

The Little French owl sings its way to bilingualism

By Natalie Cummings

For Sarah Michielsen, the only thing bolder than her smile is the way her eyes gleam as she says, “Bonjour!”

Growing up in British Columbia with a non-French speaking family, Michielsen’s first memory of learning French was in kindergarten, singing the “Bonjour Song.”

It’s a song in which she still sings today. Upon hitting high school, it seemed like Michielsen’s passion grew from not only speaking French, but also teaching it.

As the owner and operator of The Little French Owl, Sarah creates interactive videos starring herself as her alter ego, “Madame Musique.”

Featuring musical songs and other activities, Michielsen engages young minds by singing songs in English, then also teaching how to sing them in French.

“With the Little French Owl, it is the opportunity to partner joy, with learning,” Michielsen says.

As well as sharing music, Michielsen also makes videos dressed as another beloved character, “Brico Beatrice.”

“Brico,” short for bricolage, is a common French word for crafts.

The character, who dons blue hair and overalls, teaches craft projects and small art projects to reach out as another way of learning and developing skills in French.

Michielsen’s small business is beloved by many children and parents in the Trenton area, all hoping to gain a leg up when it comes to speaking French. To think at its root, The Little French Owl started by just one mother wanting to give her daughter the opportunity to become bilingual.

“My passion for teaching French started by just wanting to give a gift to my

daughter,” Michielsen says.

While living in Toronto at the time, Michielsen took her daughter to an interactive music class where children were able to play with instruments and learn songs.

The class sang the songs not only English, but in Spanish.

Thankful that her daughter was exposed to different types of languages, it left Michielsen pondering how she could incorporate teaching French in the same way.

With her young daughter in tow, Michielsen began reaching out to other parents feeling the same way, and began singing and teaching French.

It eventually grew to where children could come learn and sing in French at her side at the Toronto Public Library.

However, after moving to Trenton, Michielsen took the move as an opportunity to connect with other families with children learning French in such a small, military-driven town.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, The Little French Owl continues to be involved in the community by doing Zoom activities and learning songs online.

In Canada, there are over 3,000 French-speaking primary and secondary schools.

The Little French Owl is part of a growing education system teaching the next generation how to speak French.

Looking back on how far The Little French Owl has come, Michielsen can’t help but smile.

“I truly believe in the value of a multicultural Canada, and the enrichment that bilingualism provides,” Michielsen says, “The Bilingual dream.”



Photo by Natalie Cummings

Sarah Michielsen, owner and operator of The Little French Owl in Trenton, holds some of her musical bells that she uses to teach children French.

Volunteer gives back to the community

By Daniel Geleyn

“We’re lucky the rain just stopped a few minutes ago.” It is a cool and very damp Friday morning, but Paul Elsley has three large tables set up in the driveway of his suburban Kingston home under a tent with large Rotary logos on all four sides. You can smell the fall in the air, feel it in your bones, and of course, see it in the colours of the trees. But Elsley is not distracted as he meticulously sets out food that has been donated, locally grown in a community garden he helps maintain, or purchased with money raised, while some of his neighbours make their way to work. He doesn’t let the sound of traffic disturbs him either as there is much to do.

Like every Friday for the past few months, he has been up since about 5:30 a.m. to start his routine. Today, there is enough food to feed 37 families for a weekend. A couple walking on his street asks what he is up to with all this food. As Elsley tells them what the food is for, they nod as a sign of approval and respect for what he does.

By 10 a.m., six volunteers, all women of varying ages, from university students to grandmothers, some with their hands wrapped around their coffee mugs to keep themselves warm, arrive eager to get started despite the wet and cold. They know exactly what to do as Elsley has organized their workspace with precision, making sure to count the exact number of bright yellow grocery bags, also graciously donated by a local shop, that they will be required to fill today. Additional volunteers will arrive throughout the rest of the day to pick up some of the full bags to hand deliver them to the homes of families in need. “As a teacher by profession, I have always worked with kids, so helping to feed young ones so they can focus on their school work is a natural fit for me,” says Elsley.

Elsley grew up in the small town of Petrolia in southwestern Ontario. After graduating high school in 1978, he went to Western University in London, Ont. where he earned a degree in history and English and then went on to teachers’ college, graduating in 1983. “My dad and my siblings are all teachers. And teaching combines working with kids and coaching sports which are two of my passions, so teaching was always what I wanted to do.”

Although he loves kids, Elsley would not have any of his own until later in life. After many years of teaching, he met his



Photo by Daniel Geleyn

Paul Elsley, the president of the Kingston Rotary Club and chair of the Isthmus program in Kingston works with volunteers at his home to pack numerous bags of groceries that will be delivered to families in need later that day.

wife and got married. Although he loved teaching, he retired early from that profession after 27 years to move to Kingston with his wife who had enrolled at Queen’s University in a law degree program. In the following few years, while his wife was still in school, their first daughter was born which was followed by a second daughter, so Elsley decided to stay at home to help raise his daughters while his wife pursued her career as a lawyer. He describes his happiest moments when his two daughters were born.

“We didn’t start raising a family until I was 52. To be blessed with two healthy and happy young girls is such a blessing.”

Elsley says he has four passions. “First and foremost is my family. My second passion is service through Rotary and giving back to the community; third is the outdoors, and lastly is sports, which I did more when I was younger but I still

like to dabble in when I can.”

He has been a Rotarian for eight years and is now the president of the Rotary Club of Kingston, the oldest Rotary Club in Kingston which happens to be celebrating 100 years of service in 2021. Still comfortable in front of students, Elsley ran the Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA) workshops held for the last three years in Kingston for high school students from Ontario, Quebec and northern New York State. This program was run on the St. Lawrence College campus in 2018 and 2019 while the 2020 program was run online because of the pandemic. For three days, with the help of guest speakers and facilitated by young Rotarians, the students would develop a project to help their own community.

The same year he became a Rotarian, Elsley also started a program in Kingston to feed kids of families in need because he saw the need to fill a gap. “It is a not-

for-profit and its focus is to feed children during the school year on the weekends.” The Food Sharing Project helps feed children in schools by providing breakfasts, lunches and snacks to kids who were going hungry. But many of those children would go back to school on Mondays hungry. So Elsley’s idea was to help feed those kids on the weekends as well by providing them with a bag of healthy food they could take home on Fridays. The program is now affiliated with Isthmus and Kingston is the fourth chapter of Isthmus.

“With the pandemic, the schools closed quickly in March, so we had to come up with a new model. Through partnering with the Food Sharing Project and co-ordination with the school boards, we started delivering food directly to the families’ homes and this was a very eye-opening experience for us.”

The combined programs were even

extended to the summer months and about 600 families were provided substantial boxes of food every two weeks.

“The amount of coordination to make this happen is incredible,” said Elsley. Thanks to his connection to the school boards, the other food security programs in Kingston, and the Rotary Clubs in Kingston and area, Elsley was able to raise the required funds, find all the volunteers necessary, and make this incredible contribution to families in need in Kingston.

Leading by example, Elsley was often seen throughout the summer maintaining and harvesting at a community garden in the west end of Kingston. With the sun beating down on their heads and the weeds often knee high, he and the many volunteers he was able to corral could be seen, often with their hands and knees well encrusted with mud, pulling weeds or harvesting the fresh produce that could then be included in the boxes and bags of food for the families. Bernie Robinson, who provides this community garden as his contribution to the community, even donates his own maple syrup to reward the many volunteers who come to help.

“When schools reopened again in September, the Food Sharing Project was given permission to work in the schools again but with some restrictions like having individually packaged food items. So their cost skyrocketed and the food is not as nutritious.”

The same restrictions prevented Isthmus from returning to the schools, therefore Elsley had to improvise and run his own program from his garage. Although this is working for now, the cold weather will present another challenge. But the Food Sharing Project, after seeing the benefits of the Isthmus program, has decided to adopt a hybrid program whereby they will again co-operate with Isthmus to deliver some of the food directly to the homes of families.

As the driving force behind Isthmus, Elsley has been a powerful catalyst for members of the community to come together to help those in need. According to Brenda Moore, the chair of the Food Sharing Project, “He is a very big-hearted man but he has such a practical brain. His approach to challenges is, ‘We can just figure it out,’ and I love that.”

His hands-on leadership and dedication continue to be a beacon of hope in this community during the pandemic.