

INSPIRATIONS - REAL LIFE STORIES FROM OUR NEIGHBOUR- HOOD

By Jey Dharmaraj and Kathryn Stocks



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James

When one of our colleagues on the CCRA Centennial News chatted with a young man on the train who told him about his musical family, our colleague thought this would make a good story for the paper. So he wrote down the young man's name and number. But when he brought the idea to our meeting, the number was nowhere to be found. So how do you locate a neighbourhood family with four high-achieving musical sons? We turned to our favourite resource, the West Rouge Residents Facebook page. Within an hour of posting, we had received half a dozen suggestions and they all said the same thing: the Conquer family in West Rouge. Here is their story.

Writing about real people and their journey in life is always interesting so we were excited to talk to Allan and Judy Conquer and their family. Judy was a teacher for 33 years and Allan is in his 34th year with NCR. Both have a passion for music and music education. Judy sings and plays the piano while Allan plays the saxophone.

They had four sons who turned into music lovers themselves and so music became an integral part of their lives. Judy and Allan would lead annual school Christmas sing-alongs and other musical events at West Rouge Junior Public School and Judy's schools, and eventually the whole family would participate. She taught music at Pringdale Gardens JPS and finished her career at Charlottetown.

Their four children, Geoffrey, James, Gabriel and Robert, all were initiated gently into music when they started reading with about 15 minutes of piano practice daily, then adding singing with the Bach Children's Chorus a year or two later. The boys all took piano until they attained their Grade 8 RCM. Geoffrey continued with piano, but the rest picked up other instruments, and through high school took lessons, joined outside ensembles and auditioned into "the next" competitive placement and eventually university.

Balance and recreation were important family values so while they

did music, they also participated in church, hockey, curling, drama and foremost, of course, school. Judy and Allan always encouraged the boys to find their passion, declare it, then chase it. The boys got more and more interested in music and each one eventually declared their musical passion and practised even more on their own. The practicing eventually spilled into their church and neighbours' homes. During practice the boys would open their bedroom windows and the neighbours would love to hear the boys play. Music camps and competitions were regular fare.

When complimented on their parenting skills, Judy and Allan were very humble and replied that these values were instilled from a very young age - respecting others, creative and independent thinking, problem solving, the importance of teamwork and that success comes with hard work. While they look forward to a quiet existence someday, they suspect they will miss it.



GEOFFREY

Allan and Judy's oldest son is Geoffrey. He's 27 and plays the piano. He began taking piano lessons at age 6 1/2 and is still going strong.

Geoffrey studied piano at McGill University in Montreal. He was at McGill for eight years, getting his bachelor's and master's degrees. Each year McGill holds a Concerto Competition, where all music students can compete. Geoffrey is the only two-time winner, and was the featured soloist with the McGill Symphony Orchestra on two occasions.

After McGill, he won the 2016-17 Rebanks Family Fellowship at the Glenn Gould School at Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music. It's a prestigious program for extraordinary Canadian emerging artists who have completed their formal training. The fellowship included a European residency, which Geoffrey chose to split into two: one in Bergen, Holland, at the International Holland Music Sessions, where he pursued training as a soloist, and one in Los Angeles at

SongFest, where he pursued training as a collaborative pianist.

Now he's doing his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in piano performance at the University of Toronto. He's also a part-time faculty member at the Taylor Academy at the Glenn Gould School, a pre-college program for talented young musicians.

Geoffrey said he can't see a life for himself without music, both as a performer and teacher. He wants to continue passing on what he learns from his mentors to a future generation. He has a private studio in his parents' home in West Rouge and teaches students of all ages and levels.

Geoffrey only plays classical music for concerts. "There's so much of it that I can only touch a fraction of it in my lifetime."



JAMES

James Conquer, 23, plays saxophone. He began playing the instrument in Grade 5 at West Rouge Junior Public School. He chose the sax because his father was a saxophonist and he played

Family photo of the Conquers. From left to right, Gabriel, Geoffrey, Allan, Judy, Robert and James.

while the boys were growing up. James plays his father's alto sax and tenor sax as well as his own soprano sax. His favourites are the alto and baritone.

Right now, James is studying classical and contemporary saxophone for a master's degree in the performance program at University of Toronto's Faculty of Music. He also attended U of T for his bachelor's degree. He is currently playing in a sax quartet and contemporary music ensemble as well as doing solo work. He's not trying to do full-time gigs at the moment, but he is teaching privately in people's homes and performs on occasion.

James knows there isn't much career stability playing music. "It's rare in the music industry to have just one job," he said. "but I want to continue making money playing saxophone."

When asked his favourite part of being musical, he said, "I love the rush of performing. And I like the process of learning music, practising, studying and then performing. It's very fulfilling once you get onto the stage."



GABRIEL

Gabriel, 20, plays French horn. Gabriel is a student at the University of Toronto in his third year of music performance. He picked up the French horn in Grade 5. When asked his reason for choosing that instrument, he said: "I just thought it looked cool. I saw all the curls and all the brass and I was just like 'this is so sick!'" He played the horn throughout high school at Agincourt Collegiate and picked up the trumpet there as well.

Gabriel also plays tenor horn, a brass band instrument common in traditional English brass bands. Toronto's professional Hannaford Street Silver Band uses them and Gabriel plays solo tenor in the Hannaford Youth Band, the top ensemble in Hannaford's strong youth program.

This past spring, Gabriel auditioned for the military on French horn and was invited to enlist in the Army as a musician. After basic training, he returned to the trumpet in his spare time and eventually the bugle. "The bugle has an important role in

many military traditions and especially Remembrance Day," Gabriel said, "and if you can play the trumpet, you can solo on the bugle in all these traditional settings."

He was a member of the band at the Ceremonial Guard in Ottawa this summer where he marched during the Changing of the Guard. Now he is a reservist in Toronto with the Queen's Own Rifles band in Moss Park and plans to return to Ottawa next summer.

His dreams for the future involve playing music because he really enjoys performing. He pointed out that the military is one of the largest employers of musicians, and the Army is a great place to develop as a musician and make a stable living playing music. His end goal is to play in the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.



ROBERT

Robert, 18, is the youngest and was motivated by his older brothers. He liked to perform for others. He started with the piano, sang and then went on to play the trombone. He, too, was part of the Hannaford Youth Band program and played with his siblings in the band and various competitions.

He remembers his grandmother playing the piano and the family's love for music led him to pursue his passion through high school and auditions for university this past spring. After getting accepted into McGill University, the New England Conservatory, the Boston Conservatory, the Glenn Gould School in Toronto and the Juilliard School in New York, Robert accepted a scholarship at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he is one of 165 student musicians from around the world working hard and having fun.

On top of his university music courses, Robert practises daily for two to three hours, and has orchestra/brass ensemble rehearsals for about three hours a few times per week. The rigour is preparing him for a bachelor's degree in music and eventually, successful auditions and placement into a major orchestra.

Robert is very grateful to his family for the inspiration he received and this is what he has to say to those interested in music: "Taste your dream, immerse yourself and surround yourself in it."