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PENINSULA NEWS REVIEW

A Bunch of Thyme

By Christine van Reeuyk - Peninsula News Review

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Etta Connor is singing her way through long term care wards across the Peninsula and loving every minute of it. Her musical musings, with friends under the banner A Bunch of Thyme, is the latest of her volunteer activities, and a bit of a departure from what she's been offering for more than a decade. In fact, she's been around long enough to earn the lifetime achievement award in the 2010 Hearts of the Community Awards put on by the Peninsula News Review and Beacon Community Services.

Her most substantial work, notwithstanding her love of music, has been in the area of restorative justice. For a dozen years she's been bringing people together to find a peaceful resolution.

Peninsula Crossroads takes referrals from police, the school district, neighbourhoods and pretty much anyone who has difficulties occurring between two parties. They bring all those involved together for a conversation to create impact and define how to make reparations.

"When we finish that, if it's a police file, we follow it through, there's a contract made to do what the group wants," she explained. That way an individual can avoid a criminal charge, and both parties come away satisfied.

"In the schools, we have trained volunteers who are welcomed into the schools and work with vice principal on infractions — it could be between students, between a teacher and a student. Our people bring people together and sort out the differences."

When she retired more than a decade ago, it was a smooth transition into restorative justice work, having taught (through a Camosun College contract) for more than six years at the jail on Wilkinson Road.

"I moved very nicely into this area of restorative justices," she said. "A lot of those guys when I asked 'would you like to plead guilty?' a lot would say yes ... That meant they were willing to fess up. They weren't looking for a legal loophole."



Restorative justice volunteer Etta Connor celebrates a long time of service to the community.

Christine van Reeuyk/News Staff

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She's worked with Peninsula Crossroads Community Justice program filling every role from the chair to trainer, facilitator and public education for restorative justice and restorative school practices.

"We have trainers now that have been training people twice a year, spring and fall," Connor said. "We've never had fewer than 20 people in that training since we started it eight years ago."

She's also coordinating a project with the Saanich Native Support program and Peninsula Crossroads to provide more information and education on restorative justice and to train facilitators.

Meeting the people involved has proven to be a positive.

"This area of interest attracts a wide variety of very thoughtful people," she said. "There's just an entire range of people who come (to the training sessions). Usually they're interested in their community and trying to keep a peaceful-based community and there's a constructive way to do that. It's just a constructive thing to do."

Volunteering within the community also creates connections to other volunteer organizations.

"It requires us to know some of the services that are in our community so we can refer them," Connor said. "Generally you feel pretty darn helpful, and who doesn't want to feel helpful."

She's also worked for the Heart and Stroke Foundation, canvassing the Cordova Bay community from 2001 to 2006. From 1983 to 1990 she represented the interest of Saanich communities on the board of Volunteer Victoria.

But her latest love is of celtic music, complete with guitar, accordion and even whistles — providing a monthly musical program through Beacon Community Services.

"About four of us have a music group called a Bunch of Thyme," Connor said. "We're providing to Slugget House, Brentwood House and the Saanich Peninsula Hospital extended care unit ... We go once a month we play and they seem to enjoy it."

Learn more about restorative justice programs in Greater Victoria online at www.rjvictoria.org.

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