

Warton Willie has died at the age of 13

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Owen Sound Sun Times

The pug-nosed albino groundhog that has served as Warton's famous weather prognosticator for the past 11 years has died.

Warton Willie, who was 13 years old, was found dead in his home at Bluewater Park on the weekend, South Bruce Peninsula announced Wednesday.

"He just died in his sleep," Mayor Janice Jackson said in an interview.

"When Gord Glover (Willie's handler) went in to feed him Saturday morning, he was dead. And Gord feeds him everyday. But Willie has been very frail for some time."

The town has decided to hold a "celebration of life" and funeral procession at Bluewater Park on Sept. 30 to honour the furry rodent.

Jackson said the town already has a two-year-old "understudy" groundhog that will assume the role of Warton Willie after the ceremony concludes.

She said she didn't think it would have been fair for the town to say nothing of the

elder groundhog's demise and simply present the younger groundhog as Willie on Groundhog Day.

"It just wouldn't be right to simply switch the two out and pretend that nothing ever happened," she said.

"I think we owe a lot to Warton Willie and I think this is an appropriate tribute to him and I hope a lot of people come out on Sept. 30."

A Groundhog Day festival has taken place in Warton since 1956 when founder Mac McKenzie decided to throw a mid-winter party in a local tavern with some friends. McKenzie died last month at age 90.

Over the years, several albino marmots have served as Warton Willie who, according to legend, can predict whether or not there will be an early spring or six more weeks of winter depending on if he can see his shadow or not on Feb. 2.

The death of Willie in 1999 made international headlines. Festival organizers, at the time, said Willie was 22 years old when he died just two days before his big prediction. Since no stand-

ins were available, organizers decided to present to the world a stuffed groundhog, in a small wooden coffin with coins over his eyes, on Groundhog Day.

The town then got three new Willies from the Ottawa area, but two of them were found dead in late 2003 in their new pen outside of Warton's library. They may have frozen to death or succumbed to some consequence of water seepage into their tunnel.

The third groundhog served as Warton Willie until he died of an infection in 2006 at age 8. An estimated 300 people gathered in Bluewater Park to say goodbye at a memorial ceremony.

The most recent Warton Willie was captured in a live trap in the Markdale area.

He has whispered his Groundhog Day prediction to four different mayors over the past 11 years — Carl Noble, Gwen Gilbert, John Close and, since 2015, Jackson.

"He was a real sweetie," Jackson said. "It was really fun working with him. He clearly responded to people



SHARED PHOTO

Warton Willie in 2014.

Sept 28 2017

around him and especially his caretaker. It was really remarkable how bonded he was to his caretaker."

She said Willie's understudy was spotted by a little boy in Huntsville, who called the town. Willie's caretaker drove to Huntsville to pick up the groundhog.

Jackson said the town will now search for another

understudy.

"We always have a back-up Willie just in case. It's so critical to the town that we certainly can't leave ourselves vulnerable," she said.

South Bruce Peninsula noted in a news release on Willie's death that groundhogs in the wild don't typically live longer than four years.

"Willie's daily care regimen coupled with living in a safe and protected environment allowed Willie to reach the ripe old age of 13," it said.

The celebration of life for Willie is set to begin at 11 a.m. at Bluewater Park. A funeral procession is to travel through the park where Willie will be honoured beside the statue of his likeness.

Flag raising kicks off May as Community Living Month in Kincardine area

May is recognized across Ontario as 'Community Living Month' and is an opportunity to celebrate the achievements and contributions that citizens of all abilities make and to embrace the diversity of our community.

The work of the Municipality of Kincardine, the Township of Huron-Kinloss, numerous community groups, the local media, schools, businesses and individual residents makes a real impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families.

Community Living of Kincardine and District (CLKD) is grateful for the ongoing support of our incredible community and the progress that is being made to create a truly inclusive, welcome and caring community for all residents, including those with developmental disabilities.

To continue raising awareness and inspiring new possibilities in our community, a number of exciting initiatives are planned for May.

School Outreach Visits

Throughout the month of May, CLKD members, staff and families will be returning to local schools to share messages of inclusion, acceptance, empathy and kindness. Individuals with spend time with several primary classes, reading books focused on acts of kindness, making friends and helping everyone feel accepted. These visits will provide opportunities for students to ask questions, hear about the lives and experiences of CLKD members and learn how they can help to build a school and community that is respectful and welcoming for everyone.

Baby & Me Music Groups

The popular inclusive

music program for babies and caregivers will be offered twice in May! Jenny Raspberry-Martin, CLKD's Infant & Development Worker will introduce babies to music, rhythm, singing and new friends. On Thursday May 25, join Jenny at 10 a.m. at the Davidson Centre. There is no cost to attend.

Kids Included Together Training - Wednesday May 17 - 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Best Western Governor's Inn.

Torrie Dunlap is a world leader on the topic of inclusion, particularly when it comes to kids. She has shared her experiences at TedX, with the United Nations and in communities across Canada, the United States and Europe.

Torrie and fellow KIT staff member Kathryn King are offering an interactive and practical training session for local community

members who work with children.

Learn specific techniques to foster friendships, find out how to identify and build on each child's strengths, and discover how simple it can be to transform your organization, classroom or community into one that fully supports children with disabilities.

This workshop is recommended for teachers, coaches, early childhood educators, recreation staff, social service professionals and parents. It runs from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday May 17 at the Best Western Governor's Inn.

The registration fee is \$100. To reserve your spot, please contact Jolene Shelton, Family Support at 519-396-9434 ex 230 or jshelton@clkd.ca

Kids Included Together Presentation - Wednesday May 17 - 7-9 p.m. at the Best Western Governor's Inn.

Join Torrie Dunlap for an inspiring and motivating talk about the transformative power of inclusion. Learn how, as parents, professionals, advocates and community members, we can help others in our community shift from focusing on problems to seeing the possibilities by



Shared photo

Allan Moore, Kelly Wheeler and Maurice Cotter took part in the Municipality of Kincardine flag raising at the Kincardine Library in support of Community Living Month in May 2017.

adopting inclusive mindsets.

Tickets are available for \$25 and can be reserved by calling Jolene Shelton at 519-396-9434 ex 230 or jshelton@clkd.ca

Thursday May 25 - Jessica Cormier Charity Art Show and Sale - 6:30-9:30 p.m. at the Bruce Steakhouse

Jessica Cormier Studios is hosting a Charity Art Show and Sale at the Bruce

Steakhouse! Artists of all ages and abilities will be showcasing their work and some will be available to purchase through a silent auction. For each piece sold, 50% of the proceeds will go towards the artists and 50% will be donated to CLKD!

The Andrew Parkhouse Trio will be performing and tapas will be on sale for only \$5.