

# Carrying on mother's legacy

Green Gables guest house owners honouring mother's dying wish, while adding their personal musical twist

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM  
PHOTOGRAPHY • TOMASZ ADAMSKI

**M**usicians Jennifer Stacey and Len McCarthy hadn't planned to become the keepers of a grand, old home in downtown Kitchener that has hosted guests for decades.

But "life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans," says McCarthy, quoting John Lennon's song, "Beautiful Boy."

"It wasn't what we planned, but it's feeling right," Stacey says.

As the married couple works to fulfil the fervent, last wish of Stacey's dear mother, Margaret Stacey, the home's previous owner, they're writing a new chapter for Green Gables Executive Guest House, and for themselves.

Take a peek behind the Queen Street North property at an attractive, smaller, stuccoed building and you will discover their idea to offer even more opportunities for our music-rich community to enjoy making music.

Jennifer Stacey holds a photo of her mother, Margaret, while standing in front of Green Gables Executive Guest House on Queen Street North in Kitchener.



**TOP:** The main floor of Green Gables, the Queen Street guest house.

**RIGHT:** Jennifer Stacey and Len McCarthy speak with Anna Saechao, housekeeper at Green Gables since 2009.



Stacey and McCarthy are professional musicians and experienced, certified teachers.

Stacey is a retired teacher of music and gifted children in public schools. McCarthy is an accredited music therapist and contract course director/instructor who has taught music at seven Ontario universities. For 25 years, Stacey (voice and percussionist) and McCarthy (bass, electric keyboards, saxophone) performed in a five-person cover band, "Party Lights," at gigs in the Greater Toronto Area. The couple combined parenthood with their musical careers when their son and daughter were children.

Married 39 years, they lived in Markham in a house they'd upgraded with a new kitchen and windows.

Green Gables Executive Guest House, a stroll away from Centre in the Square, the art gallery and Kitchener's main library on tree-lined Queen Street North, was the cherished home of Stacey's mother, Margaret, until her death on April 23, 2015.

For more than 30 years, the three-storey, 6,000-square-foot, Tudor-style house with three gables was also a home away from home for long-term visitors, many of whom Margaret delighted in welcoming back as her friends year after year. She bought the house in 1982 when she was manager of the regional Canada Employment Centre in Kitchener.

When Margaret learned she had terminal cancer in early 2015, one of her first concerns was the future of her stately home. The 85-year-old British-born woman, described by family and friends as decisive, smart, social, generous and possessing a dry wit, worried about her guests who had booked their stays or functions at the house long in advance.

"When she found out she had two to three months to live, her question was: 'What will happen to the house?'" Jennifer says.

"This was her house but she felt she was sharing it," Len says. "People became part of her extended family. For the time they were here, this was their home."

Margaret hoped Jennifer and Len would carry on her legacy of hospitality.

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She wanted housekeeper Anna Saechao, who had worked with her since 2009, to continue her meticulous job of caring for the house, with its three marble fireplaces, high ceilings, hardwood floors, antique furnishings, sunny conservatory and yard shaded by towering fir trees.

She hoped Sharon Walsh, who worked part time at the house for 17 years, would continue her job as valued caterer, meeting with clients, planning, grocery shopping and cooking for functions.

“She said: ‘No, we will not cancel,’ ” says Saecheo, remembering her conversation with Margaret in the hospital. “She said: ‘They need my house.’”

**ABOVE:** Guests can relax in the sunny conservatory. **LEFT:** One of three marble fireplaces.

“She said: ‘If my daughter and son-in-law carry on, I’d be so happy.’ ”

Saechao and Walsh agreed to stay on if Jennifer and Len decided to continue Margaret’s legacy.

“This place feels like my own home,” Saecheo says. “I feel like it’s my own family.”

Walsh, an experienced caterer who has retired from her full-time work, says Margaret helped with food preparation and setting tables.

“She had very specific ideas of how things were to be done,” she says. “She always put so much cutlery on the table and it was always a joke with us,” she says with a laugh. “She liked the proper way.”

Guests felt connected to Margaret and the big, comfortable house where they could sit before dinner or wander around. One family came every Christmas for a big

turkey dinner, Walsh says. “They’d open presents. It was like grandma’s house.”

Margaret “loved being out with the clients. She was out making sure everything was OK. I think clients appreciated her hospitality and allowing them to use her home and enjoy her home,” says Walsh, who at the time of the interview was preparing for about 50 guests for a meeting of the Waterloo chapter of the Congress of Black Women. It was a group that Margaret enjoyed immensely, she says. A group of nurses who graduated in 1957 had been meeting at the house every year for 20 years to catch up with each other.

“She very much treated them like family when they were there,” Walsh says.

To be with her ailing mother and help with the house, Jennifer took a three-month leave of absence from teaching with the York Region District School Board.

Len, who was studying for his master’s degree in music therapy at Wilfrid Laurier University, did chores and stayed overnight when he could. Previously, Len had contract positions teaching music courses at universities that included Laurier, University of Waterloo and University of Guelph over a 10-year period. In October 2015, he graduated and began working at Expressions Music Therapy Services in Kitchener.

**T**he more time that Len and Jennifer spent in Kitchener, the more they appreciated Waterloo Region’s rich musical landscape, its farmers markets and friendly neighbourhoods.

They agreed that with help from “Mother’s great team,” they would assume ownership of the guest house. The decision was firm, but not easy. “There was a lot of: ‘What are we doing? Are we able to do it?’ ” Jennifer says.

They moved to Kitchener at the beginning of August 2016 and sold their Markham home the following December.

Guests continue to book their visits, though the couple may change the focus, for now, from longer-term to shorter stays.

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**ABOVE:** 'I see this as a community music centre. People who want to make music can come together here,' Jennifer Stacey says of the new music teaching studio, called Music @ Green Gables.

**INSET:** An old school desk, cleaned up and stained by Len McCarthy, is now a working sink in the music room.

Margaret had six rooms to let; now there are three. Jennifer and Len occupy the third floor. Events such as weddings, birthdays, Christmas dinners and meetings are continuing with Walsh's steady hand in the house's small but efficient kitchen.

It's going to be the same, but different. "How can we honour Mother but still be ourselves?" Jennifer says.

Their answer was to renovate the upper storey of the three-car garage behind the house into a music studio that they hope will become a kind of community space.

"The studio is to put our stamp on it a little bit. It stays the same but incorporates us too," Jennifer says.

In June, as workers applied stucco to the garage's exterior, (a little later than planned due to rain delays), Jennifer and Len described their music teaching studio, called Music @ Green Gables.

The studio, whose architect is friend and fellow musician Stephen King, is reached by outside stairs and though it isn't wheelchair accessible, the living room in the house is accessible, Jennifer says.

The garage studio has lots of light with rear windows and three dormer windows in the front that match the house's front windows. There's a bathroom, radiant heating and air conditioning.

The approval process went smoothly because they worked closely with the City of Kitchener and took the designs to neighbours, Len says.

The couple credits Pioneer Craftsmen Ltd. for doing a great job carrying out their ideas for the space.

They want the studio to be a place where people can learn new instruments or take up old ones again; sing songs; be a part of a group; join a ukulele or singing club. They're thinking about making the space available to chamber groups and offering workshops to music therapists and others interested in augmenting their skills.

They'll give lessons, but they won't be formal; they'll be more like "porch parties," Jennifer says. They are interested in all

types of instruments and music, including jazz, blues and reggae, and hope to begin classes in October.

"I see this as a community music centre. People who want to make music can come together here.

"We want it to be more of a community leisure thing. Music should be available to everybody."

They regard Waterloo Region as a good place to launch their dream. "The population supports music in a big way," Len says.

Len, 63, and Jennifer, 62, have a lot to give. Jennifer is working on a master of arts in community music at Laurier. She teaches York University courses for music teachers adding qualifications. As well as being a music therapist, Len is a songwriter, composer, arranger and producer. He also has a PhD in ethnomusicology and a master's degree in music education.

Recently, he won the 2017 songwriting competition of the World Federation of Music Therapy to celebrate World Music Day. His song, "Music, Musica, Hudba," will be played at the opening of the world congress in Japan this summer.

He plays keyboard in the Cyril Way Band in Toronto headed by a friend from Newfoundland.

Amy Clements-Cortes, a music therapist at Baycrest Health Sciences in Toronto and president of the World Federation of Music Therapy, praised the couple for "opening up new possibilities for people who want to engage in music in the area.

"I think it's great they're taking the initiative and they're well qualified to do it," says Clements-Cortes, a performer, vocal instructor, researcher and university educator who taught Len at Laurier and now teaches Jennifer in the master's community music program.

"They have a connection to the community."

It's turning out all right, Jennifer agrees.

"I'm not superstitious, but you know how the universe sends little things?" One day, a stranger stopped to chat while



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Jennifer Stacey looks over the drawings for the music studio, which is in the upper level of the garage in the background, with architect, friend and fellow musician Stephen King.

Jennifer was working in the garden. She happened to be connected to the Waterloo-Wellington chapter of Orff, which is a method of teaching music to children using movement, singing and instruments. Jennifer is an Orff specialist.

Love of community drove Margaret's plans for the property too. When Margaret bought the house – previous owners had turned it into a nursing home called Green Gables Manor – she thought it could be a guest house down the road, but only after she retired. However, the story goes that a visiting professor from England desperate for temporary lodging convinced her to open her doors early. He became the first of many professionals who stayed at Green Gables while Margaret restored it to its “quiet elegance.” Later, the house received the Mike Wagner Heritage Award from the City of Kitchener.

“The demand snowballed after that first guest,” Jennifer says. The house, with its three-metre-wide front door of wood and latticed glass, has a distinguished history. It was built between 1906 and 1911 when Caroline Breithaupt Augustine, a widow with three children, bought it and moved her family in. Augustine's family members were among the pioneers of Kitchener's tanning industry. Green Gables' subsequent owners included Lang Tanning owner Jerome Lang and his cousin, Joseph, and then Alfred and Caroline Wintermeyer whose son, John, became the leader of the Ontario Liberal party. The house was more likely called Green Gables because of its three green, gabled windows at the front of the house than because of Lucy Maud Montgomery's book, “Anne of Green Gables,” which was published in 1908, Jennifer says. Jennifer thinks the imposing house may have reminded her mother of the

time when, at age 10, she was evacuated from her home in London, England, to a similar-looking home. Today, there's a grandfather clock in Green Gables' hallway that reminded Margaret of the clock she wound when she was a child in that house.

Jennifer remembers Margaret as a strong provider after Jennifer's father, a scientist for the Defence Research Medical Laboratories in Toronto, died in 1966. Jennifer was 11 and her brother, Jonathan, was in England. Margaret was working at a Canada Employment Centre and she owned a children's clothing store.

“How many housewives in the late '50s open a children's store?” Jennifer says, adding her mother earned her bachelor of arts degree in the early 1970s.

Jennifer laughs when she imagines her mother's reaction to a requirement at her first job at a women's clothing store in downtown Toronto in the 1950s. “You had to wear suits and she was told to add padding to her backside.”

Margaret rose through the ranks at the Canada Employment Centre to attain a high-level position. “In my opinion, she was a real feminist,” Len says.

“She had always been strong. If she saw something, she did it. When we first came to Canada, I was three years old,” Jennifer recalls. “When we got to the airport, there was a welcome centre. The woman there was so overwhelmed that she (Margaret) helped behind the counter.

“She was a person of action.” Margaret applied her strong will to her health, but she couldn't beat the prognosis. She struggled to get better and was frustrated when she didn't. “She kept planning for things in September, October and November,” Jennifer says.

The couple is excited about the opportunity to continue Margaret's legacy and add to Green Gables' history.

“After we're long gone, I guess that we'll be part of the story of the house,” Len says. 

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