the stars through digital technology. Such an observatory could be housed and shielded from unwanted light by a steel "roof-top ribbon" which also serves to collect solar energy.

A "core water and heat management" strategy could capture heat from solar panels and also provide cooling capacity through underground tanks.

Down the road, Six Degrees Muskoka could reach out to communities within Muskoka and around the globe through technology and art, as well as programs that empower youth and promote social thinking.

And it could all happen in the venue of a restored building well into its second century of serving the community, bringing people, ideas and culture together, just as it did over a hundred years ago.