

COMMENT

MY HOME



LAURA FURSTER

Hamilton owns its success

it is not a Toronto mentality making our city great place

Let me begin by stating clearly that I adore Toronto. I grew up in the GTA, did my undergrad at the University of Toronto, and have spent many afternoons rambling around the streets of Kensington Market.

I love Toronto, but I love Hamilton even more, and I can no longer watch idly as Torontonians try to claim Hamilton's success as their own.

Recently, Toronto Life boldly declared on their cover, "Toronto's new hot spot: Hamilton!" Thanks for the nod, big brother, but Hamilton is not actually a district of Toronto. It's a whole other city, about 60 km away from you, as the crow flies.

I will gladly give credit where credit is due. We all know about the migration of many former Toronto residents to Hamilton, precipitated by impossible housing costs in Toronto. Yes, there has been some added financial and cultural energy pumped into Hamilton as of late, but no, it is not a Toronto mentality that's making Hamilton a great place to live.

I have lived for significant lengths of time in Mississauga and Guelph, and have been in Hamilton now for two years. In my heart and soul, I am a Hamiltonian. This city speaks to and for me in a way that no other Canadian city ever has. Having grown and gone through many formative experiences in other places does not mean that those places can lay claim to my current success.

Hamilton has a vibe that is not akin to Toronto's. I have felt vibes similar to Hamilton's in Havana and Amsterdam, but in my experience, Montreal and New York are far more Torontoesque than we are. It's not about proximity — it's about attitude.

I hear two distinct sentiments from people who are new to visiting Hamilton: "It's a pretty good city, if you overlook the bad parts," and "I don't know what those people are complaining about."

The mentality that there is something not quite good enough in Hamilton's esthetic sheen is one that stinks of Toronto. But, it's not about the existence of a few shabby buildings. It's not about the good and bad neighbourhoods. It's not about the homeless population. All of these things exist in Toronto, in spades.

It's about a long-held view that Hamilton is not elite, and those who cling to that opinion will never be among those who are contributing to Hamilton's greatness. Being great, for Hamilton, does not mean being revered by our neighbours. It means being a strong, progressive, creative, and compassionate community that is rife with talent and ambition.

And, if you don't "get" Hamilton, well, that's just too bad for you.

We don't need Toronto's approval to let us know that we're an incredible city all on our own, and we don't need to pretend that we invented the oversized lawn sign to feel secure in our selfhood.

Those who are moving from the GTA or closer cities such as Burlington and Oakville because they see greatness in Hamilton are doing so because their attitude jives with ours, and we welcome them because we recognize that we are only made stronger by growing our community of like minds.

Rebranding as "HamOnt" rather than "Hammer City," or "Steeltown," has been part of an initiative to rejuvenate Hamilton's identity. However, I see no shame in remembering Hamilton's roots. We are so much more than a bunch of Toronto expatriates — the people and the industries that have led us to where we are now trace a deep and complex history, and include both ancestral residents and new arrivals who share a common vision.

Hamilton was also once called the Ambitious City. Perhaps it's time we reinstate that title.

Laura Furster is a fine artist, literary writer, and journalist living in downtown Hamilton. She can be found on Facebook/Twitter/Instagram, and at www.laura-furster.com. Contact: laura.furster@outlook.com.

Being great, for Hamilton, does not mean being revered by our neighbours.

LAURA FURSTER

DAUGHTER IN THE HOUSE

Back-to-school time can't arrive soon enough

But I give the kids a break. They will be on their way before we know it



PAUL BENEDETTI

One evening last week, I noticed my neighbour Dave standing in front of his house staring blankly up into a tree.

This is not totally unusual behaviour (well, at least not for Dave). He may have been contemplating how many maple keys would soon drop in his driveway or estimating the barometric pressure in preparation for his drive up north the next day.

I wandered down and asked him what he was doing.

"I'm checking this here," he said, pointing to a gnarly tree at the side of his driveway.

"It's got a big crack in it. I think it may be done. It only looks good for about 15 minutes every year," he said.

"Careful with that," I said. "You could say the same thing about us."

We sat down on the front stoop and Dave said, "My house is in chaos," shaking his head.

For a minute, I thought the worst. "What's wrong? Are you out of gin? I can

When they arrive back from a long school year away, it's all wonderful and happy. And then there's day two.

get some from my house," I said, knowing we keep a bottle in the first aid kit for emergencies.

"No, my daughter's home from university."

Ah, yes, that, I thought. Even gin wouldn't fix that.

I should know. Both of us have our last kid — daughters — in university and now home for the summer.

When they arrive back from a long school year away, it's all wonderful and happy. And then there's day two.

The first thing I noticed was the trail of stuff everywhere. Knapsack left strategically at the bottom of the stairs maximizing the possibility of killing dad in a tragic fall. Multiple pairs of shoes in the front hallway, not lined up against the wall, oh no, the shoes are strewn all over the place, like little parent landmines to trip over.

And then there's the clothes.

I love my daughter, but to say she's messy is like saying Anthony "The Mooch" Scaramucci has a bit of a potty mouth.

She leaves a trail of clothes everywhere she goes: jacket on the dining room table, running shoes in the kitchen, gym socks in the couch cushions, and the upstairs hall is littered with unmentionables that shall remain, well, unmentionable. (I think some of them are underwear, but they could be just stray pieces of coloured ribbon.)

And then there's the bathroom. Going in there after Ella's had a shower is like trekking into a Cambodian jungle after a hurricane — only more messy. Once the steam clears — she only runs the hot water for an hour or so — it's hard to find the counter because it's covered with wet towels, hair bands, makeup bottles and jars, and the one I love the best, her hair straightener still plugged in and glowing at around 1,000 de-

grees centigrade. I've learned my lesson. Now I go in wearing oven mitts and a football helmet. It's safer that way.

Then there's the towels. After Ella was home for about a week, I couldn't help but notice that our previously white towels were now streaked with what appeared to be either engine grease or tar. Since I had given up making asphalt as a hobby years ago and my wife had not signed up for Car Repair for Beginners, my suspicions turned to my darling daughter.

"What are these marks?" I asked my wife, holding up a towel that looked like the start of a Jackson Pollock painting.

"Oh, that's Ella. It's her mascara. I bought wipes for her, but I guess she forgot to use them."

Apparently, she forgot about 47 times, because every towel in the house looks like it was used to clean hub caps, a delightful touch that I'm sure future guests will appreciate.

"Does it wash out?" I asked, naively.

"Are you kidding?" said my wife. "You couldn't get that off with a flame-thrower."

If you want to leave a message for future generations, just jot something down with Maybelline Great Lash. Aliens will be reading it in 3018.

I recounted all of this to Dave, who just sat there shaking his head. "I look forward to getting my house back," he sighed.

Me too, but in the end, we agreed we should maybe give the kids — and the tree — a break.

They'd both be on their way before we knew it.

Paul Benedetti is the author of *You Can Have A Dog When I'm Dead*. Reach him at pbenedetti6@gmail.com

OUR OWN SPACE

Don't tell the kids, but we bought a new house

This week, five years into it all, we're moving into a new home in Dundas



THOMAS FROESE

So, the children's mother and I bought a house.

"Let's not tell the children," she said.

"OK," I replied.

So we didn't.

Now before I share why, let me say that we all have a relationship with our houses, and in my family I'm the one with a sort of long-suffering in this union.

This is the story.

Our friends were moving to British Columbia. "We want to sell our house," they announced. "To you." No realtor. No listing. "We want you to have it."

It was a fine house in a desirable part of Dundas, one of the GTA's most interesting and fortunate communities. It could have easily sold for more money to anyone. But it was offered to us like a gift, from nowhere, like gracious wind on a calm day to an unsuspecting sail.

We knew we couldn't live in it. We worked and lived in Uganda most of the time, and would continue for some years. So we bought the house, rented it out, and left for Africa as usual.

When back in Canada, I'd visit. The house needed work. Sometimes the children were along, with, naturally, their questions.

"Dad, why are we sleeping in this empty house?" (Garage sale.) "Dad, why are these bricks in our van?" (New driveway.) "Dad, why are you landscaping this house?" (I'm helping the people living here.) That's what I'd always say.

Four years later, at a certain tree at the Dundas Driving Park, we told the children. "You mean you bought a house four years ago? Without telling us!"

"Uhuh."

That sharing came last summer. This week, five years into it all, we're moving in.

It's a different feeling. For the first time the children will know their own space in one place year-round. I feel newly arrived myself, like a foreigner, somehow, to this



THOMAS FROESE

A house with a view is what Thomas Froese's family has purchased. "The children will now see a gnarled and bent willow tree in summer, then fall," he writes. "Memories will now collect in ways as different and fresh as summer snow."

great city of communities.

I also find myself talking to this house. Feeling for this house. A large hole for a walkout is punched into its lower back. The entire basement is under construction. Sharp saws have cut open its concrete floor. Hammers have pounded nails into crossbeams. Heavy boots have left their marks.

It's messy work. And the house, like any house, is resistant to change. But in the quiet moments I look around and reassure the place that it has great value. That it's loved more than it realizes. That despite its doubts and this difficult work, it's not wasted space. And while our relationship started with an ocean of distance, the world now knows about us.

Through their new front windows, the children will now see a gnarled and bent willow tree in summer, then fall. For the first time they'll know winter (which I haven't experienced fully in 15 years.) Then spring. Memories will now collect in ways as different and fresh as summer snow.

The house will also see things: family, friends, food, laughter, games, lovemaking and whatever more. It will see and hear everything. When I consider this, I hear the house whisper back to me.

"It's good. Very good," it says. "But I am a

house. Only a house. A collection of wood and brick and mortar. I will hold your family memories for a season of time, yes. But I'm not the memories themselves. And one day I too will be piled on the ash heap of history."

Then the sadness. But this too is good and necessary. And this, I suppose, is why we didn't tell the children. We didn't want them distracted by some time and place not yet in front of them.

Our friends, by the way, didn't stay long in British Columbia. You know how things go. Plans change. Several years ago they returned to Ontario. This too is life. Do you know what makes God laugh? People making plans. That wonderful Yiddish joke.

And that tree at the Dundas Driving Park? It's one of the more striking trees in Hamilton. You'll know the one. You'll see it's perfect for climbing and sitting and listening to secrets, to hidden things, like a child might. When I walk past it, I think about these mysteries.

Maybe sometime I'll see you there.

From his new home in Dundas, Thomas Froese writes about fatherhood, travel and life. Find him at www.thomasfroese.com

COMMENT ARTICLE GUIDELINES Please send articles via email to Howard Elliott, helliott@thespec.com.

Length should not exceed 750 words. Include a short (two-sentence) publishable endnote that identifies you. Include your full name and daytime phone number for verification as well as a headshot sent as an email attachment. We require at least 200KB for reproduction. We reserve the right to edit, condense or reject articles.