

DONALD MITCHELL

"One of these things is not like the others.

One of these things just doesn't belong ..."

Don Mitchell mentions this Sesame Street song when talking about his childhood as an adoptee. He says he felt different than other kids, that he 'didn't belong'. "I always felt anonymous. I didn't know who I was. On my life's journey I was always looking for identity, belonging, and family."

Don was born in 1969 and adopted by Gary and Lynne Mitchell in Prince George, B.C. Gary was an engineer, Lynne a medical receptionist. Don has an older sister Darlene. The family moved to Terrace, B.C. and back to Prince George when Don was in high school. He openly discusses a childhood that wasn't always the happiest, and makes no secret of the fact that he and his mother never really got along.

"It was no one's fault," says Don. "We went to a child psychologist, tried everything. But my mother and I were like oil and water. That natural parent-child bond was missing." They stayed in touch until Lynne died a couple of years ago "but our issues were never fully resolved, although late in life she said that she respected me for following my own path."

Don is grateful to his birth mother for bringing him into the world, but has no interest in discovering her identity.

A pivotal event in Don's life occurred in grade four during a public speaking competition. Standing on stage to deliver Donald Duck and his Little Toy Train "I barely got the title out before I broke down, sobbing, blubbering. It was awful." Paradoxically, this traumatic experience eventually led Don to a theatre career and a life of performing in public. "But the fear never left me, only the ability to work with it."

In high school Don was a jock, playing numerous sports. But this was the public, extroverted side of what he calls his "dual nature." "Inside was an introverted, fearful child who would rather be a dancer or an artist." When he was 16 a girlfriend dragged him to her ballet class. "After that, dance became one of my passions and later an important part of my career." To this day he still squeezes in dance classes at Movement Market.

At home, conflict had continued to the point where, at 13, Don ran away and camped on Terrace Mountain for two weeks. By Grade 10 more conflict led to him being sent to a group home. "My friend and protector there was a big, indigenous guy. He was dead from alcoholism by 19. I realize now that, compared to the other guys, I was a privileged white kid, blessed with many advantages. But it sure didn't feel like that back then."

After this, Don only lived with his parents sporadically for the remainder of high school, spending much of this time couch surfing, living with friends' families, while holding down a full time job.

Don also started taking theatre classes and appearing in school shows, trying to overcome his stage fright. "I just played silly little roles, a character inside a box where no one could see me. Finally in Grade 12 I landed a big part in Guys and Dolls and started to dream of theatre as a career."

But the road ahead was a winding one. Don refers to the eight years after high school as a "detour." He moved to Victoria, and worked at McDonald's and Thrifty Foods, becoming a manager. He appeared in countless community theatre shows, but, of course, you don't get paid for that.

"Theatre became my passion," he recalls. "So I finally decided to take the plunge and become a professional." He gained admittance to Sheridan College, Canada's leading musical theatre school. "But I got a late start. I was 30 when I graduated." Don

dedicated himself to acting for almost ten years, doing shows across the country "but I never landed a role on the biggest stages in Toronto, never got the 'big break'. So I always had to find outside work - at Indigo, Staples, in home renovations. I was like the 'little tugboat that could' just trying to stay afloat."

Don's father asked if he knows anyone who is "successful" in theatre "by which he meant rich and famous." But Don has a different definition of success. "When you make a connection across the footlights and hear the butterfly wings sound of a thousand people laughing and you look up into the darkened theatre full of happy people -- to me that's success."

Another successful event in Don's life occurred in 2004 when he was in rehearsal for Charley's Aunt at Port Hope Theatre. Michelle Mallen - whom local theatre buffs may remember as the talented star of several Theatre Kingston shows - was also in the cast. She suggested dinner. Don declined. "I said 'Michelle, I'm a professional actor. I have reams of lines to learn. I don't have time to eat!'" Luckily, he came to his senses, went to dinner, and before long he and Michelle were living together in Toronto, marrying in 2007.

But theatre is a hard road for two itinerant actors who want marriage and a family. "I'd just finished doing West Side Story in Edmonton which I loved," Don remembers. "But I was in my late 30's. At dance auditions I'd find myself competing with 18-year-olds whose bodies are immune to pain and pulled muscles. So I called my agent and said I'd had enough."

But Don will always feel grateful to theatre. "Theatre saved my life when I was a 'troubled teen'. It gave me the gift of forgetting my real life for a few magical hours. It gave me an escape, a purpose, and a family of people who finished the process of raising me when I didn't get that from my real

family." And Don still graces Kingston stages from time to time. Anyone who saw his inch perfect portrayal of Atticus Finch in Domino Theatre's To Kill A Mockingbird will agree that he hasn't lost his acting chops.

Still in Toronto, Don worked for a few years as a home renovator and he and Michelle welcomed their first child, William. Then in 2010, in another fortuitous turn, Michelle inherited a share of her grandparents' home in Kingston. She and Don made the decision to buy the house and make a life here.

"Sydenham District and Kingston became the embodiment of home to me," says Don. "We now have two beautiful children, William, 13 and Adele, 10. I love that my children are surrounded by history. I love that Adele was born in her great grandmother's bedroom. I love that Michelle and I are able to connect with our kids in ways we yearned for when we were children but didn't always have.

"As I said, I was always looking for identity, belonging, a sense of place, and family. And"- (spoiler alert) -"I have found it. I'm very blessed."

But back in 2011, new to Kingston, Don had to find a job. Browsing the KEYS web site, he spotted a posting from Sydenham Street United Church. "It asked for three things: 1.Management experience. Well, I'd managed at McDonald's and Thrifty Foods. 2. Someone who could handle building maintenance and repairs. I was an experienced home renovator. 3. Artistic experience. I was a professional actor for heaven's sake! It was as if they'd read my resume!"

And so the next phase of Don's life began, "but I had no idea of the challenge we faced." It's no secret that congregations are dwindling and churches are struggling. By one estimate 9,000 churches in Canada will go out of business in the

next decade and Sydenham Street United was no exception to this trend.

To put it bluntly, SSUC had to start generating substantially more income to allow it to continue as a church. "The church had an asset - a magnificent heritage structure - but it wasn't being fully used," says Don. A visionary group from the congregation had developed the idea of creating an arts and cultural hub, a separate charitable entity, which could be a lifesaver for SSUC. But no one knew if it would actually work.

So there was a lot riding on Don's shoulders. He had been hired as an 'operations manager', but at first all there was to manage was the germ of an idea. It didn't even have a name. Don suggested The Spire. People assume it refers to the church's physical spire, but Don explains that it's also from the Latin root for 'inspiration' and refers to the last breath an actor takes just before performing. "The breath before creation." And that's what The Spire has become - a welcoming space where people can create and breath. It now seems like the perfect name.

Don describes his job as "spinning 1000 plates on sticks" - from changing light bulbs to co-ordinating community use of the building to growing the bottom line. And, with a lot of help, he's succeeded. The Spire achieved its financial goals and became a dynamic community hub. Before Covid struck, 1000 to 1200 people of all ages flowed through the building weekly to celebrate the arts, to sing, to act, to dance, to learn. And Don is confident those numbers will bounce back.

The Spire has provided a home for more than 20 diverse local groups, such as Autism Ontario, Rideau Waterway Land Trust, Cantabile Choirs, and many more. It has also become a prime concert venue. Judy Collins, Arlo Guthrie, and Liona Boyd

are just a few of the famous performers who have packed the sanctuary space.

"The Spire has become an amazing asset for our city," says Don. "The opportunity I was gifted with was the most significant of my life. I grew into the job with wonderful guides along the way." Don singles out an "incredible minister" Rev. Elizabeth Macdonald, Bruce Hutchinson, chair of Friends of The Spire, and Kenn Doerksen. "I'm just a back room worker. The Spire would not exist without their tireless dedication."

In concert with his work at The Spire, Don has become increasingly involved in community issues, although he resists the term 'community activist'. "Just say I'm 'engaged'". The event which 'lit the fuse' was Queen's decision to build a new playing field on West Campus, which threatened to cause considerable light and noise pollution in the surrounding neighbourhood. "I was outraged," recalls Don. "For myself. For my neighbours. So I went to meetings and raised a ruckus. Ironically, given my excruciating early struggles with public speaking, my years of acting had taught me how to speak to a crowd."

In the end a compromise was reached and Queen's became a respectful neighbour. "But I realized, although we'd 'won', that I'd come on too strong. I had to be more than an angry voice if I wanted to make a difference. So I started reading planning books, going to Planning Committee meetings, volunteering for City Committees."

Don has just completed a rewarding six year term on the Municipal Accessibility Advisory Committee. "We vetted every development for accessibility. Many buildings, including The Spire, fell woefully short. We undertook a major re-fit in 2017 and I'm proud to say that The Spire is now fully accessible."

Many other issues engage Don - "homelessness, affordable housing, heritage buildings, saving trees, you name it. Actors are very self-absorbed. I had to learn to get outside myself and connect with others for good." Don is now vice chair of the Sydenham District Association "except there's no chair so I guess it's me. Now I get asked to other districts to speak about planning and other issues. I still speak from the heart - like Jimmy Stewart in Mr. Smith goes to Washington - but I'm more measured now. I try to bring people together, not divide them."

And now Don faces another life changing moment. He's moving on from the Spire. It wasn't an easy decision. Don has forged a deep connection with the old building. "Many nights after concerts when everyone's gone and I'm alone in the sanctuary in the darkness, I play the grand piano and sing musical theatre songs into the wee hours. This is a place and a practice that's nourished me for over 11 years. But now it's time to hand The Spire over to someone else who will lead it in new and exciting directions."

As to what he'll do next, Don has no firm plan. "I want to continue to grow. I might even go back to school." In some ways Don seems like a Luddite - he doesn't own a cell phone or drive a car, and believes in old-fashioned values like 'do unto others ...' "I want to do something that has social worth, where I can be of use to people."

Considering this, might he run for city council? He offers a definitive "Maybe. But whether I run or not I'll continue to show up, to speak up. I'm as passionate about public engagement as I am about theatre."

And Don doesn't seem worried about what the future holds. "As an adopted child I didn't know who I was. But I know now. When I was young I had some dark days. But now, with my

inspiration from *The Spire*, and my bond with Michelle and the kids, I'm living in the light."

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Doug Bowie

October 28, 2021