



“WHAT ARE YOU GOING THROUGH FOR, BOY?”- H. David Vuckson

I was part of the post-World War II baby boom. My parents (born in 1912 and 1915), along with millions of other parents at the time, wanted a better life for their children than what they experienced living through the First World War followed by the Spanish Flu pandemic that killed about 50 million people worldwide, and then the Great Depression followed by World War II. Those difficult times they lived through amounted to two decades-worth of their lifetimes. Their generation had to deal with a combination of wartime tragedies and the shortages of the Depression years and then the shortages and rationing caused by another wartime economy. Many families had to live by the old adage, “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without”. With the end of the Korean War (1953) there was a desire for a return to normalcy and a great pent-up demand for things new after so many years of shortages.

My father was from a family of ten children who survived to adulthood and, being the eldest son, had to quit school when he was about 15 years old to go to work to help support his family. He got a job working on the building of the Trans-Canada Highway in northern Ontario and the first thing he did with his money was to buy his mother a washing machine to ease her work load.

As the post-war baby boom started to work its way through the public school system in the early 1950’s, the members of the Collingwood Board of Education (this was about twenty years before the Simcoe County School Board was formed)

started to lay awake at night as they considered the ever-increasing enrolment at the town's three public schools: King George in the west end, Victoria in the centre of town, and Connaught in the east end. The Victory Village Community Centre on the lane off Hurontario St. between 8th and 9th Streets was pressed into service as an annex of Victoria School on Maple St. and many south enders, myself included, attended there for one or more years when Victoria was full.

When the catchment area for C.C.I. was extended in 1951 to include places like Stayner and Creemore and surrounding countryside, C.C.I. got an extra word in its name and it became Collingwood *District* Collegiate Institute and students from out of town were bused in, further taxing the capacity of the building. It became clear that a new, much larger high school was needed to replace the Collingwood Collegiate on Hume St. which had opened in January 1926 twenty-four months and sixteen days after the original 1874/79 school building had burned down in December 1923.

The new high school became a reality in April 1954 when the first phase of C.D.C.I. opened on a huge site with plenty of room for future expansion at Cameron St. For the fall of 1954, the former Collegiate building on Hume St. became Senior Public School holding Grades 6-7-8 for the entire town (except St. Mary's Catholic School on Ontario St.). The pressure was now off the three public schools mentioned above and they now had just Kindergarten to Grade 5 instead of to Grade 8 and the Community Centre was no longer needed for classrooms. When Stayner Collegiate Institute opened in September 1961, the Collingwood high school reverted to its original name of Collingwood Collegiate Institute.

There developed a great emphasis on education—it was the way of the future. Education was going to provide the post-war generation *unlimited* opportunities that their parents did not have, parents who had finished their public school years just in time for the Great Depression and, for the most part, did not have those career opportunities that we were going to have. By the time I entered high school in September 1961, we were being told, “You can't go anywhere without an education” and in an assembly we were told to “Get as much education as you can”. Then the question came up as to where all these bright minds were going

to get all this education after Grade 13, so in the post-war prosperity, existing universities were expanded and brand new universities were created and thousands of spaces for students resulted. The proliferation of paperback books made text books affordable. In retrospect, I think that the massive expansion of universities in that era was also partly intended to be a sort of “holding tank” because there were not enough jobs around for this demographic bulge.

In high school there was a Guidance Office (in my time it was Ross Culbert, the Latin teacher, who was the Guidance Counsellor). Here, one could get brochures on various professions to help students decide what they wanted to become when they grew up. I remember one teacher who told us that not everyone was expected to become a doctor, lawyer, or some similar professional. He said that we also needed carpenters, plumbers, electricians, car mechanics, etc. The new Vocational Wing answered that need in 1963 and took the scope far beyond what used to be called “Industrial Arts” or, just plainly, “Shop”. And, of course, there was also the long-standing four-year Commercial Course.

Somehow along the way, the idea developed among the older generations that a university was some sort of “employment agency”, and that as you arrived at graduation day waving your General Arts 3-year Bachelor’s Diploma in the air, you were ready to take on the world, or the world was going to eagerly come to you with job offers. What did come at the end of third year at York University were unsolicited oil company credit cards from every major seller of gasoline. I didn’t drive at the time and cut them up.

I had spent several of my high school summers working as an Office Boy/Messenger in the Collingwood Shipyard. However, during the summer of 1966 when I had finished Grade 13, there were no openings at the Shipyard and I got a job at Kaufman’s Furniture cutting up long sticks of wood for chair legs. The day the Grade 13 results arrived in the mail, my mother drove up to Kaufman’s and walked through the factory to find me and bring the news. The word spread in Kaufman’s that “this boy is going to university”. To men who had worked at the same job for many years, it must have seemed to them that the world’s greatest opportunity was just waiting for me. One middle-aged male Kaufman

employee said to me in all seriousness, “What are you going through for, boy?” I had no idea what I wanted to do or become and when others of my parents’ generation asked the same question I told them I didn’t know. Because I excelled in French and Latin at C.C.I., my mother urged me to become a French teacher and come back home to teach French at C.C.I. “They’re the ones making the money!” she said.

Well, I wasn’t interested in being a French teacher. I applied to only two universities—York (my first choice) and Guelph. I was accepted at both and decided on York. I wrote to Guelph and thanked them but said I was not coming. At York I enrolled in a 3-year “Ordinary B.A.” programme. By 2nd year we had to choose a “major” subject. I had to choose *something*, and settled on Psychology. When older folks in Collingwood learned that I was studying Psychology because my father bragged about it, they would instantly exclaim, “Oh, so you’re going to be a psychologist! How nice!” I had to disappoint them and say that I wasn’t going to be a psychologist but they couldn’t understand that, thinking that if that’s what you’re studying, that must be what you’re “going through for”. How I hated that expression!

I was able to get my summer job in the Shipyard again for the summers following each of my three years at York. My annual tuition fee was \$550.00. No, that amount is not a typo. During the summer in the Shipyard I earned enough to pay my tuition and buy my text books. My parents paid my residence fee. I really went to university because I was expected to. My father said if I did the learning, he would pay for it even if he had to “sell the shirt off his back”. Again, and again, and again, the mistaken and misguided notion of the university as an employment agency would come up but I fully understand that parents wanted better things and opportunities for their children than they had in their younger years.

This brings me to the point of this story. We are all born with different strengths, abilities and passions. My passion from my earliest life was music. Some of this, at least, stems from my maternal 5x great-grandfather Ferdinand Weber who built pipe organs, harpsichords and pianos in Dublin, Ireland in the 1700’s. Some of that passion came down through the generations in my DNA. When I was half-

way through my first year at York University, I knew by a “gut feeling” that music was going to be my life’s work but at the time I had no idea how that would look. I spent a lot of time playing piano at York and, like others before me, I naively salivated over the pie-in-the-sky idea of composing a song or a catchy tune that would become an overnight million-seller and produce instant riches. That never happened.

After I graduated in May 1969, I got my first job playing piano at the Blue Mountain Gateway Restaurant on Saturday evenings. That led to a few other ‘gigs’ in town including the Mt. View Hotel. A neighbour friend of mine, when he learned I was working as a musician, seemed puzzled that after spending “all those thousands of dollars” I was not *using* my education! I *was* following my passion. My father was not impressed. He was actually quite disappointed. I got the “When are you going to get a *real* job?” speech. I told him that someday I would surprise him. He said, “Oh, sure, we’re all waiting to be surprised”. Following my passion further, I also learned to tune pianos. When I moved to Victoria in 1977 I continued tuning pianos and was fortunate to get a job playing piano in the dining room of a local hotel. I *did* surprise my father because, as it turned out in the late 1970’s just before he retired, I was earning more money playing piano than he did as the Sheet Metal Foreman in the Shipyard and it was hard for him to take. He said incredulously, “You make more money than I do!”. He was stunned.

In Victoria I worked in a major piano store for about eight years until I semi-retired. I continue my piano tuning business in a small way to this day. For about 18 years I also worked with the local pipe organ builder as a tuning assistant and general helper and learned the basics of organ tuning so that when he, nearing retirement, didn’t want to tune the organ at our church anymore, I took over and look after the organ to this day and play it on Sundays. I am definitely following my passion inherited from my 5x great-grandfather Weber, working with pianos and pipe organs 236 years after his death in 1784.

Many people work at jobs they hate but do it because they need to earn a living. Life can be much more enjoyable and rewarding if one has the opportunity to

have work where they can “follow their passion”. I am thankful that I have been fortunate to do just that in my life’s work.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant, R. W. O’Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C. where, semi-retired, he writes Stories of Collingwood and still tunes pianos and the pipe organ at his church.