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Two generations, two dome houses (and a potato farm)

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Dick DeRyk
A few miles south of Yorkton, along and just off Highway 9, are two houses that are not just different and unusual, they are pretty much one of a kind. The one visible from the highway is now largely hidden by trees. But back when it was built, and that is 50 years ago now, it was an attraction. People would stop along the highway for a look, and some would come to the door to see if they could have a closer look. The second one, built 20 years ago, is a mile and a half and a bit off the highway on the grid road where few travel. But in the past year, stories have been published about one aspect of it in both Yorkton This Week and CTV News out of Regina.

The older one is a geodesic dome house built by Elwyn Vermette with many helpers. While Elwyn and his wife Marie sold the house a few years ago and moved to Saskatoon, the second one, a monolithic structure, also built with Elwyn's major involvement, is home to his daughter Tonia and her husband Kirk, who are active in both artistic pursuits and farming in the community and area.

Elwyn and Marie came to Yorkton in 1968 after teaching in Birch Hills for four years, and then taking a three-year university course in the United States in multiple activity industrial arts education. He was hired specifically to set up an industrial arts program in the rural public school system, which included a junior high school in Yorkton, which is now known as Yorkdale School. The program involved students working with slides and sound, 8 mm film, and eventually morphed into an audiovisual program in the junior high school. It was initially a three-year project, but when the three years were up, the school division decided it wanted an audiovisual program, not just in the junior high school, but in all rural schools and the Yorkton Regional High School, jointly operated by the rural and city school divisions. That required a major commitment of staff resources and money. But in a decision, perhaps ahead of its time, the board agreed. And Elwyn stayed to run the program and become the system's media specialist. We should also mention that because of his expertise and interests, he served as chair of the board of the Yorkton Film Festival for 10 years at a time of some turmoil in the organization and a push to move the festival out of Yorkton. Elwyn swore that would never happen. And it hasn't.

When rural school population started to dwindle, the system wanted Elwyn to take on other tasks in the system, which didn't particularly suit or interest him. Instead, he cut back on his teaching time, taking off September and October and May and June, which allowed him to start a small-scale seed potato farm called Prairie Dome on adjacent land. After all, he had been raised on a seed farm near Elrose, Saskatchewan. But more about that a little later. We talked with Elwyn and Tonia about the two dome houses, the why and the how of largely designing and building, with the assistance of others, the homes.

Elwyn Vermette
Well, in the summer of 67, I was sort of halfway between home and Montreal. Friend of mine decided we would go to Expo 67. And so we jumped in the Volkswagen and headed out. And while I was in the American pavilion, it was a relatively open structure, except it had it had a platform about a third of the way up. And I was standing on that platform, gazing at the space, and saying to myself, this is what we need to be living in our climate. And so that was the seed. And from then on it was digging things out, finding Dome Book II, reading some Buckminster Fuller stuff. And finally, two years before we started, we sat down and came up with the kind of a structure it would be, cut out little bits of cardboard, glued them together, and that was it. We were going to build a geodesic dome.

Dick DeRyk
Was that novel at the time? Because if it is, then I'm guessing that your house would have been extremely novel in Saskatchewan when you came up with that concept.

Elwyn Vermette
It was novel a couple of years before '67, but it was all being done in subcultures in California, that sort of thing. The hippies gone back to ground. And when I started on that, I wasn't alone in doing that. There was a fellow here in Saskatoon that worked for the Research Council. He was a chemist, and he had already done some small geodesic domes for the lumber yard here, and they were pumping them out as cottages. So I know there was at least four, but there could have been more that came at that time while I was planning mine, and this fellow was also planning his, and he was trying to do it so that it would meet the national code for Central Mortgage and Housing, so that he could he could get a mortgage for it. So he incorporated A-frames with the dome to accommodate windows.

So you know, we talked and we worked, and so by the time we built ours, there were others that were coming along. It got to be a bit of a community because you know, people would come from here and there with the two artists in Regina and Lumsden, the Holmes, they had decided that they wanted to do something like that and they came up when they talked to us. And we talked about different ways of doing it. And I was going with a rigid triangle pattern where you would make the sections and then bolt them together. And they were going with a hub and strap where you put up a tinker toy type of structure with hubs and straps and then cover up. So that was the environment that we were in. And anybody that was doing anything was kind of in contact with you and you with them.

Dick DeRyk
The locals, when you started on this, did they maybe think you were a little bit out of your mind? Or what was the reaction locally? Was there interest, or was it here's this guy doing such stuff that nobody understands?

Elwyn Vermette
Once we got the structure up, every weekend, August through till the snow blew, there were cars lined up on the highway coming in to see what this was all about. Tonia can tell you that she had given many a tour through the house when we were there, when they were still preschoolers.

Dick DeRyk
The house itself, when you look at it from the road, looks relatively small. When you see the pictures of the inside, it's almost deceptively spacious, you know, because it really does look quite tiny, because we're used to seeing things that have you know perpendicular vertical walls and a big roof on top, and this just doesn't have it. I mean, this was a two-storey building, right?

Elwyn Vermette
But split. From the outside you're looking at receding lines. If you look at a ball and consider the volume of a ball to that of a a cube of the same dimensions, and the cube looks much larger than the ball, although the quantity of whatever it would hold would be about the same.

Dick DeRyk
You started building in '73. Was that the start or was that the finish?

Elwyn Vermette
That was when we started putting the structure up. Planning took two years. It took one evening to plan the structure, and then took the next two years to figure out how to put things inside so it would work.

Dick DeRyk
Did you do the construction yourself? Did you hire contractors? Did you put the triangles together yourself? What was involved in all of that?

Elwyn Vermette
We did everything but the taping of the drywall on the dome itself. Everything else we did, from digging the hole with the tractor, because I couldn't get anybody with a Cat to come out there and do it. They were afraid of what they were going to get into below the surface. We did it all, and the triangular panels were all prefabricated at Harris's.

Dick DeRyk
Gordon and Sheila's place?

Elwyn Vermette
So that's where the basic prefabbing happened. Then we built the garage as a test case. We put in the foundation. We didn't know whether this thing was going to go together well or not. Because when you're dealing with the angles and the measurements, your tolerances are finer than an eighth of an inch to make it come together properly. We didn't know how long it would take to put this thing up. So we built all the panels for the garage, put the foundation for it in, and then we got up bright and early at six o'clock. We were out there, material stacked up, ready to go, because we wanted to get it all done in one day. Marie said she would bring a snack out for 10 o'clock, you know, and keep us going for the day. And she arrived at 10 o'clock, and we were sitting around inside it, looking at the way it had gone up.

Dick DeRyk
Literally in hours.

Elwyn Vermette
Oh, yeah, like in a couple of hours, because we spent the first hour deciding how we would handle them. Everything was pre-depth drilled. And that had, we didn't know how accurate and how well that would work, but it did. We thought if it went south on us, then we could sell that five acres for the garage on it. Somebody would like. That was all finished before we started anything on the house.

Dick DeRyk
Including the interior, exterior, you did the complete garage first? It was your test, it was your lab, it was your laboratory.

Elwyn Vermette
Yeah.

Tonia Vermette
Not the shingles.

Elwyn Vermette
All of the structure and the skin.

Dick DeRyk
Obviously, that was encouraging, and you obviously decided the house was next.

Elwyn Vermette
By the end of putting that up that day, things were going in my mind. Three days later, our jigs built, and we were setting up to start the house. In the meantime, we had to dig the hole and build the foundation. Part of this foundation was going to be 12 feet, and we started to run into stresses. So we designed it out of block and column and beam so that the whole concrete structure, block and concrete structure, was a reinforced concrete structure with block in between all the beams.

Dick DeRyk
How long after the garage did you get the house started?

Elwyn Vermette
Everything started immediately after the garage was up. That happened in middle to the end of July, and the house went up by the end of August.

Dick DeRyk
To what point? Livable or basically the structure was up?

Elwyn Vermette
We actually lived in the garage for a year. So we were able to insulate it and make it livable, but we had the structure up before school started, because in those days I was still teaching full time, and I had started the television and motion picture production courses the year before, and so when it came time to put the building up, the whole class came out, the whole class and Al Flavel came out that day, and with the Harris boys, we put it up in six hours.

Dick DeRyk
The whole thing?

Elwyn Vermette
The whole thing, including a cupola on top.

Dick DeRyk
Yeah, yeah. Have you heard from any of the kids that were involved in that project since? Have you kept in touch with any of them? This must have been quite an experience for them.

Elwyn Vermette
Quite a few of them, like Larry Cross. He came to help with the foundation, and then he stayed with me till it was finished. So he would come out on weekends when he was in grade 12 and help with that. And you know, kids like Dean Bauche, he was there.

Dick DeRyk
I mean, that must have been quite an experience for them.

Elwyn Vermette
They did enjoy it.

Dick DeRyk
Did you do anything unique or unusual as far as energy provision, as far as heating, that type of thing?

Elwyn Vermette
The heating was all hot water radiation, because you can get some pretty fierce air currents going if you go with forced air. The shape of the building, say we had 1140 square feet. That's the footprint. Of course, it was an entrance as well. In heating that particular space, you've got one-third less surface area exposed to the elements. So that gives you a jump on energy conservation right there.

Dick DeRyk
When you came up with this and through the process, what was Marie's take on all of this?

Elwyn Vermette
Well, she would shake her head some days. Everything was always turning out different than she imagined it. And because it was my imagination that was doing it, even though I was able to sketch it out so that she could see, and we had the models so you could see there. But she had to be in it before it really settled in.

Tonia Vermette
Yeah, my mom, very much like my husband, can't envision anything in her mind, even from a picture. She's in it and can walk around and sit on all the furniture and move it all four or five times before she's happy with how it's arranged. She can't see a picture in her mind of how something will be. And when you have a partner like that, I can say, it's kind of frustrating. They just have to trust you.

Dick DeRyk
Obviously, you both have partners that trusted you because the projects did go forward, right?

Elwyn Vermette
Yes.

Tonia Vermette
Yeah, a lot of times with lots of worried looks.

Dick DeRyk
I can imagine. You and Marie have three daughters, but your family was larger because you also had foster kids, several of whom were with you for a long time and became an integral part of your family. The space was able to handle a large family, obviously. Or did it create its own challenges?

Elwyn Vermette
Well, Tonia will see the challenge is a little different than I do. But the basement was well used that way too. In fact, there was a time that Marie and I moved into the basement as well. We could get three bedrooms out of the basement, and there was a full bathroom there as well. And we had the three bedrooms on the main floor. We had as many as ten at one time. Well, that was ten of us, that would include Marie and I. So we had as many as eight children there. They came in families.

It was a split-level interior. We were able to have one bedroom where the beds literally slid under the kitchen. So you had an open room without any beds for during the day, and then at night they just pulled your bed out. Well, it started out they only pulled it out halfway because that's the size they were at that time. That stemmed from a long more drawn-out session I had with an educator. He says, you know, we don't need these bedrooms, you know, we could just have drawers in the kitchen and you just put the kids in drawers.

Dick DeRyk
I'm guessing that, you know, after you moved in, Tonia, you'd have friends over or friends would know where you lived. What was the reaction when kids came over? This was totally different than anything they would have ever seen in Yorkton. Did you get any kind of... what kind of weird house are you living in, type of commentary?

Tonia Vermette
Most kids who came over to visit thought it was pretty cool. And when I was really young, like five and six years old, people would just pull up to the front door and say, Can we see your house? We were very easy, easily abductible children, but that didn't happen in those days. So we toured lots of people through, and then I think I was about six or seven, there was an energy efficient house documentary made, and our house was part of it. And so then everyone in Yorkton saw it in their junior high science class. Even the ones that didn't get invited over to see the cool house. Yeah, we were famous for five minutes after that science class.

Dick DeRyk
If you were doing it again now, Elwyn, would you have changed a lot? Would things have been done differently?

Elwyn Vermette
The emphasis was on being able to build something out of the lumberyard that was different, more green as you would say these days, but was something that was pleasing to you, at least to my eye. And I would be more concerned now with the environmental aspects like which materials should we be using, not only for their structural and aesthetic qualities, but in terms of the environment in large. So those things are different. But I'm still doing the same kind of thing. It's always every project is a step into unknown territory for me, and I can see that I may have done it a little different, but I wouldn't have been able to do that without the experience that I got from doing it.

Dick DeRyk
Let's talk about that monolithic dome, because that's now 20 years ago.

Tonia Vermette
2004, when we started.

Dick DeRyk
The interest in that, did it come from having gone through the building of the geodesic dome and living there?

Tonia Vermette
I would say 100%. Like we grew up in a dome house, which everyone else thought was weird and I thought was normal, because that's all I knew. And the monolithic dome was me doing things the way making all those changes, all of those things that didn't quite work. Well, this was my attempt to make all of that better.

Dick DeRyk
So the decision was made. You said Kirk couldn't quite visualize it, but obviously he was convinced that this was a good idea, or was he?

Tonia Vermette
All happened like the first year we were married. I saw an advertisement in the back of a Popular Science magazine before everything was online and we still had magazines. They published a little magazine out of Italy, Texas, where Monolithic Dome is located, just with all different projects from around the world, things that they were doing and that kind of thing. And so it all started from there, and that was 1996.

Dick DeRyk
Where were you living? Were you living in town at the time?

Tonia Vermette
We were in Kelvington at the time, and then we subscribed to this magazine. We moved to Yorkton and renovated a wartime house. Well, Dad, I handed him tools and learned a lot in that renovation. We took it right down to the studs and re-insulated, rewired, plumbed, drywalled, the whole thing. So it was like almost a new house.

And after that experience, Dad got me a TurboCAD program on my computer and I drew for five years, and we just kept getting this magazine publication. And then when we started making drawings, we went to another monolithic dome. It was from a different company out of California, south of Edmonton at Tofield. That was the closest that we could find, and we went and had a look at that. Monolithic Dome quit publishing the magazine, and everything went online. And I was cruising the internet just thinking maybe there would be a builder in the northern states somewhere that might be able to do a monolithic dome. And lo and behold, there's one in Saskatoon. And we were their first housing project. They had done a storage shed in the city, and we were the guinea pigs for the Canadian Dome Industries out of Saskatoon.

Dick DeRyk
How many are there now? Do you know?

Tonia Vermette
I don't know how many houses or buildings they've built across western Canada now. I know that they've done some churches and other larger buildings, because the great thing about a monolithic dome is it's this thin shell concrete structure that you can get a really huge span with without any columns in the middle. So it lends itself well to community centers and churches and that kind of thing.

Dick DeRyk
People will be able to see the photos of how this thing went up because quite frankly, when we first talked about it, I had no idea. I kind of envisioned all sorts of you know, bent steel things going up to form the frame. And here it is, a big balloon that gets blown up and it has all the window spaces and everything is already in place. Was that custom made for you?

Tonia Vermette
It was entirely custom made. I drew up the plans and then Canadian Dome Industries did the engineering part of it, and then all of that went to Monolithic Dome in Italy, Texas. The fabric is similar to a coverall building, except it's a thicker, heavier material, and it is heat welded together on the seams, except for where we had the windows installed, because we have windows that project out beyond the dome, and those were sewn in with thread.

And then once it arrived and was fitted to the foundation, there were a couple of hiccups there. It didn't quite fit the first time and had to go back. And there was one measurement that was off, and so it had to be rewelded in one spot. It was blown up like this huge balloon, and the whole time during the construction, there was an airlock that you had to go through, this tiny little door that you went in and closed the door and then went in the second door. And so all of the windows and doors, like all of the frames and everything, not the glass, but the window frames, the window bucks, had to be all piled on the inside because everything had to go through this tiny door. So there was a big scaffold that was on a pivot that would spin around so they could reach right up to the top because it's 20 feet high at the center. And so all that was put underneath this big balloon, and then it was inflated. And once it was inflated, then polyurethane foam, and then there were the little clips like that had prongs on the end that they stuck in at intervals, and then they foamed over those clips, and then a wire wrapped around the rebar and held on to the rebar. And the whole time the fan is still blowing, making sure that nothing's falling down.

And they brought up a fellow from Monolithic Dome from Italy, Texas, and he taught the rest of the crew how to spray the shotcrete on. It was pumped in. Concrete trucks came and dumped into this hopper, and then the concrete was pumped through like this fire hose and sprayed on the inside. I guess they use it in the mines a lot. So if you're a miner, I think all those guys knew what we were talking about when we said shotcrete. And it took about six coats, like they'd spray it and then knock any sort of parts that were really sticking out far, and then let it set up and then spray again. So it took about six coats. From start to finish, they were done inside three weeks. They packed up and drove away, and then it was left to us to finish. That was the deal we had made with them. I have Dad, so he was the chief finisher and framer once Canadian Dome Industries left.

Dick DeRyk
That form did it stay or did it eventually come off?

Tonia Vermette
Well, it stayed. It's still on the house. It's guaranteed for 25 years. In some spots where the window bucks were sewn in, we can see the thread was starting to degrade and pop. So we had it covered with a cork stucco product last summer. So now it's finished, like actually finished. It looks like a real house. It doesn't otherwise, it looked like just this big tent because you could still see all of the ripples in the fabric and that kind of thing where the windows were sewn in. So it looked like a big tent.

Dick DeRyk
But it's on the outside, right?

Tonia Vermette
Yes, it's on the outside.

Dick DeRyk
The natural color of that was white or kind of whiteish.

Tonia Vermette
It was a beige color. You could get three colors beige, white, or blue.

Dick DeRyk
And what color is it now?

Tonia Vermette
Now it is kind of a burnt orange, inspired by all the rocks that we have, landscaping around the yard.

Dick DeRyk
So how many square feet in yours?

Tonia Vermette
So it's 1400 on the main floor, and then, the bedrooms upstairs are about 400 square. Well, the flooring is 400 square feet, but how real estate measures is, it depends on how, where you can stand up.

Dick DeRyk
So there is no columns inside whatsoever.

Tonia Vermette
No, it's totally open.

Dick DeRyk
And you've built walls to create rooms or stub walls to create separate areas, I assume, or Elwyn did?

Tonia Vermette
Just the same as you would frame in a regular house on the inside.

Dick DeRyk
Does that present any special challenges, Elwyn, as far as you know, finishing the inside?

Elwyn Vermette
The geodesic dome, it was always angles, and but you would get repeating angles. You eventually got to a point where there was no new angles in doing all the built-ins and the rest of the inside. So in this case, it was always a spherical consideration being able to put in joists for the upstairs portion. You built the mid walls, but they had to fasten onto the concrete structure. So that was interesting doing that. It was interesting getting each individual joist manufactured to fit in that particular position. Those were done off-site at Bredenbury. Other than that, Tonia's great with curves. So yeah, okay, there's an S curved hallway and there's the circular staircase. So you have that curvature that's part of the stair structure, and then you also have that coming through in the bedroom, two of the rooms. The challenge was to think differently than I've had to before that. So it's a very growth-producing exercise.

Tonia Vermette
Dad said that building the geodesic dome was like building furniture, and building this house was like making free form sculpture.

Dick DeRyk
You've been in there so close to 20 years.

Tonia Vermette
Yeah.

Dick DeRyk
You have what at the time was probably fairly futuristic energy sources for heat and power. What brought about the decision to go geothermal and solar?

Tonia Vermette
So we had looked at geothermal for just-energy saving properties, and we wanted to have in-floor heat. And so we have a hydronic in-floor heating system, so there's fluid that's pumped through pipes in the floor. And we checked out the price of what gas, because we're on a back road and we would have had to bring gas in to the site. It worked out to be about the same amount as putting in geothermal. So, either way, we were gonna spend $14,000 either getting gas here or putting in geothermal. And we decided that not having a gas bill was a better idea. So, we have had not had a problem with the geothermal. We did have a little bit of friction with our Yorkton geothermal provider and our engineer through Canadian Dome Industries, just arguing about how big of a system we needed. Because Yorkton Geothermal said we needed a six-ton system for a house of this size in this climate. And Canadian Dome Industries said, no, you don't need that much. You need a 1.5 ton system because of the energy efficiency of the structure. And we went with the three-ton and it runs hardly at all.

Dick DeRyk
That's quite a difference, 1.5 to 6, right?

Tonia Vermette
Yes, because of the concrete. The concrete dome is insulated from the outside, and so all of the heat is on the inside, and it has many passive solar qualities. And so in a passive solar home, usually there is some thermal mass, like the concrete floor, or there'll be a concrete wall that gets heated by the sun coming in through the windows. Well, in this house, the entire surface is one giant thermal mass because all of the walls and the floor are all concrete, so it heats up very slowly over a long period of time, and then it also cools off very slowly, and so it keeps a very even temperature. We can't turn up and down our heat like a regular house because you turn up the heat and three days later it's warm. And you turn the heat down, and two weeks later it starts to cool off. I mean, you can open the windows and turn on the HRV system to bring in fresh air and that'll cool it and that kind of thing. It'll also heat up during the day when the sun comes in the windows and it gets really warm in here in the winter. So it'll be up to 23, 24 during the day, and then at night concrete will exhaust out the heat.

Elwyn Vermette
Yes, middle of February, when it was still under construction, and we were just using geothermal activated. We were a couple, three months into having the heat supplied that way. And the pump quit on the geothermal. And we didn't notice that the pump had quit for three days, and the temperature started to creep down, and all we did was put a small space heater, electrical, and that was it. That held it till they got the parts for the pump, so it's phenomenal in terms of efficiency in that sense.

Dick DeRyk
You also have solar panels.

Tonia Vermette
So we got the solar panels three years ago, we applied for it, and then it took like almost a whole year to get them installed. And so we have a large enough system that we produce enough power that our power bill is basically just the rental for the meter right now. We managed to get in on the

first program where it was a one-to-one, like for every watt we generate, we're credited for that watt. And that we've been grandfathered in now, so because that program doesn't exist anymore.

Dick DeRyk
The people who collect the carbon tax are not happy with you, I would assume, because you're not paying any.

Tonia Vermette
But we actually are charged a little bit of carbon tax on our bill, and I think that's kind of strange, but I guess it just comes on the meter rental, like it's a basis on a percentage.

Dick DeRyk
There's benefits as you said to being self-sufficient, but certainly there's some serious financial benefits as well. Once you are over the initial cost, you know, you've advertised the cost of the equipment. From there on in, it's bonus for you.

Tonia Vermette
Yeah, it will be whenever we pay off the initial investment. So it looks good on paper, but we financed it. So it'll be a few years before that's paid off. But it does feel good to be producing as much energy as you're using. That we're a carbon neutral house here.

Dick DeRyk
At some point you decided that the plain walls were too plain and you were going to do some interior decorating. You are well known locally and elsewhere as an artist. And the inside of the house, I imagine, was was a pretty attractive canvas for you.

Tonia Vermette
So we have a couple of really high walls that were empty for a few years. When we painted the house initially, my husband and his friend sprayed everything with a paint applicator that is normally used for painting barns and stuff. So it was a compressor with the sprayer and did everything a yellow color, like a light yellow. We just wanted a little bit of sunshine inside our house in the winter.

I had traveled a little bit with a friend through Europe and loved Spain and the tile work and the exterior courtyards where the houses didn't have a yard on the outside, they had their yard on the inside of the house. And so I wanted to recreate that inside the dome because the rough surface of the concrete walls kind of reminded me of adobe and that kind of plaster. I started painting the walls, initially the kids' hand prints, and over time your walls get a little bit banged up. And I had cut pictures of magazines out of sort of a Venetian plaster look and different painting ideas.

And so I started doing that when I had to repaint some of the house, paint it all the way up 20 feet in the air with one consistent color. And I painted a climbing rose on my kitchen side of the house. That was probably five years in. And then just recently, I recreated a window out of one of the bedrooms upstairs on another blank canvas of wall with some flowers blooming so that we have a little bit of summer all year, doesn't matter how cold it is outside.

Dick DeRyk
And is that done now or is that a work in progress?

Tonia Vermette
I'm thinking they're both done now. Although I've been known to go back and start painting something that I thought was done 10 years ago, and oh, I see that little bit of shadow isn't quite right. Or I think I like those roses to be a slightly different color. And so I'll jump in there and keep going. But for now, they're done.

Dick DeRyk
Some of your paintings are in the regional health center. Are you still producing that kind of art as well? Or is your involvement with the arts council and your house keeping you busy enough?

Tonia Vermette
Most of the paintings that are, like the movable ones, the ones on canvas, they're in the Yorkton Regional Health Center. Those came out of my Bachelor of Fine Arts exhibition that I did in university. And I had all of these paintings, and then Judy had put together a sort of a gifts of art to the health region at that time. And so I said, okay, this is a great place for some of these great big canvases to go. So they went throughout the health region. And then just recently, during the pandemic, two other artists, Angelina Kardynal and Stephanie Newsham and I painted door disguises and murals in the memory care unit at the Yorkton and District Nursing Home. Just door disguises so they look like cupboards and look like scenes from a kitchen and just to brighten things up and make things more interesting and fun for the residents who are there all the time. It helps with exiting behavior when you make the door not look like a door and like something fun.

They're always trying to pick out the potatoes from Angelina's potato pail. And I have all of my grandma's quilts stacked in the linen cupboard there on the door so that they don't try and go into the linen cupboard and get into that stuff because it looks like a shelf. So that was very fun. I have sort of moved a little bit away from painting recently, and Michelle Easton and I have done some yarn bombing around the city the last few years. So aside from helping with the restoration of the mural in City Park, I haven't done anything that hasn't been on my house walls in the last few years.

Dick DeRyk
The farm that Elwyn started growing potatoes many years ago, you're still growing potatoes. Tell me about that, Tonia, and Kirk's involvement in that.

Tonia Vermette
Potatoes went from five acres to 60 when we were kids, and now is close to 200, part of a corporate farm out of southern Manitoba now. Seed potatoes are shipped all across western Canada, lots of greenhouses, mostly to other growers. And Kirk's got a whole crew out there to ship potatoes and during planting and harvest and over the summer. And until our kids all grew up and left home, there was strawberries and saskatoons out there, but our staff has dried up and growing fruit has more challenges now. Bugs and diseases and other things moved north due to climate change. So there's a few more challenges with growing fruit and just the change in our demographic and how people consume their fruit. They're not coming out and picking 30 pails and making jam and freezing. It's more of an agritourism event, fruit picking, than it used to be years

ago when it was picking for sustenance over the winter. Like there isn't the same canning and freezing that happens anymore.

Dick DeRyk
Are you growing strictly seed potatoes?

Tonia Vermette
Strictly seed potatoes, always only seed potatoes.

Dick DeRyk
My knowledge of potato farming is fairly limited, except that I do know that it's huge between kind of Highway 16 and Highway 1 in that whole Neepawa area of Manitoba. My understanding was always that potato growing requires sandy soil. Am I right or wrong on that? Because you've obviously been growing potatoes on the soil types that are local.

Tonia Vermette
And there is some sandy soil close to York Lake, and we do rotate crops with neighbors because potatoes can only be grown on the same land every five years, rotatation happening in our local area with neighbour farmers. And just depending on the soil type, the sandier the soil, the more irrigation they need as well. It's just they come out of the ground easier for harvest, so that sand falls through easier than the black loam that's all pumped up. Dad could add to more of the details about the potato growing. I know how to drive the truck and pick rock.

Elwyn Vermette
Probably the most important thing about our seed farm is the isolation, because potatoes are susceptible to community diseases. And these community diseases usually come in on the high altitudes, and on the ground, they will move from one area to another, and we're far enough away from all of those. And so when it comes to virus-borne diseases, those are the difficult, most difficult to eradicate and the most difficult to control. And so being responsible for your own diseases, like if something comes in on a bug and you're able to contain it in a two or three square yard area, then you don't develop an epidemic. And that is the primary advantage of where we are. The stones are a problem. We've only got between six and eight inches of topsoil, that's another issue. We're going on 15 years without any virus on the farm, and everything is sampled and checked every year to ensure that that's the way it is. And it's about the only place in western Canada that doesn't have virus. As soon as you get over in the Outlook area, again you're into a community of growers. Disease always manages on the weakest link. So it's not ideal, but it produces a product that's in demand. And the reason it's part of a southern Manitoba company is because when it was time for me to start getting out completely, they were buying almost 70%.

Dick DeRyk
They were buying 70% of your output.

Elwyn Vermette
Yes, this was a very important operation for them. And the only way that they could ensure it was going to keep going was to buy in. And so they bought in and we got out, but they didn't want anything to change, and Kirk was the element there to keep that from happening. They wanted

things to continue to work as well as they had in the past. An operation is only as good as the people you have.

Dick DeRyk
You're 80 years old now, right?

Elwyn Vermette
Yeah.

Dick DeRyk
You're still doing stuff.

Elwyn Vermette
Oh yes.

Dick DeRyk
And I tell people, you know, as long as I'm doing what I like doing and it keeps me active, why would you, because some people have a vision that retirement means you're gonna sit down and do nothing. Which to me would be a killer, but you know, obviously to you as well.

Elwyn Vermette
Well, I never worked a day in my life. It was all fun. Valdy said, "There ain't no work, it's all just play."