

# Retired schoolteacher goes back to the land

## Caledon eco-village champions sustainable agriculture

By KAREN DALLIMORE

For six generations, Brenda Dolling's family has farmed in Halton. Her ancestors built the historic farmhouse that now forms part of Bronte Creek Provincial Park, and her father, George Brecken and grandfather Gordon farmed fruit and shorthorn cattle in the north Burlington area. She vividly remembers as a kid, "that hike in the forest, the walk among the wildflowers, building forts in the woods, that is what instills that connection with the earth."

When Brenda retired from teaching primary school it was no surprise that she was drawn back to the land, only this time it was as one of the founding members of the Whole Village Sustainable Farm Community, a new eco-village that is being developed on Shaws Creek Road near Caledon.

At 60, the choice was easy for Brenda: "I knew what I had to do. I've got 20 years left and I don't want to go to Florida and play golf."

If the whole concept sounds like something from the hippy era, it's not surprising. Brenda explained that, in the 70's, such communities often failed. They were places to, "run away and hide as well as create harmony and peace, but with no structure and no balance of privacy and common space."

This time the Whole Village hopes to build on the success of the past and learn from their mistakes. "This is not an escape. There are lots of people in your face. We're trying to live what we believe and invite people in to share it," says Brenda.

The term eco-village is only about 10 years old, but the concept is not new. There are 241 eco-villages on every continent in the world. This eco-village is being developed based on three key principals: intentional community, ecological building practices, and sustainable agriculture, and they will share it with anyone who is interested, from school groups to volunteers to students and adventurers from around the world who may stay as long as they want, as long as they are willing to contribute what they can to the village community.

"Remember the rag-bag? Remember using what you had, using that piece of wood over and over until it was only good for burning?" she asks. For her, life at the Whole Village is no different than how her grandparents lived: working hard, working with nature and working together, but now the glue that holds this community together is not necessarily the ties of family.

It is their commitment to the principles and practices of living a sustainable lifestyle that has brought together the initial core of eleven members. Financially, each member has brought an

initial investment of at least \$12,000, as well as a commitment to monthly maintenance fees. Most are middle aged and up with equity in their own homes to invest, some have young families, and many are still living off the property and working full time jobs.

The equity system is still being worked out based on the needs and abilities of the members, such as their space requirements in the new 15,000 square foot, 12-unit co-housing building that is currently under construction. Each bed-sitting area will have its own private space, including a private outdoor patio, ranging in size from Brenda's 1200 square foot space to one suite that will be home to a family with seven children. There will be common areas such as a library and kitchen area where people will gather for meals and meetings.

The neighbours have been suspicious: it took two years and a good lawyer to get the building permit for their new home, but Brenda hopes that their efforts to build a solid community will gradually gain them goodwill in the area.



Brenda Dolling is pictured here (middle row, third from right) with friends from the Whole Village Sustainable Community near Caledon. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Last year the Whole Village was given a conservation award from the Credit Valley Conservation Authority, in part for planting 5,000 trees and establishing a wildlife corridor, and for developing a conservation plan with landscape architect Brad Peterson that includes a mixture of pasture, crop and wetlands that optimizes the natural geography of the 191-acre property.

This past spring the group planted 30 fruit trees and so far they have established a flock of chickens, an apiary and a small organic garden. Eventually their goal is to supply 75% of their needs from the farm itself, although Brenda isn't sure if she

will see that achieved in her lifetime.

But how do they all get along?

"There's been conflict, a few doozers, but we've worked through it," says Brenda. The group holds regular "Meetings Of The Round" where thousands of hours of discussion and consensus building sort out all of the aspects of the community. Topics can be as complex as the corporate issues surrounding land ownership, to whether each member will have their own phone and satellite dish. "It never ends," says Brenda. "We're always working on it."

And so far, in Brenda's words, "It's been quite amazing."



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