

When Good Comes Out of Tragedy

STORIES BY JASON BELL

There's a rather sizeable account at a credit union in Beausejour administered by Brian and Nancy-Jo Howie, permanent residents of Nutimik Lake in Whiteshell Provincial Park.

In a perfect world, the bulk of the money wouldn't get spent. But this isn't a perfect world.

The retired River East School Division educators, their lives torn up by the tragic loss of their son, know that all too well.

Kevin Howie, the couple's eldest son, drowned in a boating accident in the spring of 2005 on the first day of the annual fishing season. The search for Kevin – by boat, on shore and from the air – lasted more than three weeks and involved dozens of family members and friends, search and rescue volunteers, RCMP and parks officials.

Brian was there when his son's body was finally recovered from neighbouring Numao Lake.

Since then, Brian and Nancy-Jo – who've lived year-round at Nutimik since 2008 – have worked to ensure their 28-year-old son did not die in vain.

They started the Kevin Howie Memorial Search and Rescue Fund to provide financial assistance to other families searching for missing loved ones in the Whiteshell.

In Kevin's death announcement, a request for donations was included. But just months later, on the September long weekend, those closest to him held a garage sale to really kick-start the fund.

Since then, more than \$40,000 has been generated, with about \$10,000 going back into life-saving supplies for several lodges and clubs in the Whiteshell.

Later this year, the ninth annual Nutimik garage sale will take place on Aug. 4. Nancy-Jo says while the event has become smaller and simpler over the years, she just can't call it quits.

"I can't stop. I'd feel guilty if I did," she says. "The sad reality is that somebody's going to need that money."

"That's what I think about when we put it on. I'm thinking about the next family that has to go through this. We know it can happen so we're paying it forward."

Adds Brian: "We have to, for Kevin ... to honour his memory."



MISSING FISHERMAN



Kevin Howie

Age: 28 Height: 5'10" Weight: 230 lbs.
Eyes: Green Hair: Sandy Blonde

Last seen at Nutimik Lake at approximately 11:00 a.m. Saturday, May 14, 2005. At that time, he was alone in a green Lund Rebel fishing boat with a silver 40 h.p. Honda motor (boat has been recovered). He was wearing a camouflage jacket and pants. Believed to have been downstream of Slave Falls, near Scots Rapids.

If you have any information, please call (204) 348-7166 or the Lac du Bonnet RCMP at (204) 345-8685.



The Howie name is synonymous with the Nutimik Lake area, located along Highway 307 about 140 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg. The family has owned a cottage there since the province opened up the park in the early 1950s. Brian and his five siblings were practically raised at the lake – boating, fishing, hiking and spending evenings sitting around the campfire.

It was only fitting that after he and Nancy-Jo were married in 1973, they purchased a cabin of their own nearby. And when their two sons, Kevin and Allan, came along, the boys really didn't want to be anywhere else but the lake.

"Both the boys were athletic and they loved the outdoors. You name it, they did it," says Nancy-Jo. "Water-skiing, tubing, fishing and hunting – they were into it all."

The couple has a photograph of Kevin showing off one particular 'catch of the day,' a lake sturgeon probably weighing about 12 pounds. Nutimik is known province-wide for being a terrific spot to land these ancient, monster-sized fish, particularly on the east side of the lake beyond the rapids of aptly named Sturgeon Falls and also on neighbouring Numao Lake.

But it wasn't the largest fish Kevin had ever pulled up, not by a long shot.

"He caught a 63-pound sturgeon," Brian recalls, still very much the proud papa. "Kevin loved to fish. He wanted to be out there all the time."

Each spring, from the time he was just a youngster through to his late 20s, Kevin was the first customer to buy a fishing licence from the store at Nutimik, and he'd spend hours arranging and rearranging his tackle to be ready for 'opening day.'

That's exactly how he prepared for the first day of the 2005 angling season on Saturday, May 14.



The family had a wedding social to go to that night in Winnipeg, so Kevin and some buddies planned to hook some walleye and, possibly, a sturgeon or two, and then get back to shore with plenty of time to spare before driving back to the city.

Nancy-Jo remembers vividly the miserable May morning – cool, wet and windy. While his fishing pals decided to stay indoors, Kevin would not break tradition and he set off



Search and Rescue Resources

As the provincial police service for Manitoba, the RCMP is responsible for the search and rescue/recovery of missing people in the province, and that includes missing boaters, says RCMP spokeswoman Sgt. Line Karpish.

A thorough plan has been in place for many years, taking advantage of the expertise and resources of the RCMP and other organizations.

"Every case has its own set of circumstances," Karpish says. "Witnesses, type of boat, weather, location and accessibility are all some factors that will influence how we respond."

The Falcon Lake, Lac du Bonnet and White-mouth detachments share and provide policing services for the Whiteshell Provincial Park. Each is equipped with boats. To bolster a search effort, the detachment commander could ask for the aid of volunteers with the local fire department and natural resources officers with Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship, who are often already much closer to the lake, Karpish says.

The RCMP might also request the help of the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (Manitoba), a civilian, volunteer association of small-aircraft pilots who help in searches by air.

If a shoreline search is required, the RCMP Search and Rescue Team might be mobilized in partnership with the Manitoba Office of the Fire Commissioner and trained volunteers from Search and Rescue Manitoba (SARMAN).

If the victim is presumed drowned and there is a strong indication of where the person was last seen, the RCMP Underwater Recovery Team would likely become involved, Karpish says.



An annual garage sale at Nutimik Lake has raised more than \$40,000 for the Kevin Howie Memorial Search and Rescue Fund. The ninth annual sale takes place this year on Aug. 4.



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in the family boat that morning, donning a thick, camouflage jacket to shield himself from the elements.

But he wasn't wearing a life vest. His mother says Kevin rarely did, preferring to strap a personal flotation device loosely around the bottom of his legs. It was assumed he was heading past the rapids that can churn viciously with the high waters of spring.

He was due in by 4:30 p.m., but was already an hour late when Nancy-Jo, fretting quietly while staring out the window at the dreary weather, finally spoke the very words her husband was thinking.

"I said to Brian, 'OK, something's wrong,' " she recalls. "We kind of sensed it earlier, but didn't want to acknowledge it. We were supposed to be leaving for his cousin's wedding social. Kevin wanted to be there. He never missed a family event."

Kevin was using the family's only boat, so Brian called some friends and asked if they'd go out and look for him in case the motor had conked out and he was stranded on the lake somewhere. By nightfall, the friends were back with horrible news – they'd found the boat with no one inside and the gas tank empty. They'd scanned shorelines, too, but there was no sign of him. The RCMP and Manitoba Conservation were notified.

Brian joined Kevin's buddies that night, as did Allan, who raced from Winnipeg to help with the search. It wasn't until well after midnight that the half-dozen members of the makeshift search party, tired and heartsick, called it off for the night.

The next morning, they were back in their boats, combing Nutimik and Numao lakes with no success. By Monday, the search party had grown to nearly 100.

"I don't know where they all came from," Nancy-Jo says. "It was mostly family members and Kevin's buddies. I didn't know we had that

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Brian Howie and his son, Allan, sit on a memorial bench for Kevin. The bench is located on the Trans Canada Trail overlooking Sturgeon Falls. Kevin loved to fish above the Falls, which was the area where he disappeared in 2005 while fishing.



many friends. My sister came to help, and I'm sure she made breakfast, lunch and supper for 50 or 60 people every day."

During those early days of Kevin's disappearance, the anguished couple relied on the help and emotional support of those closest to them, but was frustrated by what they perceived was a slow and inadequate response by police and parks officials and the lack of a liaison.

Nancy-Jo maintains that at one point, the Conservation boat had a dead battery and officers were stuck on shore. Meanwhile, RCMP officers weren't familiar enough with the area to attempt to cross Sturgeon Falls, searching the calmer waters of Nutimik instead.

"They were stuck on this side and we were sure Kevin was on the other side," she says.

Family and friends didn't just search for Kevin by boat; they also plowed through the bush on foot while pilots of private planes peered from above. By the middle of the second week, Brian and Nancy-Jo finally told people, who had put their lives on hold to help find Kevin, that it was time to go home.

"We all thought Kevin would make it to shore, build a log cabin, tame a wolf and be quite comfortable. He was that kind of outdoorsman," Nancy-Jo says, with a bit of a chuckle. "I had hope until the end of the first week, and then I just knew."

Kevin's body was finally found on June 8 on Numao Lake by his father, who simply refused to quit searching, along with three uncles. His ashes were spread on June 14, exactly a month after he went missing.



The financial toll the search had put on the family wasn't a consideration while their son was missing, however, the reality soon set in. The cost of food, fuel and supplies such as bear spray and walkie-talkies, as well as lodging for those from out of town for the three-week search, was hefty. They managed, but they also wondered if others could under the same stressful conditions.

"I remember my sister-in-law, Evelyn, saying we need to do something," Nancy-Jo says. "We didn't want flowers and we didn't want money. We needed something more meaningful. We had to do something for the next family who lost someone on the lake."

The Kevin Howie Memorial Search and Rescue Fund was born.

Over the years, the fund has paid for first-aid kits, defibrillators, stretchers, neck braces and blankets for lodges in the north Whiteshell. It has even covered the cost for people to take CPR courses. But its main focus is to help cover some of the expenses a family

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incurs during a search.

Nancy-Jo says financial aid and emotional support were offered to two families who lost loved ones in drowning accidents since the fund was created. Preferring to keep most of the details private, Nancy-Jo says she remembers meeting one family searching for a missing man at Big Whiteshell Lake.

"They came off the lake after that first day of searching and we were there offering food and water and support. And hope," she says. "They were like, 'Thank God, someone else is there for us.' It was a very emotional day."

Judy Parnell, who owns Nutimik Lodge with husband Bob, says the Howies helped highlight the fact an organized approach to searching for someone was lacking in the provincial park.

"We didn't have the infrastructure in place in the Whiteshell for search and rescues. This is a remote area. We're away from RCMP detachments and hospitals. We were on our own," she says.

The Parnells had owned the lodge for mere weeks when Kevin went missing.

"It's difficult to say anything good comes out of a tragedy, but this community pulled together," Judy says. "We learned how to take care of ourselves. If there's an emergency, we

get things going right away. We don't wait."

Brian and Nancy-Jo hope the fund never gets used. They'd rather build playground equipment for kids.

"I never want a family to go through what we went through," she says, adding the wound of losing a child never heals.

But time does make it a little easier. Brian says there was a long stretch when he couldn't even go onto the lake. However, he knew that's not what Kevin would have wanted.

"It's almost a sense of peace now being on the water," he says. "Every time I'm out there now, when I go past a certain marsh, I wave to Kevin – every time." **C**

Donations can be made to:

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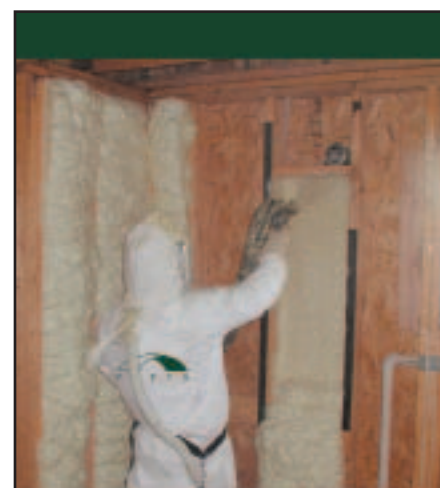
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