Back-Room Boys Keep the Spirit of Christmas Alive at Perley Rideau

By Anna Rumin, Special to Perley Rideau

On the second floor woodworking shop at Perley Rideau, tucked behind one of the Recreation and Creative Arts Studios, there’s a bustle of activity that’s powered by good-natured jokes, laughs and purpose. The positive vibes and the productivity can convince a visitor that she has stumbled on a satellite office for Santa’s Workshop. Credit for creating this atmosphere is shared between Perley Rideau Recreation and Creative Arts staff and the team of elves -- “the back-room boys” -- the code name for an outstanding team of volunteers. The “back-room boys” work tirelessly to create the woodworking projects provided to the residents and tenants who then assemble and paint the creations and proudly put their names on each. The residents then choose to keep their creations or sell them through the studio or during the Christmas sale in the cafeteria in early December. Proceeds from the sales go back to the residents and the program.

With Ross Imrie, Studio Lead, guiding this merry crew, the back-room boys select from a stockpile of wood to design, cut, sand, drill, bolt and glue to create clouds of shavings that are sucked up into the vacuum system. If you walk into this safety-conscious workshop at the right time, clouds of fairy dust seem to fill the room. The spirit of Christmas doesn’t stop with selflessly dedicating personal time to create a variety of wooden toys that are reminiscent of an earlier time, there is also candy. Chocolates and licorice are shared by Bob, a retired RCMP member, who hands out his bounty to residents as they work away. One resident puts the finishing touches on a saloon shaped birdhouse, another assembles a wooden Dashund that moves and bends so effortlessly that it would be the envy of any chiropractor. There are trains, bedazzled reindeers complete with red nose, Sabre and Arrow planes and even the occasional Whirligig among the 60 or so available woodworking kits that can be selected, assembled and completed by residents.

Head into the back and you’ll find Dave, an Air Force veteran of 35 years whose salt and pepper moustache turns up into a wry smile when a new visitor encounters his wit and dry sense of humour. A volunteer for more than 18 years, Dave works meticulously to design a clock before moving on to a small set of drawers and then revisits his list of repairs and upgrades he has planned. For a first-time visitor to the shop, that great wood smell can cause a reaction similar to smelling new car leather or sniffing chocolate chip cookies right out of the oven. When it comes to the wood that they work with daily, Dave admits that he has lost his sense of smell for it, but when they bring in a different type of wood, then his sense of smell returns, a minor job hazard. And the sensory delights extend beyond smell to the shop’s sights and sounds. There is rarely a moment when someone isn’t telling a story, singing, laughing or engaging in healthy banter that moves like spoken Ping-Pong. The wood shop develops another type of skill, requiring the “backroom boys” and the occasional visitor to strategically lob comments and barbs between the racket of productivity when the band-saws are cutting and the fans are roaring. The fun, verbal jabs and jokes always seem to find their targets.

This magical program, which rivals any of Santa’s workshops, is made possible thanks to four incredible forces: Veterans Affairs Canada, The Perley and Rideau Veterans’ Health Centre Foundation, Perley Rideau Staff and the Perley Rideau Volunteers.

“There is not much “the back room boys” cannot build,” admits Carolyn Vollicks, Director, Community Outreach & Programming.
Saying Thanks and Farewell to Whirligig Creator, Brian Watte

It was a mix of jokes, stories and teary good-byes on December 8th when staff and volunteers gathered to celebrate the decade’s worth of contributions by Brian Watte, a long-time member of the “back-room boys”. Ross Imrie, staff leader of the wood-shop described Brian as” a bit of a cowboy who loves the intellectual process designing kits, but will also sort the screws. And if the equipment breaks down, he’ll fix it”.

Brian’s enthusiasm and passion for the residents and the woodshop is contagious. He was in the Air Force for twenty-nine years and begins by talking about the World War II veterans at the Perley Rideau as his heroes. He goes on to provide examples of their accomplishments including one resident now in the final stages of Alzheimer’s Disease, who holds twenty patents in navigation equipment. Brian describes the wood shop and the studio in general as if it is magical, not only highlighting the work produced by the residents, but their engagement with one another and with the staff and volunteers. One of his roles was designing kits and Brian explains that the genesis of his ideas came from sitting down with the residents and “getting a feel for what they like and then creating something within their skill set”. He chuckles at the memories of one resident who kept making additions to her deluxe birdhouse and another who seemed to paint everything pink.

At the celebration Ross tries to get through the list of things Brian has done including the design and execution of a Van Gogh windmill, and the dust-collector he created for the woodshop. Laughs all around at the fact that the only thing Brian won’t build anymore is a birdhouse simply because he has made too many. Afterwards, Brian heads down to the cafeteria where the new Whirligig he has built is on display not far from his replica Hurricane airplane that is hanging from the ceiling.

“It’s like leaving a family” Brian says, reminding the team they have his phone number when something needs to be fixed. “I’ve enjoyed working with every one of you because you care for the residents – and that is what makes the difference”.

“Besides being an awesome group of guys, they are pretty much the backbone of the wood program, building and tweaking every piece that our residents produce. They seem to only need an idea and they can bring it to life.”

Vollicks echoes the program’s purpose, saying, “Our program strives to provide opportunities for personal growth, self-expression and the development of new or existing leisure skills. We do this every day of the year through positive relationships, supporting and engaging our residents with challenging and meaningful activities in a caring and fun environment.

Splinters:

1. **7**: the number of “back-room boys”
2. **1600 hours**: total number of volunteer hours contributed by the “back-room boys’ in 2015
3. **185**: Number of times was woodworking offered 2015
4. **1783**: participants benefitted from woodworking in 2015
5. **219**: Number of 24-hour days that residents spent in woodworking in 2015 (that number does not allow for sleep. The elves must be envious!)