

Interview with ‘day-oner’ Denis Gibbons

## Former sports writer says new newspaper was well-received from the start

By **LISA TALLYN**  
Staff Writer

Denis Gibbons had been working at the Acton Free Press for about four years when his editor Hartley Coles told him in July 1973 that Dave and Jim Dills were planning on opening a paper in Georgetown.

Coles was going to be editor of the new publication and asked Gibbons if he wanted to be sports editor there.

“I was shocked, I couldn’t believe it,” said Gibbons who was the Free Press sports editor at the time. “I wanted to go because it was a bigger area to cover. I was quite familiar with the sports program there and I knew they had an excellent hockey program at all age levels. I was anxious to expand my horizons.”

He already had several good sports contacts in Georgetown and about a week before the paper launched in October he took some time to touch base with them.

“Georgetown High School was one of the main places I went,” said Gibbons. “We were extremely well received and I got tremendous cooperation right from day one.”

He said before he started working here he had a bad image of Georgetown hockey because as an Acton boy he used to play against Georgetown in Memorial Arena.

“All I could think about Georgetown hockey was getting crushed in the boards in the corners of the rink whenever I went in there.”

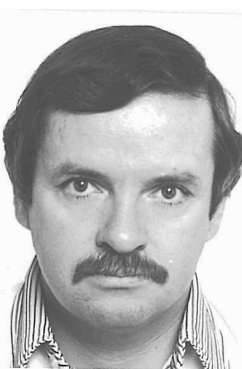
Because of that memory, his image of the Georgetown sports community was “that they were all goons but I found out the exact opposite—that they were very nice people.”

Gibbons said when the first edition of The Independent hit the streets residents commented about how “newsy” it was.

“They weren’t used to that kind of coverage. Each week we got more and more compliments and representatives of organizations poured into the office to have their material published.”

He said there was a tiny bit of loyalty to The Herald from oldtimers around town.

“Those people were a little cautious with us when we went out to take photos, as if to say— what right do you have coming into this town?



**DENIS GIBBONS**



But that sort of reaction was very small.”

Gibbons remembers taking a good football photo that ran in the first edition across the full width of the page. Georgetown lost the game 7-2 to T.A. Blakelock, but Gibbons said it turned out to be a very successful year for Georgetown, which made the Halton finals (losing to Burlington Central) and played at Ivor Wynne Stadium in Hamilton.

Gibbons recalls putting in long hours throughout the week— full days Monday to Friday, often a couple of nights a week and two to three hours on Saturdays and Sundays taking photos of community events, tea parties, cheque presentations and bazaars. Along with sports and photography, he also covered Esquesing Township council.

The paper was put together Tuesdays. Gibbons, who works as a freelance journalist, said they used to type the stories onto newsprint, staple a separate sheet with a

headline on it, and send it up to Acton where it was typeset and printed.

Coles, who was born in Georgetown and spent his early school years here, was a perfect choice to be The Independent’s editor, Gibbons said. He remembers Coles’ column in the paper’s first edition was “hugely popular because it brought back a lot of memories to older Georgetown residents.”

“Another big factor in the success of the paper was the hiring of Anne Currie, who had been a reporter at The Herald for many years and knew the Town very well. She brought all of her contacts with her.”

Gibbons remembers he and Coles were busy running the Acton Free Press with Kay Dills right up until The Independent opened, but fortunately Currie had left The Herald early and was able to build up a stock of photos and stories for the first edition.

“Advertising manager Don Ryder also had some knowledge of Georgetown because he was already making calls there during his days as advertising manager of The Acton Free Press. Georgetown merchants used to like to attract shoppers from Acton,” he said.

He remembers the paper’s advertising revenue starting off slow, but increasing very rapidly.



The Georgetown Independent’s Main Street office in 1973.

## Tales from the inside Former staffers spill secrets

Sitting quietly in my darkroom making screened prints, the door was suddenly thrown open. A co-worker ran in, slammed the door and began clawing at his belt buckle and ripping off his pants.

I was a little taken aback (and more than a little concerned....) until he told me he’d slipped with the Xacto knife, and was checking to make sure he hadn’t cut something important.

—Kevin Powell, composing

I remember when the Dills started The Georgetown Independent 40 years ago ... champagne was served to all to celebrate! My sister Debbie MacDougall was hired to work for three months to replace a girl that broke her hip... she ended up working at the paper for 34 years!

—Dolores Black, composing



Reporter Pam Douglas conducts a hard-hitting interview with a groundhog for Groundhog Day. Douglas went on to be an award-winning reporter for our sister paper The Brampton Guardian.

I was a reporter/photographer at The Independent between 1983 and 1989.

One of the highlights was the time I went to the movies with Canadian comedian John Candy. He used to sponsor a minor hockey team in Georgetown, and when his movie *Splash* opened in 1984, he took the whole team to see it, and I went along.

I interviewed him, and got his autograph, which I still have. He wrote, “You give good interviews”.

Then there was the 1986 Disney made-for-television movie *Young Again* filmed around Georgetown, and some of it was filmed overnight in The Independent office.

Lindsay Wagner played a reporter, and Keanu Reeves was in it, too, although I don’t recall ever seeing him. Several staffers were paid a pretty nice amount of money to be extras, but most ended up on the cutting room floor.

My part ended up in the movie, though. I was probably visible for all of four seconds, but it was a bit of a thrill at the time.

—Pam Douglas, editorial

I joined the paper in 1982 working in the classified department and was there for 20 years. Needless to say it was just like family, our first office on Main St. was so friendly and people dropping in to give what they thought was earth shattering news.

My first boss said it was like working at the country club, how true he was!

—Carol Hall, classified



The Independent & Free Press staff celebrate being named Canada’s top community newspaper in 1997.

## A Ted Bit

## Compiling 40 years of history was a labour of love

This issue of *The Independent & Free Press* marks a milestone—it was 40 years ago to the day that the first issue of The Georgetown Independent hit the street.

The Independent was the third community newspaper owned by the Dills family in Acton, the others being the Acton Free Press and The Milton Canadian Champion.

The first Independent office was located at 19 Mill Street in Georgetown, across the street from the Royal Canadian Legion.

By September 1977, The Independent had outgrown its Mill Street location, and 30 Main Street South became its new digs. That’s the location where my story begins.

Since January 1, 1976, I’ve written a diary. As I thought about writing this column, I thumbed through my diary, to see when I first entered the 30 Main Street South office.

January, 22, 1982, I wrote: “Dropped by The Independent office to meet editor Hartley Coles about doing some freelance work. He said not now, maybe later.”

I closed with “Time will tell if that pans out or not...”

A month later, Hartley called me and asked me to do story from the list of possible stories and photo essays I’d submitted. It was about local shepherd Peter Branch, who raised lambs at his Steeles Avenue farm, selling his Easter lambs to ethnic groups.

Reading that entry, I thought how ironic— now I raise lambs.

Hartley and I became good friends—not only as an employee, but also a mentor.

I was a writer, but not a journalist. New writing is a completely different style— a style I had to learn.

“Give me your stories,” said Hartley, “I’ll edit them, and you can see what changes I make— you’ll learn from that.”

He was correct. I found myself dropping the extraneous ‘thens’ and ‘thats’ and making sure I reversed a sentence from time to time to add variety.

Shooting was natural for me. I had no problem covering news events. For years I’d studied the work of master photojournalists in the Time-Life journalism books.

February, 1983, Independent dark-

**Ted Brown**



room technician Nancy Pundsack wanted to visit someplace warm, and needed someone to cover the darkroom duties. Hartley suggested me—I started working in the darkroom in the basement of 30 Main Street South, ‘souping’ film and making contact sheets.

I later was asked to work Monday mornings in the Acton Free Press building in Acton, souping film for the Acton staff, then brought them to Georgetown to make the prints.

*‘Each editorial staffer was assigned a decade to research and pull highlights from back issues. I will say, it was the most gruelling, but satisfying, job I’ve undertaken in some time.’*

Once again The Independent experienced growing pains, and moved to 211 Armstrong in the spring of 1990. In 2000, we moved to Georgetown Market Place Mall for 13 years, until the most recent move this past summer, to our Market Place unit on the east side of the building.

When I started, The Independent was nine years old. I had no idea I’d still be here 31 years later. I guess it has ‘panned out.’

When we talked about this 40th anniversary celebration, we decided to produce a special edition newspaper, celebrating the 40 years.

Each editorial staffer (Lisa Tallyn, Eamonn Maher, Cynthia Gamble and myself) was assigned a decade to research and pull highlights from back issues.

I spent several hours in the Esquesing

Historical Society archives at the library, pulling out old black and white negatives and copying them on a light table. Back at the office, I then opened them in PhotoShop to reverse the negatives to positives and adjust the contrast, making them suitable for publication.

I will say, it was the most gruelling, but satisfying, job I’ve undertaken in some time.

I noted the info from each photo and made it available for managing editor John McGhie so he could implement that info into the caption.

It was certainly a trip down memory lane. I’d looked at the files, recognizing events I’d photographed in the 80s, 90s, and so on, right up to present time.

Being the oldest employee still working here, I was able to recall many of the news events my colleagues had pulled out of the archives. We all worked together, making sure we had a good cross-section of the news of the day— some items quite significant, others a bit quirky.

The final product—40 pages for 40 years (plus eight more pages for good measure).

I think it’s pretty cool. It was certainly a labour of love from all the editorial and ad staff here. We hope you enjoy it.

In my 31 years, I’ve seen a lot. Fires and accidents in the middle of the night— I’ve witnessed people at their very worst.

But it’s also been a pretty good ride.

As a journalist, I’ve met Prime Ministers, like Joe Clark, John Turner, Brian Mulroney, Kim Campbell, Jean Chrétien, and Stephen Harper. My one regret was I never met Pierre Trudeau, but his son Justin was in town a few years back so I now receive a Christmas card from him and the family.

I’ve kibitzed with sports celebs like Ernie Whitt, Tom Henke and Duane Ward, not to mention countless NHL heroes at Hockey Heritage dinners over the years. I’ve chatted with musical greats like Gordon Lightfoot, Blue Rodeo, Murray McLachlan and many others.

But best of all, I’ve spent the past 31 years working with some of the best people in the world— the residents of Halton Hills.

So our beloved Independent & Free Press is now 40 years young.

Happy Birthday old girl, and may you celebrate many, many more.