

No three-legged chickens here

Hillsburgh's Everdale Farm teaches organic farming

STORY AND PHOTO BY BERNADETTE WARD

Tucked away from hustle and bustle of everyday life is a 55-acre example of the things that can be accomplished by a little co-operation and a lot of dedication to the concept of sustainable living.

Like the bees that buzz around the giant sunflowers near the community centre, the Everdale Organic Farm and Environmental Learning Centre near Hillsburgh is busy with ideas and workshops that help reconnect people to the land through hands-on education.

The non-profit organization sprang from the ashes of Canada's first free school, based on A.S. Neil's child-centered, egalitarian Summerhill School in England. Although the school closed, it retained its educational charter, which was adopted by the farm's founding members Wally Seccombe, Karen Campbell, Gavin Dandy, Helena Wehrstein and Lynn Bishop.

"We want to be about practical education and sustainable living," says Wally Seccombe, Chair of Everdale's board of directors.

A working farm, local residents have the opportunity to purchase organic produce, eggs, meats and other locally grown or produced goods through what is termed Community Shared Agriculture (CSA).

Members purchase a share offered in quarter, half, three-quarters or full - depending on their needs. Each share or part share consists of a number of points and the produce is assigned a point value, for example one cucumber might be worth one point. Families redeem their points for produce each week.

The farm's certified organic produce is also sold to through farmers markets and to homes in Toronto to generate additional revenue.

Organic farming, defined in part as a holistic approach to farming that does not use pesticides, fertilizers, growth hormones or use genetically modified organisms, is an up and coming approach to farming that garnered some \$1.3 billion in Canada in 2003 and over \$14 billion in the U.S.

According to Campbell, Everdale subscribes to the organic philosophy that it all begins with the soil - healthy soil produces healthy plants and therefore healthy livestock and people.

Along with farming, Everdale offers a wide variety of hands-on education programs and public workshops on subjects that include organic gardening, solar and wind power, seed saving, straw-bale home construction and eco-landscaping.

The farm does not just offer workshops however; it offers the opportunity to see the concepts at work.

As a demonstration of what can be

done, Home Alive - The House that Thinks, Drinks and Breathes, is offered as a guided tour.

The straw-bale constructed residence, designed and built by Ben Polley of Harvest Homes is an example of building technologies and designs from the past, use of natural building materials, wind and solar power and eco-landscaping.

"To get ourselves onto a more energy conservative path we need to rediscover old technologies and work with nature's force's," says Seccombe.

Interspersed across the property are other examples of harnessing nature's power such as the parabolic sun cooker that sits outside the community centre. Turned toward the sun, the satellite-styled cooker generates more than enough heat to boil water and cook food and doesn't make the hydrometer budge. Not too far away stands an outdoor pizza oven that uses a small amount of wood and cooks a pizza in only minutes.

For those considering a future in farming, Everdale is one of nine organic farms in southern Ontario that offers internships where for a full season would-be farmers learn how to manage in an ecologically friendly and economically sustainable way.

Along with organic produce, the farm also cultivates medicinal herbs and has undertaken a heritage seed project. There are also summer camps and school workshops that offer students from kindergarten through grade 12 something more than a walkabout. Students actually work this farm, collecting eggs from chickens and harvesting produce.



The environmentally-friendly straw-bale farm house at Everdale.




Seated on a stone wall at Everdale Farm, are Emma and Ethan Tennier-Stuart

Campbell sees first hand how disconnected many have become from nature and the land. She knows that some students have never been on a farm before and that across North America, this is not uncommon. She cites one hilarious and shocking U.S. study that discovered over 80 percent of the school children interviewed believed that a chicken had three legs.


Why three? Apparently many U.S. grocers put three legs to a package in their stores. As if all this is still not enough to keep

everyone busy, Everdale hosts a number of community events every year including a tree planting, a harvest picnic, a solstice dance and coming up on August 13 - The Red Skies Music Festival which will feature an organic food and beer garden, music and instrument making activities for children and other activities all to the tunes of musicians Karyn Ellis, Ruby Drake, DJ Chico Torro, House of Velvet Kevin Howley Project and Steve Andrews and Guests.

For more information about Everdale including their hours and address, try their website at www.everdale.org or call 519-855-4859.



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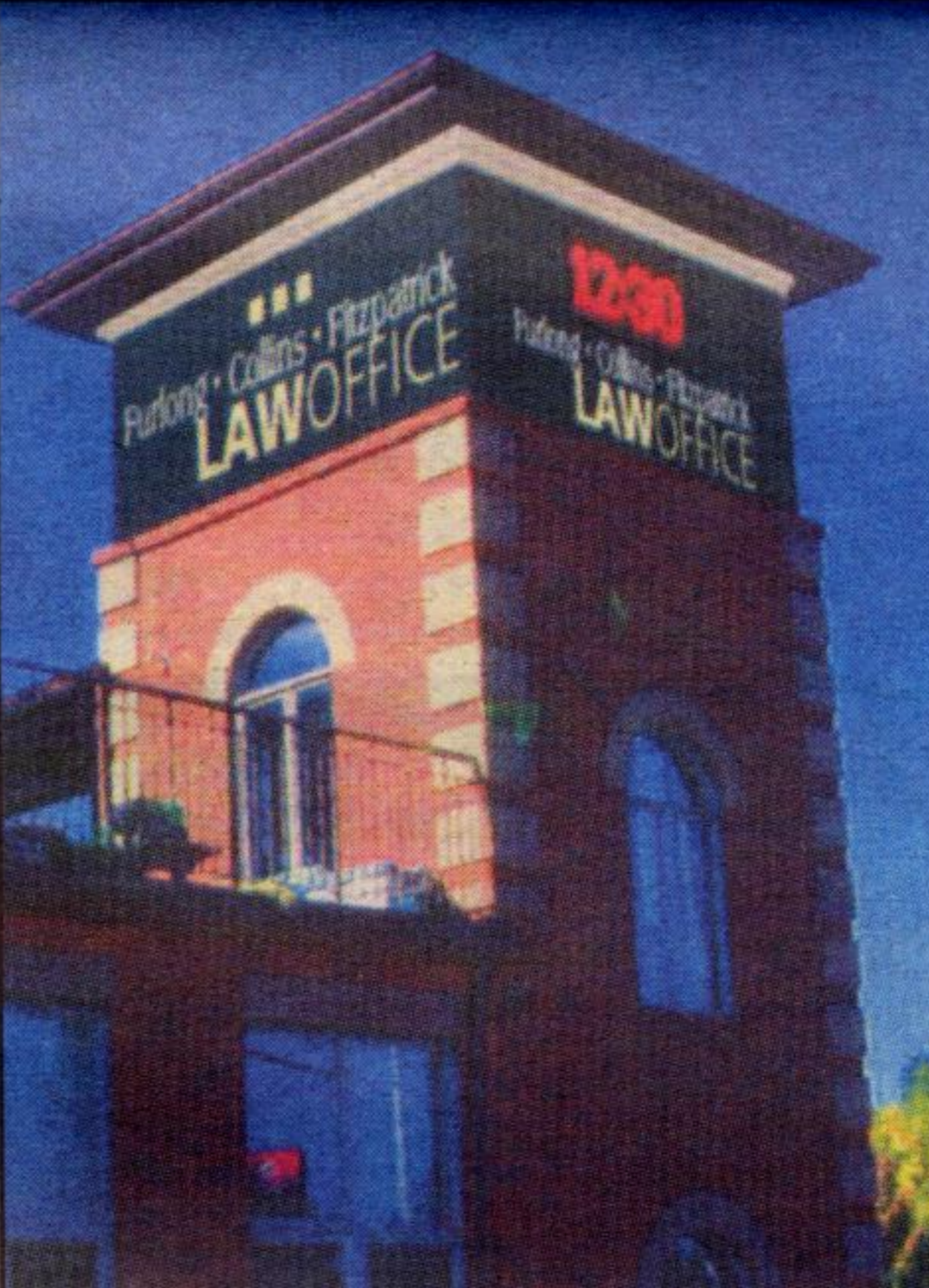
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