

The Inside Scoop

.....with Judi McWilliams

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Interview with Sandra Lawn



Sandra S. Lawn
Festival Chair
St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival

April 12, 2011 (Part one)

In one of the most beautiful settings along the St. Lawrence River, in the town of Prescott, you can visit the Sandra S. Lawn Harbour & Marina. It hosts a wonderful children's play area and a 148 slip Harbour. Sometimes in life you may not be curious as to "what's in a name". However, the name of this Harbour/Marina was clarified to Gary and me when we had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Sandra S. Lawn at a Gala evening in the Prescott Town Hall. This was right after the season's opening performance of the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival. It turns out that Ms. Lawn was not only Chair of the Festival, but had been Mayor of Prescott for 15 years, until she retired in 1991. What an wonderful opportunity for me to get THE INSIDE SCOOP from Sandra about the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival. Sandra was generous with her time and shares informative and interesting information that I will now share with you! One of Ms. Lawn's duties as Mayor of Prescott, was to facilitate the development of the Prescott waterfront into what is now, as I mentioned above, the Sandra S. Lawn Harbour. As chair of the South Grenville Economic Development Commission, she soon became well aware of the importance of tourism. That is where she and I and the Festival Nomad (Gary McWilliams, [Ontario Visited](#)), all share a similar passion! It is interesting that Sandra, a mother of three daughters (who just happen to be all musical), helped Sandra become "aware of the importance of the arts in our small rural town". Sandra is extremely intelligent and has a sense of humor to boot. She holds a BSc in Biology and a Masters in Public Administration, the humor, she tells me "my study of Shakespeare amounted to about 15 minutes in English 2 at Queen's". How is it then that Sandra became so involved with the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival? Sandra tells me that she has been involved almost from the beginning. It happened "when my husband, as a Rotarian and mayor of our town came home to describe Deborah Smith's enthusiastic presentation about the idea of Shakespeare in our Amphitheatre at the Harbour. In the first season I was a volunteer, and immediately after the first AGM was elected to the board of directors. I became chair of the board in January 2008. I have been chair of fundraising since 2004."

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April 19, 2011 (Part two)

Sandra is very busy with her responsibilities as chair of the festival board, leading the meetings and fulfilling any duties that spring from that role. What I was interested in was Sandra's duties as Chair of Fundraising! She tells me, "my duties are many - from organizing the fund raising team, in many cases making "the ask" and assisting with fundraising events - in some cases leading the effort." Ms. Lawn is very "hands on" and it sounds like her dedication and devotion helps inspire others in the continued efforts to offer such wonderful performances to so many audiences! Fundraising does come with some challenges that perhaps we, the audience and recipients of these great performances, do not see. Sandra states that, "One of the main challenges is maintaining financial stability". She goes on to say, that "Our fund raising campaigns are run using the experience of major campaigns where I have been able to learn the basics of running a successful campaign, e.g. putting a major expansion on the Brockville and Area YMCA (opened when I was president) and being chair of the Friends of the Prescott Public Library when we put together a \$575,000 expansion. Over the years we became better and better at writing grant proposals, mostly as a team." Other minor "challenges" Sandra has dealt with were the few internal conflicts that she handled smoothly. She is wise however, having a written policy on conflict resolution, which fortunately has yet been used. That would then answer my question about "egos" with all the actors, volunteers, directors, etc. There seems to be no problems to overcome here.

April 26, 2011 (Part three)

One of my passions, as you may know by now, is to have the ability, through **THE INSIDE SCOOP**, to inform festival and event planners/organizers about the issues and the importance of **VOLUNTEERS!** For most festivals and events, it is critical to have volunteers! I have been surprised from my previous interviews in **THE INSIDE SCOOP**, with the attention and insight, to this issue, that organizers have shared with me. I was not surprised, then, when Ms. Lawn told me that ... *"We started with just a handful of volunteers - perhaps 30 and are now up to over 300. Recruiting, training and appreciating are key. We have volunteer appreciation nights; offer free tickets on certain nights and at every opportunity value these key people. It is really important to have the right volunteer in the right position - and very, very occasionally we err"*. With this in mind, I wanted to find out how the **St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival** kept things fresh for the patrons and actors alike. Sandra says that ... *"Our artistic director and directors are always surprising us - the level of excellence is always high of course, but there is that special something that comes when you bring favourites back and add new bright stars every season. Our artistic director, directors and actors are all professional - they love the venue and the community and this lively happy spirit keeps things fresh for them and for us"*. I'm sure Sandra is correct that "things are fresh" as it is reflected in the **St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival's** increase in their attendance during the 2010 season. During these difficult economic times, I wondered what Ms. Lawn attributed this increase too. *"Having a new play based on an old play, captured people's imagination - so I think that brought more local people - however the Ottawa audience might have wondered at first what this was all about. Word of mouth is the key factor although I believe our marketing just gets better every year as well as our internet presence. The programs throughout the year like Jake's Gift coming again on D-Day, June 6th some claim was a life changing experience and we are getting the reputation of doing wonderful unique things"*. This information, that I am sharing with you, will hopefully help other festival and event planners/organizers with their efforts to increase attendance!

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May 3, 2011 (Part four)

In our [War of 1812 Celebrations](#) website, I have been writing about "Living History" and its importance to understanding the present. I was curious to see what importance the St. Lawrence Theatrical Company had as part of our society and what role did Sandra see as its importance? She replies ... *"It is hard for me to put it into words. It is a number of things – it draws people back to the brilliance of Shakespeare and live theatre. It is enriching, it is fun, it is outdoors beside a magnificent river. I greatly enjoy technology but know in my heart that without Shakespeare as part of my world and the world of my friends and family we would be all the poorer and unable to participate properly in the creative Ontario everyone is seeking in so many different ways"*.

I also wondered if she had any roles during a performance itself. She shares with me ... *"I do not have any role during a production – we used to introduce the play to the audience but with an Artistic Director like Ian Farthing (see my up coming article about Ian Farthing at ----, he is amazing!), this is much more effectively done by him. My husband and I also host a supper at the beginning of the rehearsal period."* Sandra does get to enjoy the performances during the season, visiting every single performance last year. She tells me ... *"It is a joy to attend and I am learning every single performance"*. With that being said, I wondered if Sandra had a favorite production. She shares with me that ... *"Every year my favourite production morphs into that particular year's production. However last year I loved **Trouble on Dibble Street** – as a former mayor and chair of the board I really wanted everyone in town to come to the Festival and love it and learn from it as I did. That just wasn't possible until Trouble – when so many of our reluctant theatergoers came because it was our bicentennial gift to the town – and they loved it"*.

May 10, 2011 (Part five)

It would be remiss of me not to ask Sandra about her favorite performer was. She goes on to say that ... *"I also love how we incorporate music into every performance. Kris Josef in addition to being a great actor also did an amazing rendition of Bob Dylan – about whom I knew little – now it seems that every morning on the CBC they play at least one song that I loved from our festival. I cannot really say I have a favourite performer – they are all so unique and put so much talent into it. I may know certain actors more than others and have a special relationship for a variety of reasons. One reason is the way a certain actor has really turned around the life of the person she was billeted with – it is so heart warming to witness this sort of interchange with the wonderful people of this small town"*. Some of the fun for **THE INSIDE SCOOP** is collecting special anecdotes to share with you. Ms. Lawn indeed did have something to share with us ... *"One of my own favourite anecdotes took place on closing night of Romeo and Juliet when my young grandson (he must have been about five) at the curtain call, ran onto the stage and threw his arms around Perry Mucci. This boy wants to be an actor because of Perry; he never wants to miss a play when he visits frequently from Ottawa"*. With this response my final question to Ms. Sandra Lawn was if the **St. Lawrence Theatrical Company/St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival** encouraged the youth of today to attend performance? Again, I was not surprised by her response ... *"For some of us, children and youth are why we do this. Children 12 and under are admitted free and youth are always at a lower rate. My husband, a retired educator, is fervent about the attendance of youth. Our artistic director does as much*

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outreach in the schools as possible. We hold the Young Artists training program every summer and then showcase them as part of the Sunday Series. At the Connect Youth forum at South Grenville District High School, we sign up volunteers and let our regional youth know more about why this is not just educational and enriching but a lot of fun too. Those of us who are in the community year round work at convincing parents and grandparents that this is critical for their offspring's future and we truly believe it!!"

Posted by Gary and Judi McWilliams