

Gerontology student bringing joy through robocats

SUE TIFFIN

Staff Reporter

A few years back, researchers in southwest England invited a group of people aged 60 to 99 at a supported living retirement complex to interact with eight different toys, each of them at a separate station. As participants moved around the room engaging with the toys, which included lifelike robotic companions designed to look like a seal, a dog and a cat, as well as less interactive toys like a plastic dinosaur and a knitted hedgehog, researchers filmed the activity and later led the seniors in a group discussion and debrief of their experiences.

Amongst the 17 participants, more than half most preferred their time spent with the toys that were familiar, soft, interactive and lifelike, choosing as their favourite the cat, followed by the dog – robotic companion toys that were created under the Hasbro name and are quickly becoming a common support in long-term care homes and assisted living facilities.

It's a study that drew the attention of Lynda Williams, a Haliburton resident who is studying for her second degree during her retirement and, in her downtime, organizing an online fundraiser to help purchase 25 Joy for All cats for local long-term care homes.

"It's just awesome how these things work," said Williams. "They're so interactive, it's really quite amazing."

Williams was a teacher at J. Douglas Hodgson, though at the time of her teaching career which began when she was 19, it wasn't yet necessary to have a degree.

"I always thought, I'd really love to go to university," she said. "Once I hit 60, I thought, I'd really love to go to university."

After doing some research, Williams found that two universities in Ontario waived the tuition fees for seniors and so found herself in her 60s earning her first degree –



Robotic companion cats are soft, lifelike, and respond to touch and interaction, making them a comforting addition to long-term care homes where residents might be feeling isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Haliburton resident Lynda Williams hopes to bring 25 of the cats to local long-term care homes. /Submitted photo

in religious studies with a minor in women's studies – in 2015. When she found out that four-year degrees were being offered online, she enrolled again, and is currently studying a major of gerontology with a minor in Indigenous studies.

"This will be my second degree through Laurentian [University] because I wanted an honours," she said. "Because who knows, I might go on to my Master's, I'm not sure. That's kind of the hope."

Williams, who is 70 and whose mom is 93, said gerontology was of interest to her in part because of the conversation toward looking at how aging well and living in

a congregated living setting can be done "in a different way, in a more gentle way, in a more inclusive way," to allow for autonomy for seniors as they age.

As she studied, she became interested in research done on the positive effects of roboanimals – most of it recent, conducted in the past decade or so.

"At the beginning they were using them mostly for dementia patients but now they're finding how good they are just for anybody," she said. "I've seen them in person, so I know if you touch here, it looks at you, if you touch somewhere else, it'll roll over because it wants its belly rubbed, and it will meow. It's fairly good that way, even when you just see it, and it feels really nice, which is a big change from what there used to be ... Because of how they're lifelike, how they look lifelike, they feel lifelike, and what they do is lifelike."

In some states, including New York and Florida, the robotic companion animals have been distributed to long-term care homes where isolation during the pandemic is causing stress for residents at a time with fewer visitors, including live therapy animals. The Joy for All line in particular was first introduced, to great success, in Dec. 2015.

"Within the first few months, the effects that these products were having on aging loved ones and their families was undeniable," reads the Joy for All website. "Stories and testimonials from caregivers on the positive impact on isolation, loneliness, and all forms of cognitive decline continued to validate what the team had believed all along – that the power of play was relevant at all stages of life."

While our local long-term care facilities do have access to some robocats, Williams said she wanted to ensure there would be enough animated companion pets to help those who are most feeling the effects of isolation

see COMPANION page 5

Dysart sees more than \$58 million in new development in 2020

MIKE BAKER

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

While COVID-19 ensured that most people couldn't wait to see the back of 2020, Dysart et al's chief building official noted there were some positives to come out of the pandemic-ridden year.

Karl Korpela informed Dysart council last month that it had been a busy year for development in the local community.

In total, the municipality issued 508 building permits in 2020 with new investments coming in at just over \$58 million.

"It was definitely a busy year considering the COVID-

19 restrictions on [new] building we had for just over a month," Korpela said. "We had a couple of record setting months for building permit issuances."

There were 24 new primary dwellings and 55 new seasonal dwellings built in Dysart over the course of 2020. While not as high as previous years – there were 143 total new dwellings constructed in 2019 and 102 constructed in 2018 – Korpela indicated the major reason for that is there were no new multi-unit residential building applications in 2020.

In his analysis to council, Korpela pointed out an "interesting" pattern he's seen emerge in recent years.

"Any time we don't have a major development, like a multi-dwelling unit project, we typically have twice as many seasonal dwellings built as primary units," Korpela said.

Dysart mayor Andrea Roberts was pleased to hear that people are continuing to invest money in the community.

"Overall, it looks like 2020 was a fantastic year [for development] considering it was a pandemic. People are still investing in our community, either wanting to renovate what they have, or build," Roberts said. "I don't have a crystal ball for COVID-19, but I would sure bet building permits for 2021 will be right up there again."

post house
HALIBURTON HIGHLANDS

Gourmet To-Go

Italian Festa Menu
Now Available!

Order by noon on
February 15 for pick-up
between February 18-20

HALIBURTONPOSTHOUSE.CA
DAN.SANDERS@HALIBURTONPOSTHOUSE.CA
(416) 432-4058

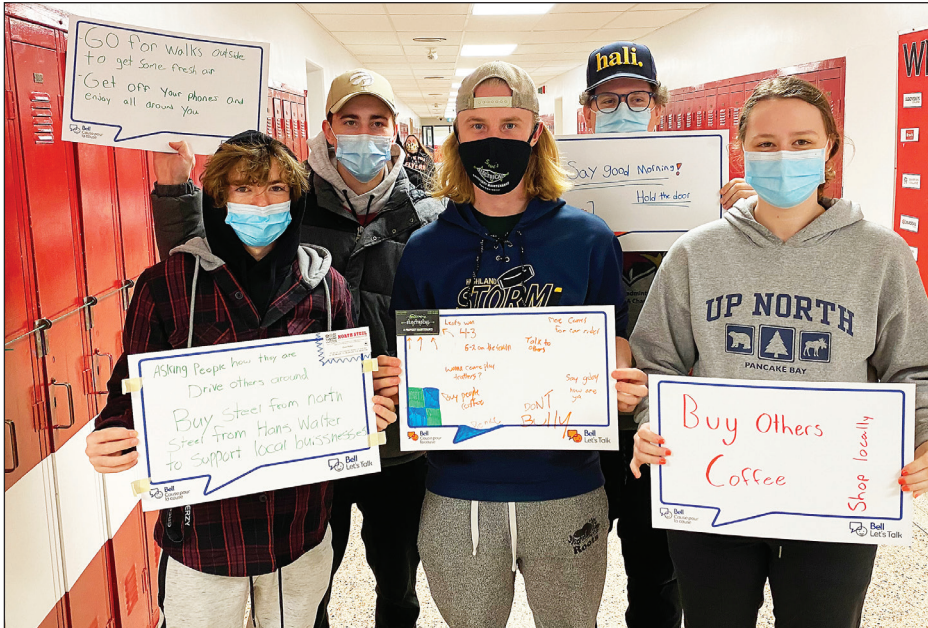
Norm Barry Hot Tub Full Service Maintenance

Weekly / Bi-weekly Water Analysis & Chemical Balancing on all hot tubs
Bromine • Chlorine • Salt Water
Full line of Products

Call or text
Norm Barry
705 457 0153

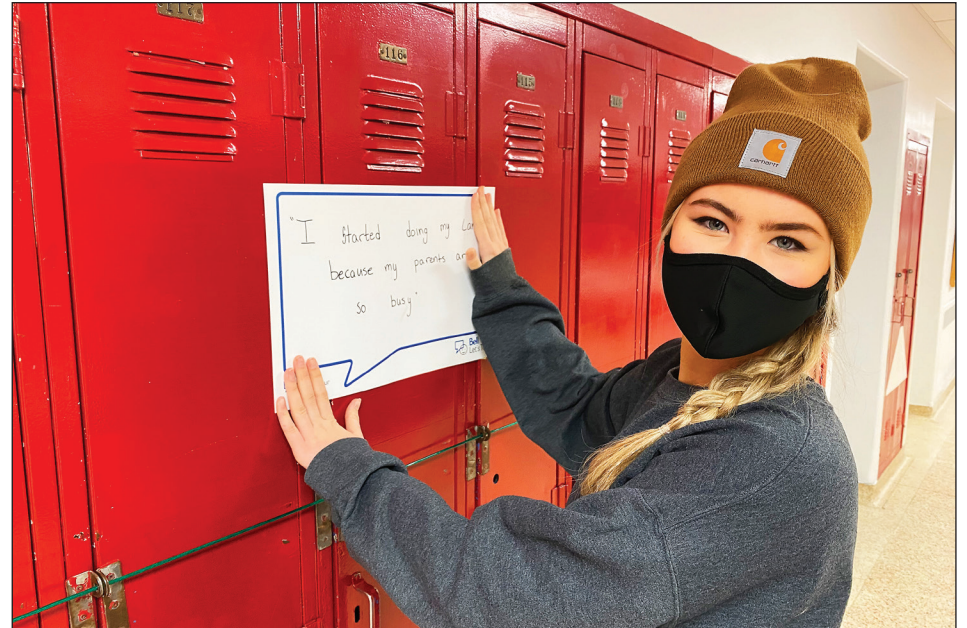
info@normbarry.com
www.normbarry.ca

Relax Let me do the work!



Red Hawks show support

Students Devon Garbutt, from left, Zach Morissette, Brendan Coumbs, Tyler Martin, and Jamie Coltman, who are all from the same cohort, hold Bell Let's Talk signs with messages of support and suggestions for mental health on Jan. 28 to coincide with Bell Let's Talk Day. Bell Let's Talk Day is a national campaign to help with raising awareness and offering words of support through social media for those struggling with mental health, which is further supported by Bell Canada from their financial donations to mental health initiatives. At the school, posting the signs in the hallways was started by the leadership class taught by Paul Longo. Vice-principal Jenn Mills wrote, "It shows that great conversations are happening in classrooms and hallways to help break the stigma!" Mills added the school and the TLDSB "have a number of initiatives throughout the year to support student and staff mental health and well being and also to destigmatize mental illness, for example Children's Mental Health Week in May. /Submitted by Jenn Mills.



Haliburton Highlands Secondary School student Summer Clark posts a Bell Let's Talk sign on Jan. 28 to coincide with Bell Let's Talk Day.

Companion animals help calm, comfort

from page 3

and loneliness during the pandemic citing research that suggested people felt "a sense of calm or comfort as a result of holding, hugging or affectionate interacting with this pet," and "improving in mood, a calming influence." She found an Ontario supplier, and worked out details, including a small discount for the bulk purchase - Williams's goal is to bring 10 each of the Joy for All creatures to Extendicare and Hyland Crest, and five to Highland Wood. But at \$250, plus tax and shipping, per robo-cat, she began reaching out to the community for support through a GoFundMe page, hoping to raise \$5,500 to cover the cost of purchase and shipping of the "furry, fantastic, meowing and purring robocats."

The companion animals can be washed and sanitized, and Williams said the cats might help the residents who receive less phone calls and visits than others, until all residents are vaccinated and they can be shared more freely.

But it's not just because of the pandemic that Williams has launched the

robocats campaign - she said once she did the research and found out how valuable the animatronic animals are to the elderly, she felt compelled to bring them to those in need of some extra comfort. It's long been her nature to help - as a teacher, she tried to support students in need, and appreciates community fundraisers like service club road tolls.

"We're a small community and if we don't support the needs of our community, who is going to?" she asked.

The fundraising campaign to help bring animated companion pets to local long-term care homes began last week, with help sorting out the online fundraiser from Williams's daughter, Heather.

"Share with your friends, put it on your Facebook if you feel comfortable doing so, please get the word out there, thank you very much for anyone who donates," said Williams. "I'm truly thankful for any amount, because pennies make dollars, and dollars keep going."

For more information or to donate, visit <https://www.gofundme.com/f/life-like-Cuddly-cat-Companions-for-LTC-residents>.

HHHS confirms negative results for COVID-19 testing of Hyland Crest staff

Haliburton Highlands Health Services (HHHS) confirmed on Sunday [Feb. 7] that the COVID-19 tests of all staff at Hyland Crest in Minden have come back negative.

"Obviously this is a tremendous relief for everyone but it does not lessen the need for vigilance with infection prevention and control measures. The staff across our entire organization have been doing an exemplary job to date in this regard and I know that we will all continue to do so," said Carolyn Plummer,

president and CEO.

HHHS will continue to closely monitor residents who will remain in isolation for the remainder of the declared outbreak. Staff and essential caregivers, who provide important physical and emotional support to long-term care residents, will continue to participate in mandatory screening as directed by the Ministry of Long-Term Care.

Submitted



Order early for the best selection this Valentine's Day!

Pre-order by phone 705 457 3774
Curbside Pick-up & Delivery

Spring seeds have arrived, organic and GMO free

Country Rose
FLOWERS & GARDEN

13513 Hwy 118 W. Haliburton • www.countryroseflowers.ca

9TH ANNUAL



3

FINAL DRAWS!



HALIBURTON HIGHLANDS HEALTH SERVICES FOUNDATION

Final draws February 15, 2021

★ \$20,000 ★ \$2,000 ★ \$1,500

Call 705-457-1580 to purchase tickets or visit hhs.ca/foundation for more information

Funds raised support the purchase of important medical equipment for health care in the Haliburton Highlands




License N° M819764

Charitable N° 89028 0449 RR0001