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On-ice relations between Halton Hills, Wenjiang warming up

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Isabella Liu's husband Mark was at home in Georgetown reading the Independent & Free Press one day early last year when he came across an article about this town's sister-city connection with Wenjiang, China.

"Did you see this?" he said to his wife.

Wenjiang is one of the nine districts in Chengdu (population 14.5 million), the fifth-largest city in China - and Liu's hometown.

She came to Canada 20 years ago and in 2016 her family moved to Halton Hills, not realizing that she would soon be a liaison between the two countries through hockey, a sport she knew little about.

"I said, 'Wow.' You move to a new town and it has something in common with the place I'm from originally. It was fate, no?"

Liu, an information technology support employee for Rogers Communications, contacted the town and expressed her desire to volunteer her time for the Wenjiang Festival, which was held here in late October. A group of about 40 Chinese citizens came to Halton Hills, including nine atom-age youth hockey players, who practised with local teams and took part in a hockey day event at the Mold-Masters SportsPlex.

Getting those hockey players from Chengdu to come here, however, was quite a challenge for the town and Liu, who also partners with school boards in the Toronto area to bring international students to Canada for exchange programs.

Teachers in China frown upon students missing any school time, the 54-year-old Liu explained, but she does have many connections over there, including an uncle

who is head of China's soccer federation, who sent the wheels in motion to get the youth hockey team an exemption from studies to travel to Canada.

"The schools don't care about hockey and at the beginning they just said no," she recalled.

"We had like 100 meetings, and finally the Chengdu team said they could make it. The kids were so excited to be here and now they want to come back."

Liu credits Town of Halton Hills councillor and Georgetown Hockey Heritage Council executive member Dave Kentner with getting the puck rolling on the Wenjiang Festival and future hockey exchanges between the countries.

It's expected that about two-dozen Chinese youth players and coaches will attend the Pasma Hockey Development Camp in Georgetown this August and as part of the sister-city relations, plans are for a Halton Hills Minor Hockey Association team to visit China in early 2019.

"We're very excited that we've got all of these spinoffs from the festival - hockey and otherwise," said Kentner.

"The town and minor hockey are working on a plan to send a team over there next year to return the favour by beating them on their home ice, and there'll be a cultural component to that as well."

Liu noted that she'd like to see an arrangement in the future where Chinese youths could attend school in Halton Hills (and vice versa) on exchange programs.

"We're the only (area) in Halton not benefitting from this and it's something we should be doing," said Liu, who was an elite-level middle-distance runner in China.

With Beijing slated to host the



Eamonn Maher photo

From left, Canadian women's under-18 hockey team captain Sarah Fillier poses with fellow Georgetown residents Dave Kentner and Isabella Liu, who helped organize this past October's Wenjiang Sister City Festival here. Positive spin-offs for Halton Hills from the hockey segment of the festival are emerging and Liu has written a couple of articles about Fillier in a Chinese newspaper.

2022 Winter Olympics, the Chinese government has taken up a keener interest in hockey. Two teams from China, featuring some North American players on their rosters, played in the Canadian Women's Hockey League this past season.

The Chinese women's national team has been based out of southern Ontario for the past couple of years in order to improve by playing against Canadian competition, including exhibition games against the North Halton midget AA Twisters.

As well, last week Wayne Gretzky came to an agreement with the "hockey powers in China" to put his name and brand on hundreds of arenas being built across the country. The Great One will also be closely involved with the de-

velopment of academies and camps along with an equipment line.

It's estimated that there are about 4,000 hockey players registered in China, with most based out of Beijing, but Liu said the sport is growing in popularity in other regions of the country.

"Since 2015, it's like a boulder going downhill," she added.

"Think about it. In my hometown Chengdu, we don't have snow, even in the wintertime, because it's in the south. There's no natural ice, ever. So to start to have people playing hockey, that's something pretty amazing. Here in Canada, hockey is part of the community, but in China it's been looked at as a commercial business and they're unconcerned that the kids are having fun. Now,

(Chinese) coaches and parents want to come here on a cultural exchange to see how we run things and what our kids think about hockey. It's not about whoever wins the game."

Liu has also become a journalistic ambassador between the two countries, writing several hockey-related articles for one of the largest newspapers in the country, China Youth Daily.

In one of her columns, she described the class and sportsmanship shown by Georgetown resident Sarah Fillier, who was captain of Canada's entry at the World Women's Under-18 Championships in Russia, which suffered a heartbreaking loss in the gold-medal game to the U.S., compared to the petulance of Swedish men's captain Lias Andersson when he threw his silver medal into the crowd after losing to Canada in the final of the World Junior Hockey Championships.

Liu first had to learn Hockey 101, including what the goalie and captain were, and the mother of three spent a good part of this past Christmas holiday writing articles. While husband Mark is a big Toronto Maple Leafs' fan, she said she only watches the occasional "big game," such as Canada vs. the U.S. at the Olympics.

"I'm like David (Kentner). We are more interested in organizing to make it happen for others who play," she said.

"When I first met Dave he was at the farmers market on a Saturday morning. He was selling tickets with his wife trying to help people. It was a normal thing for them, but this is not common in China, because they just think about themselves and making money. (The Kentners) are the reason why I came to Canada and I think this is what a lot of the kids in China are missing."

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