

FIRST PERSON

Growing up with nudists

Michael Ruehle, son of Sun Valley Gardens owners, recalls his childhood on 25-acre nudist camp

BY MICHAEL RUEHLE
SPECIAL TO THE VOICE

Michael Ruehle, son of Sun Valley Gardens owners, recalls his childhood on 25-acre nudist camp

My parents moved to Fenwick from Toronto in about 1955-56 to operate a nudist camp — a bit unusual in those days I guess, but my father had had this plan since his youth in Germany, where it was already a fairly popular idea. He had found out that a small group of people from Fonthill, St. Catharines, and Toronto had started to gather on some land on Roland Road, and my parents acquired the property, I believe in 1955. They called it Sun Valley Gardens and started to make significant improvements.

At its peak, from the early '60s to the mid-'70s, there were about 500 adult members, and it was one of the largest nudist clubs in North America, with members coming from as far as Toronto, Montreal, Boston, and Cleveland—even annual seasonal visitors from Los Angeles and Florida. It was so well-known that we once received a letter sent from West Africa which was addressed just, "Sun Valley Gardens, Canada." The post office in Montréal marked it "try Toronto," Toronto marked it, "near St. Catharines," and of course, St. Catharines knew where to send it.

I was born in 1957 and lived on the property full time until I left to go to Toronto. An interesting childhood, I would say.

I attended Law's School for Grades 1 and 2, and then Hansler, South Pelham, Pelham Center, senior public school in Fonthill, Pelham High (until it closed when I was in Grade 11), graduated from E. L. Crossley in 1976, then moved to Toronto for university.

I kept a cottage on the property and stayed there off and on until about 2007, when the property was sold, shortly after my father, Karl, passed away in 2006. My mother, Marlies, passed away just last year, in May. (I'm writing this on Dec. 26, 2020, which would have been her 89th birthday.)

From the very beginning, rather than be secretive, my father took the opposite tack. He made a point of advertising an "open house" weekend so all the neighbors, local politicians, and news media could come and see the place.

He did this twice. The first time, any members who chose to be there that weekend remained fully clothed to avoid any risk of over-reaction from the police. In the event, it went really well and some 2000 people toured the place. People realized that it wasn't a wild sex club or anything, and the press was generally complimentary.

The second time, he had everyone sign a waiver at the entrance that they were aware there would be nudity. Both events were very successful and meant that instead of being harassed, the place was quite quickly accepted by the authorities. In fact, as a direct result,

there was a core of members who were locals from Pelham, Welland, and St. Catharines, most of whom kept it a bit quiet. My father was also very astute about the value of positive media coverage, and welcomed visiting interviewers from CHCH-TV, the CBC on multiple occasions (notably June Callwood's interview), and from some of the Buffalo stations. I'd say our membership was divided about equally between the Canadians and Americans from the Niagara Falls, Buffalo and Rochester area.

Back when Sun Valley Gardens was in full swing as a nudist camp, the Niagara Regional Police used to come visit now and again. My father was on pretty good terms with them, which meant he could count on help if there were any nosy youth (you guys know who you were) trying to sneak onto the property for a peek. Whenever a new officer was hired, it was part of the hazing to take him out, without any heads-up, to the camp. Generally the senior guy would say it was, "to get to know the rural parts of Niagara better." At some point the senior officer would say, "Let's get a coffee," and the junior officer would of course wonder where there was coffee, out in the middle of nowhere. So they'd drive out Roland Road to the front gate, ring the bell and talk to my dad, who'd buzz them in. The junior officer was still unaware, because the "Sun Valley Gardens" sign is ambiguous. They would drive up the long curved driveway and, when they got to the parking area by the clubhouse, the junior guy's eyes would bug out because, of course, /naked people/ were walking around!

My father would meet them at their car in his famous "rubber boots and nothing else," and escort them down to the snack bar beside the pool area, where the police officers would sit and chat with my parents and some of the other folks while drinking their coffee and having a piece of cake.

My father encouraged these visits, of course, because (a) it meant the police were accepting of nudist things and knew firsthand that there was no weird stuff going on (okay, naked is weird for most of you, but nothing /really/ weird) and (b) if there was an emergency they all knew how to get there fast.

Many people wonder about how folks got to be nudists and join the club. In those days, well before social media, my father would run advertisements that were more or less specific, depending on where they ran. Some would be in the various nudist magazines of the time, and these would basically say, "Come visit Sun Valley Gardens, the best nudist camp near Toronto and upstate New York."

He also ran ads in some of the regional newspapers (not all permitted it), that would be a bit more discreet: "Enjoy a carefree lifestyle at Sun Valley, Canada's best fami-



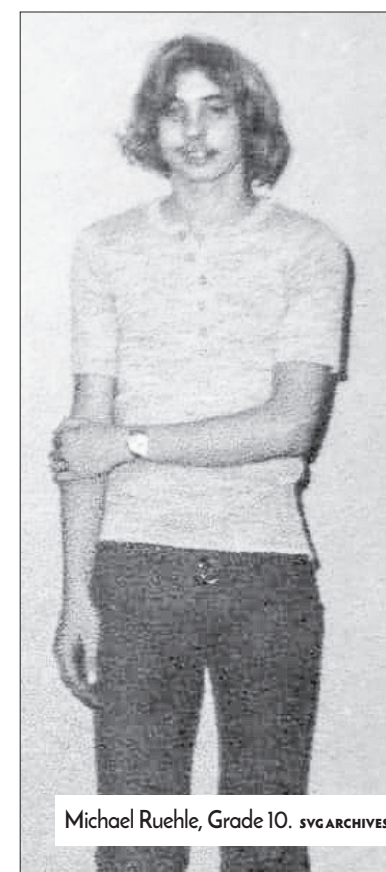
Poolside in 1965.

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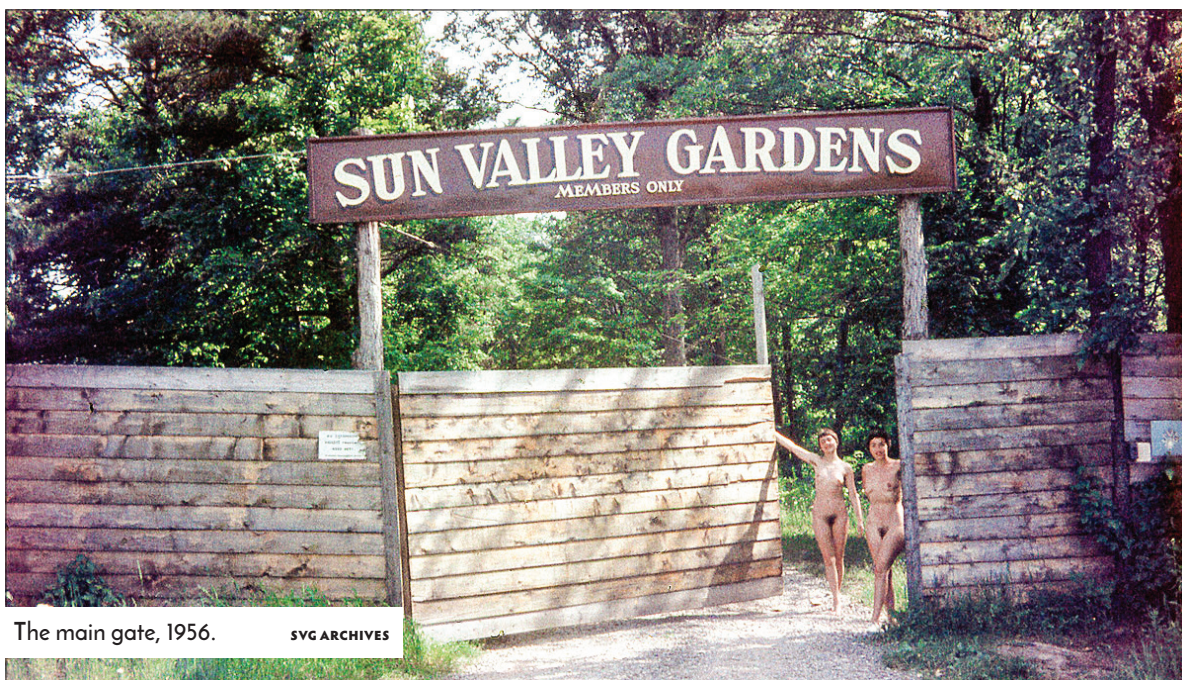
Michael Ruehle, with his parents, Marlies and Karl, in 1960.

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Michael Ruehle, Grade 10.

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The main gate, 1956.

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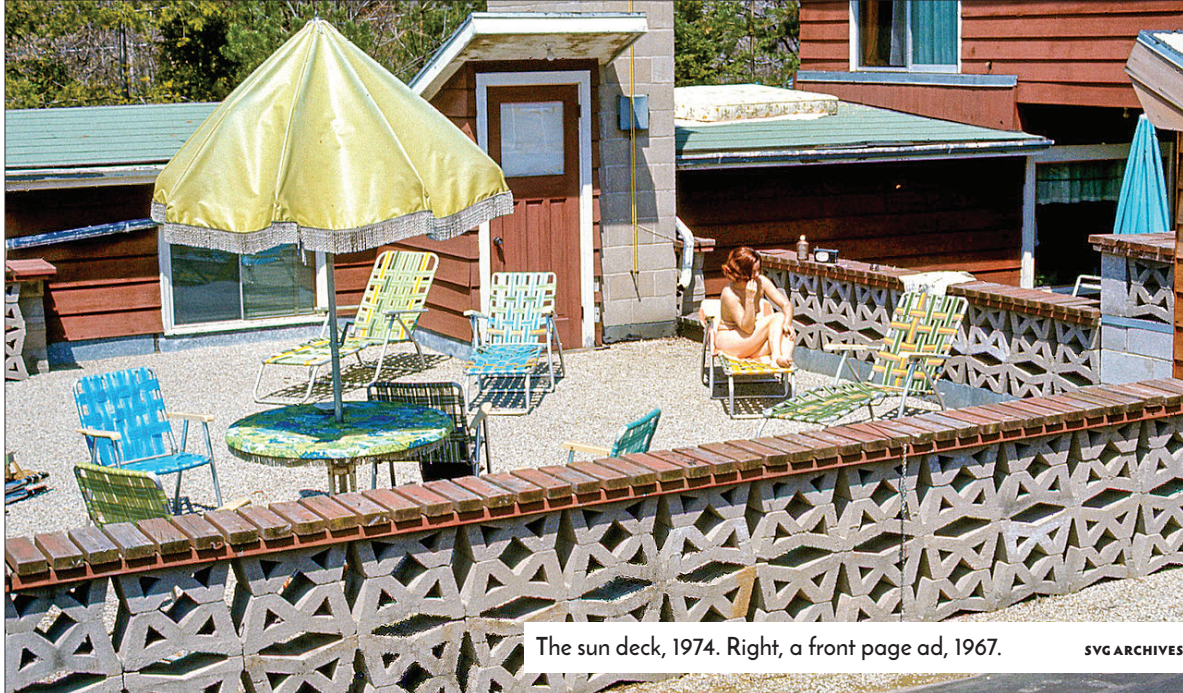
Karl Ruehle, 1958.

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The main building, 1974.

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The sun deck, 1974. Right, a front page ad, 1967.

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Second section of Fonthill NIAGARA WEE
Wednesday, June 28, 1967

ly-oriented naturist campground." There would be an address and "Visitors by appointment only." Most people would write for more information and be sent the many brochures we had on hand. Visitors would arrive at the gate, ring the bell, talk to my dad, and be let in.

Of course, usually the half of the couple suggesting to try nudism would be the husband, and very often the wife would be a bit more reticent—in those days anyway—so it was certainly a bit of a shock for these fellows to be greeted at the clubhouse parking lot by my father, in his rubber-boots-and-nothing else, with the usually-not-visible parts being at about eye level through the car window.

The visitors would be shown a place to park and be invited to tour the grounds, clothed at first. They would walk down the driveway toward the valley, where the pool,

snack bar and other facilities were located, probably being greeted by other members (pun intended) as they went. On a weekend there would usually be quite a few people there, and when the visitors reached the valley where the big open area was there they were: sunning, swimming, playing cards or cribbage, volleyball or badminton—adults and kids.

Now what often happened at about this point was that the husband would be slightly disappointed that the place was not full of Playboy models, but of people rather more like your typical Walmart customer, if they were nude. On the other hand, the wife would stop being worried about whether her looks would match up, and realize that these people were just comfortable in their own skin.

After getting toured around the whole property—the cottage area,

the campground and trailer area, and the clubhouse building—my father would invite them to spend the rest of the day, but explained that they would now have to be nude as well. It was pretty rare that people would leave. They would change at their car, take a towel (all nudists keep a towel with them to sit on) and go back to the valley to meet some other members, swim, or sit at the snack bar to chat with my mother. And then they would decide whether to become annual members, or to come occasionally and pay the daily or weekend fee.

In those days it was generally not permitted for a single man to come alone. This was to head off any kind of "singles bar" atmosphere. There were a few exceptions: one fellow from Toronto had been coming since before my parents bought the place, so he was grandfathered in and was a mem-

ber until he was in his 90s. And there were a couple of others over the years. Some were men who had originally come with their girlfriends, and when they split up, they or sometimes the girlfriend would be allowed to keep attending. Later on, in the late '70s and the early '80s, that all loosened up quite a bit.

By the late '60s some families even lived there full time, but most were either weekend visitors or stayed for two- or three-week vacations in the summer, with many families coming back for ten years or more, with semi-permanent trailer locations or summer-only cottages. Sometimes the children became members in their own right when they grew up, many of whom I still know. The place was always very well represented with kids of all ages, although there was often an awkward stage at puberty, when

some kids would stop coming with their parents for a little while, or they'd even stop attending altogether. But mostly the kids got through that experience as well. I mean, there were certainly no secrets about what was happening to their bodies—they could see the adult version all around them. The fact that no one made a big deal of it to them was, I think, a very healthy thing for their self-image.

I'm often asked by friends when they discover how I grew up, "What was that like?"

Well, it felt perfectly normal, to be honest. The stranger thing for me was when I first went to school and had to understand that it was expected that people always wear clothes, even in nice weather. Seemed a bit ridiculous, but that's where I learned that cultural norms are all relative.

See GROWING UP Page 14

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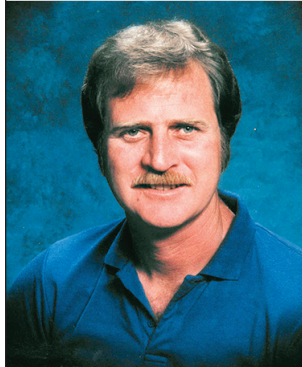
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OBITUARY



**Connell (Milne),
Robert John**

1948-2021

A sense of humour like no other. A lover of music, played piano and guitar, singer of songs. A friend to many. After a six-year battle with cancer, Bob passed away at home with his family by his side. Born to Robert and Gladys Milne in Merriton, Ontario, Bob was proud to be "A Merriton Kid." His mother passed away when Bob was the tender age of 5. Bob was eventually adopted in 1960 by James and Dorothy Connell in Belleville, ON. Always proud of his Merriton roots, Bob moved back to the area around the age of 19. Best friend and husband to Barbara for 52 years. Honorary father of Randy and grandfather to Daniel (Kierny), Lori (Jeff) and granddaughters Megan (Paul), Eban (Glen). Great grandfather to Dominic Jeffrey and Nicholas Robert. Teddy and grandson Dwight, great-granddaughters Zonta, Daytoya and Nevyah. Wendy and grandsons Cole and Devon and great-grandsons Gauge and Harley. Uncle to many nieces and nephews. Predeceased by brother Peter (Milne) Houghton and sister Patricia (Milne) Dopko, sister-in-law Florence (McKernan) Cox and brother-in-laws Alfred Groombridge, Wayne (Bushee) Bushnell (2020), "special friend" and brother-in-law Robert Schofield (1980). Survived by brothers Daniel, Gerry and Geoffrey Milne, sister-in-law Dorothy (Schofield) Bushnell, brother-in-law Douglas (Linda) Groombridge. Bob was employed at Tallman Transport in Welland for 40 years, where he made many longtime friends. Bob, along with Barbara, enjoyed 35 years of membership and volunteering at Branch 613 Fonthill Legion. Special thanks to Toni at the Fonthill Legion for all the hot meals provided during these difficult months. Special thanks to Dr. Hanna at Hamilton Juravinski Clinic and Dr. Yelamanchili and staff at the Walker Cancer Clinic. Also, St. Elizabeth Palliative Home Care team. At Bob's request, cremation has taken place. A celebration of Bob's life will take place at the Fonthill Legion when COVID guidelines permit. In lieu of flowers Bob has requested donations to be made to Branch 613 Fonthill Legion or the charity of your choice. Please share your condolences, photos and memories at www.pleasantviewcemetery.ca



OBITUARY



**HAGGARTY,
Melba Fern
(nee Crowe)**

1929-2021

Passed away peacefully at Rapelje Lodge on Wednesday, January 20, 2021 at the age of 91 years. Predeceased by her beloved husband Edgar (1996). Dear and loving mother of Sheila Ayres and predeceased by her son Sheldon (2005) Merilou. Cherished grandmother of Graham (Cindy), Shawn, Ashley, Aaron (Amber), Mallory (Patrick), Keri (Jason) and Jamie. Great Grandmother of Justin, Logan, Amron, Berron, Jackson, Marissa, Isabelle, Theodore, Jeffrey and Joey. Dear sister of Wesley (the late Eileen), Carson (Shirley), Ken (Ina), Allen (the late Joan) and sisters-in-law Doreen and Pearl. Predeceased by her brothers Leo, Roger, Glen and sister Dorothy. Melba will also be greatly missed by her many nieces and nephews. The family would like to extend their heartfelt thanks to all the staff at Rapelje Lodge for the care and kindness that Melba received. A private funeral will take place at the PELHAM FUNERAL HOME, Fonthill with interment to follow at Pleasantview Cemetery. As an expression of sympathy donations may be made to Rapelje Lodge 277 Plymouth Road, Welland L3B6E3 or a charity of ones choice. Online condolences may be shared at www.pelhamfuneralhome.ca

BALANCED LIFE

continued from Page 18

even pretending to be an athlete are long past, yet I still have a training plan to keep me motivated and on track. Intuitively I just know whether it's walking our kid's Golden on those lucky days they trust its care to us, running around with the grandkids, golfing or playing tennis on a hot summer day when that little bit of extra stamina helps, even staying mentally awake for an extra hour in the evening to enjoy a gripping novel or movie—being more fit is an advantage, and it's much more likely to happen if one adopts a training plan, modest or demanding as it might be.

To get started, knowing your baseline for flexibility, aerobic capacity and muscle strength will help you develop a suitable plan. The Mayo Clinic suggests the following simple tests, and there's no equipment needed. Although most of us have an idea where our fitness level is at any time, let's put the "see your doctor" warning in here to be safe. We're not suggesting starting off with Warrior Woman or Ironman

GROWING UP

continued from Page 11

We never concealed where we lived, so it was the subject of a lot of curiosity among the other kids. But most of my friends, male or female, were permitted to come visit me — another benefit of the "open house" policy, because their parents had presumably visited. I had another large group of friends at Sun Valley Gardens as well, who would be there either on weekends or for two or three weeks at a time, and I would see them every summer.

I also get asked, "Do you have to be nude all the time?"

No, it's just expected that if the weather permits, you don't walk around dressed when everyone else is not. Raining or cold? Wear something waterproof, or a sweater if you're cold. Women on their period? They'd wear a bikini bottom or shorts. But otherwise you'd just naturally choose to be nude.

So, finally, some corrections, or at least, an alternate perspective. An oft-cited book on nudism in Ontario, *Au Naturel: The History of Nudism in Canada*, perpetuates some pretty

harsh criticisms of my father. I am the first to admit that he was a strong-willed curmudgeon and had a temper. People thought he could be dictatorial at times (me too), but the book seems to rely too heavily on the statements of some folks who left Sun Valley Gardens on bad terms, and there are of course two sides.

Yes, he was pretty strict, partly because he knew if anything bad happened there, the local authorities would stop being so friendly. And he did not appreciate things like littering or having members step barefoot in someone's dog poop (which ultimately led to a dog ban, because people would not keep their dogs curbed).

It was said in the book that he didn't allow people to rearrange the outdoor furniture. Not at all true — what he didn't appreciate was it being dragged away from the public valley area to a personal campsite, or rearranged and left somewhere for him to put back himself later. And I never saw him limit people playing any of the sports. He had no interest in imposing any kind of activity schedule for others. Maybe someone was hogging the horseshoe pitch or shuffleboard court all day and

he asked them to make it available for others?

I do know we had a lot of fun: huge bonfires, campfire sing-alongs, "lu-au"-style pig roasts and lamb roasts, Halloween and other impromptu parades, dance parties with DJs and treasure hunts for the kids.

One of the main sources of discord was alcohol. Alcohol was a pet peeve for my father, and although he wasn't anti-alcohol as such, he was mainly concerned that just one bad situation due to excess drinking would cause him a lot of trouble. It was only quite late, in the mid-'70s I think, that he finally started to allow people to drink alcohol at the clubhouse and elsewhere. Until then it was only permitted at your own campsite, trailer or cottage. So if you discreetly had a drink in your own place, that was okay, but loud, late-night drinking parties would get you warned, or summarily expelled. Some of the folks who couldn't tolerate these alcohol rules went off to start their own very different style of nudist camps, for example near Hamilton.

The focus of the book is on my fa-

See GROWING UP next page

programs, and basic Health Canada guidelines recommend two and a half hours of moderate to vigorous activity each week, so getting started on your own is a reasonable option.

To get a sense of your cardiorespiratory capacity, check your pulse rate before and immediately after a one or two kilometre walk. You can use a fitness watch, or count the pulsations in your carotid artery by pressing your fingers lightly on your neck for ten seconds, then multiply by six. Sixty to eighty beats per minute is considered normal, and lower is generally considered to represent a healthier heart than higher.

Count how many regular or modified push-ups you can do without excessive strain, and how far forward you can stretch with your legs in front of you when seated on the floor. The push-ups will give you a sense of your strength—between five and twelve is normal for women, six to sixteen for men. The most basic measure of flexibility is being able to touch your toes sitting and standing.

Measure your waist circumference (don't believe your pant size —manufacturers lie to make us feel good), height, and weight, then find a body mass index calculator or chart on the web to find and interpret your number. Save all this information for comparison as you progress. Measurable improvement is wonderful motivation.

Now that you know your baseline in a very general sense, take a few minutes to decide what your fitness goals, or needs, are. Achieving general health and well-being goals will require cardiorespiratory training (endurance) core strengthening and balance training (resistance), flexibility (joint mobility and range of motion, posture alignment, body tension) and perhaps quickness training (control of motor skills).

A good training plan will contain all these elements in a balanced routine that begins at your current base and progresses to what's necessary to achieve your desired goals. Begin at a low level, be cautious, progress slow-

ly, and if you feel dizziness, pain, or shortness of breath, rest and consider consulting a professional.

Here's a very basic plan, mine for winter, which can be used as an example and make this discussion less generic. This plan is designed to maintain overall strength and fitness, skewed somewhat to cycling endurance, and has components of flexibility. The end goal is simple: to reduce morbidity and be able to cycle off into the sunset.

We're not suggesting starting off with Warrior Woman or Ironman programs

Monday – Rest Day. Recovery is key to any exercise program, especially as we age, and definitely when starting out. A rest day doesn't necessarily mean sitting around. Gardening, hiking, home maintenance or watching sports all qualify — whatever feels right, and isn't too strenuous.

Tuesday – Exercise, Weights, Ride 40k. Exercise is a wide open term that allows the choice of various activities. Pilates and yoga provide core strength, stretching and flexibility, and aerobic training. Vigorous floor exercises such as Zumba or Salsa would be more aerobic, and some of these routines like the old Twenty Minute Workout include push-ups and sit-ups for strength. By simply stating exercise, this plan allows lots of room for creativity and change as required. If you're new to aerobic fitness routines, a lot of jumping, dancing and bouncing may inflame your joints, and put you off continuing, so stick with low impact exercise until you are comfortable with additional stress on your joints.

Weights are weights, be they static, equip-

ment-based, or your own body weight, and not a part of the routine I relish. Calling it resistance training might sound more 2021, but it's still hard work that is essential to long term muscular and joint health. Forget the bulging biceps, I just want to know that there's enough muscle around my joints to protect ligaments from sudden twists and jolts, and that I have the strength to recover my balance from an unexpected slip or loss of footing.

The 40 kilometre ride provides cardiorespiratory training, develops specific muscle groups, and improves balance—all goal-specific in my case. If you've already spent 40 to 60 minutes on some iteration of the exercise and weights portion of your own training plan, you've done lot for the day, and adding more may be over the top, or unnecessary. Substitute golf, tennis, horseback riding, gardening, ballroom dancing, anything with movement, for the third, activity-specific component of this training plan.

Wednesday – Exercise, Weights. Repeat the above to stay the course, but change it up as you wish to maintain interest or try something new.

Thursday – Exercise, Weights, Ride 40k. This is a general repeat of Tuesday, with the ride part allowing flexibility. If this happens to be the day insurrectionists are storming Congress, an hour on the indoor trainer glued to CNN is perfect. If I want to concentrate on aerobics, a spinning DVD will shorten the ride time and increase the effort. Perhaps it's a hike through Shorthills or brisk walk on the Gerry Berkout Trail. The beauty of a training plan is that you schedule yourself to do something for a specific duration, so you have to do it—yet any aerobic activity will do. There's few things more refreshing than a brisk walk at lunch hour when you're working, and that might fit your plan just fine.

Friday – Run 5K. Significant fitness and strength increases come from stressing body systems, and running on my short, stubby legs provides a definite opportunity to push the intensity

level. For your plan, anything that's fun and elevates the heart rate significantly will work once you're ready for it.

Saturday/Sunday – Optional/Exercise, Weights, Ride 90k. Weekends are, or used to be, busy, and staying on plan can be a challenge. This written plan tells me that during the two days I have to do the three elements, exercise, weights and a distance ride, but that I can move them around to fit my schedule. Remember, your new training plan is a balance between commitment and flexibility, and only works if you actually do it.

What equipment to use, and whether to employ professional assistance or coaching are very personal choices, and not decisions that have to be made before devising a basic plan. Scheduling flexibility has always been important to me, hence I prefer to train at home. I began using only my body weight for resistance, and have since graduated to garage sale weights and a Kijiji-sourced home gym. Splurging for an unused floor exercise mat seemed the right thing to do though.

In-home spinning bikes, treadmills and cross-trainers are all the rage. An excellent way to see if any of them are for you before pulling out your credit card is to join a gym or the YMCA and try them. A fitness tracker such as a watch or app on your phone is also something to consider early on. If you chose to adopt a training plan to improve your heart health, it is literally life affirming to watch your resting heart rate drop, your maximum heart rate rise, and your recovery times reduce.

Beginning an exercise program is an important decision that needn't be overwhelming. By planning carefully and pacing yourself, you can safely establish a healthy habit that will last a lifetime. If you put your plan on paper, put that piece of paper in a place that you can't help but see it many times each day, and think of all the benefits that will come your way if you stick to it.

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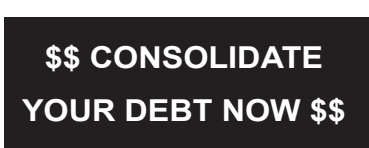
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GROWING UP

continued from previous page

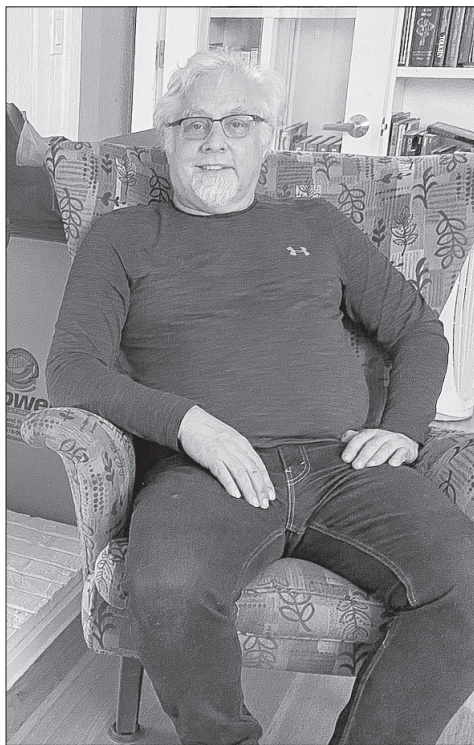
ther, but I should also say that my mother was very much responsible for the success of Sun Valley Gardens. I still meet or speak with people who knew her and were strongly impressed by her ability to keep everything going.

There was definitely a decline in membership starting in the mid- '70s, but this was true of almost all nudist camps at that time, often because people had started to combine their nudism with going south for a vacation (which wasn't so common before) or looking for a more party-like atmosphere. So they stopped coming to the campground-style nudist resorts. Many of the nudist resorts then went down a more commercial route to increase revenue, with big parties every weekend, a real emphasis on alcohol sales and even open-to-the-public judged "naked women" events — I call it that because it really got away from the nudist philosophy and into marketing nakedness. This was never my father's style.

The end of the Sun Valley Gardens era really came when my parents split up. My father was left to run the camp, but it was pretty clear that he was not a people-person and had relied on my mother to do most of that, so it didn't go so well. And his heart wasn't in it anyway, so he closed it. He would be very sad to see how the place looks now, but he wouldn't have compromised to keep it going either.

Am I still a nudist today?

In the long run, I haven't kept up "being a nudist," i.e., attending a nudist campground. I've moved around the world too much, and it's just not been a priority. I've gone on holidays to nude resorts in the Caribbean, and visited nude beaches on my travels. The main thing I think I carry with me from that upbringing is to understand that nudity per se is not sexual. All this weirdness about whether some particular part of the body is visible or not, or the idea that a man (or woman) "can't control themselves" if they see too much skin, is just ludicrous to me. I applaud that toplessness is legal in Ontario, but also recognize that by harassing, ogling and cat-calling women if they do choose to



Michael Ruehle today.

SUPPLIED

go topless, men are causing women to not take advantage of this legal freedom. (It's a lose-lose situation, guys! Wise up.)

It has also caused me to be very accepting of a wide range of ways of living. I've lived in many places in the world, feel comfortable with the idea that "the way we do things here" is not "the best" and certainly not the only way to live, and I am adamant that people should be able to choose their preferred way to live, as long as it doesn't directly harm or restrict the freedoms of others. Be gay, straight, bi, poly, asexual or whatever; choose your expressed gender according to how you perceive yourself and how you feel comfortable in your skin; practice any religion you choose or none, but don't force your beliefs on others; treat people from all races and cultures equally and value them.

This is more than mere "tolerance"—it is affirmative acceptance—and nudism (and Canadian multiculturalism) was my gateway. ❖

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