

**Nomination
Category**

Arts



Don & Jen Skinner

Don and Jen Skinner wanted a more hands-on role in their Muskoka business and a different environment for their children, so they relocated from the GTA to Bracebridge over five years ago.

Owners of a number of historic properties in Bracebridge, the Skinners are focused on preserving the architectural and cultural heritage of the downtown while revitalizing and rethinking how the buildings are used.

With those goals in mind, the Skinners created Six Degrees Muskoka, an

arts hub at the old Queens Hotel building on Manitoba Street which features an art gallery, retail space, an arts/architecture/culture reference library, and a 10-seat digital animation studio which offers classes for children.

Don and Jen draw on their respective backgrounds in architecture and interior design and in the arts. Together they combine their training and experience with the belief that people, art, the environment, ideas and commerce are all closely interrelated. The name Six Degrees Muskoka reflects that vision by alluding to a French philosophy that everyone on Earth is connected through no more than six other people.

"In Muskoka there's lots of these relationships," Don Skinner says. "We encounter them everyday in what we're doing."

The Skinners are conscious of their role as stewards of an important part of Bracebridge's architectural heritage and have an ambitious 10-year plan to revitalize Bracebridge's historic downtown core.

"We're doing this for the enjoyment of it, not the recognition or notoriety," says Don Skinner. "We're just trying to do the right things."

Community Advocate



Don and Jen Skinner

As the son of an architect who owned rental properties, Don Skinner's career choice is a natural fit. Skinner, who is an architect, owns the Skinner Properties with his wife, Jen. They have holdings in Mississauga and Bracebridge.

The Skinners are three years into a 10-year plan to revitalize the downtown core of Bracebridge by refurbishing five historic buildings they own, which are mostly clustered around the intersection of Taylor

Road and Manitoba Street. The space that used to be Al Beverley's lighting store has been renovated into Six Degrees Muskoka, an art gallery, library and computer animation studio.

"There's a lot more here in Muskoka than meets the eye," says Don Skinner, who first visited Muskoka when he was just an infant.

Today he calls the district home, along with his wife Jen and their sons, Indigo, 8, and Jasper, 5.

"It seemed like a wonderful environment to raise kids, in terms of smallness of community, intimacy of relationships and community values," he says.

The Skinners see preserving historical heritage, and connecting it with the present and future, as important.

"We have a master vision of how these things will tie together as a campus that celebrates technology, the future, creativity and the past," says Skinner, who sees well beyond his 10-year plan. "I'm not going to get off the train in 10 years. I can see where this is going to go to."