

NEIGHBOURHOODS: *The first in a series of profiles about York Region communities and the issues they face*

The road to respectability

Growth helps small-town Keswick shakes its image as the poor cousin among York's municipalities

BY LISA QUEEN
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The wound obviously still cuts deep. Despite Keswick's continued growth toward maturity, residents still recall former mayor Bob Johnston's reference to their community as "murder city" seven years ago, in the wake of a number of fatal domestic disputes.

"He's (Johnston) an idiot. He had no right saying something like that. That's just his opinion. Keswick has its problems, just like any other town," said Carol Nakeff, who has lived in Keswick for 20 years.

Keswick hasn't had that many murders — just the guy who rolled his wife up in the carpet (Brian Kavanagh, who murdered his wife Ellen in 1992) and David Mead (an 18-year-old who was shot by Allan Gauld, a 50-year-old Keswick construction worker during a dispute over a stolen motorcycle).

There were also three other domestic-related murders between 1989 and 1992, which prompted Johnston's murder city reference.

Although his comment inflicted pain on the community, it helped spur Keswick to tackle the problems of domestic violence and its poor image.

Keswick has made huge strides in the past few years, including the establishment of the Sandgate women's shelter.

The community, which used to house a predominantly lower-income and transient population, now boasts new subdivisions, plazas, the Georgina Ice Palace and a movie theatre.

Old cottages have been renovated.

Income figures from Statistics Canada now consistently show many Georgina neighborhoods aren't the destitute communities outsiders remember from a generation ago.

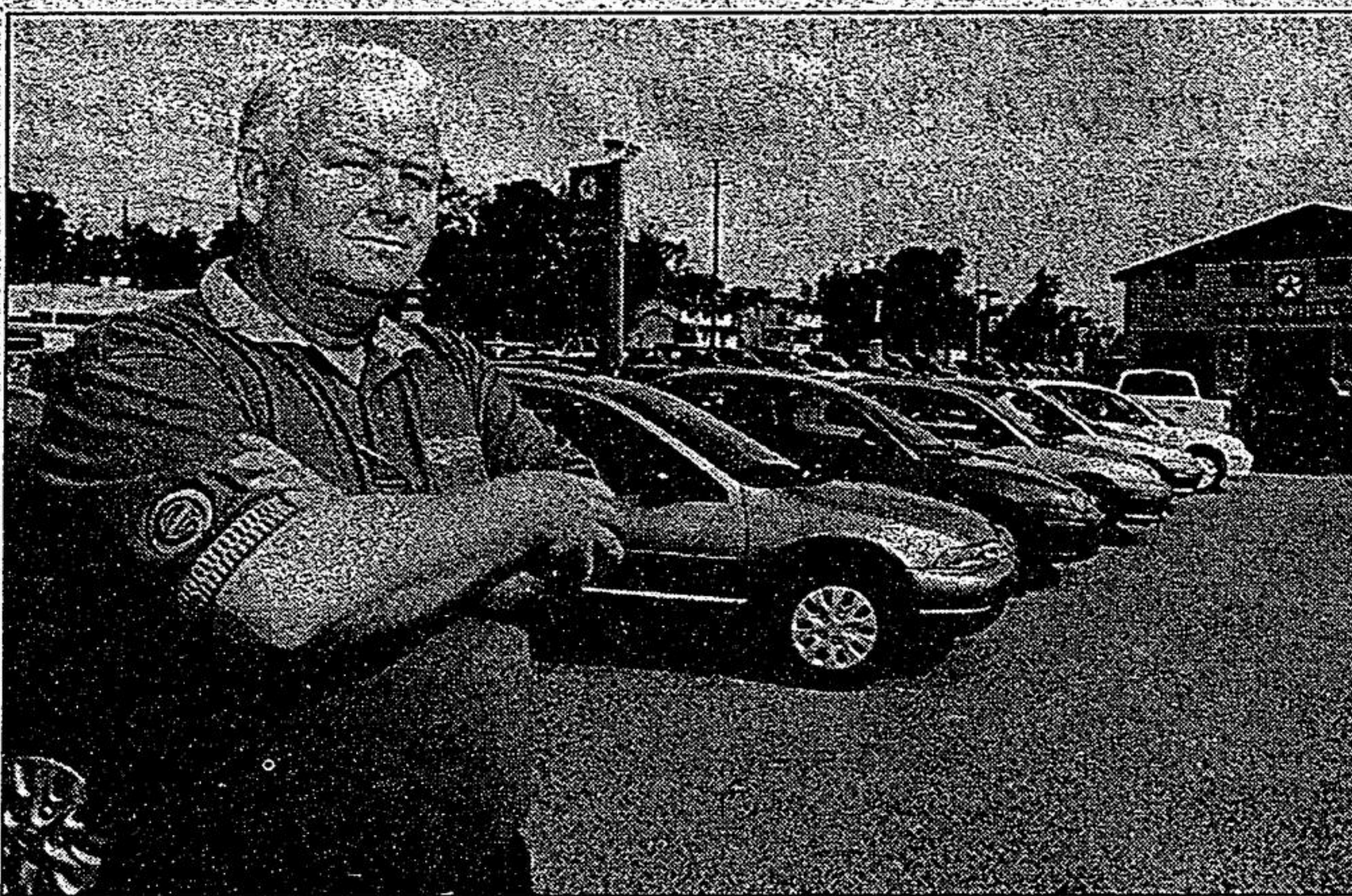
The median income in Keswick is now \$22,000, more than \$2,000 higher than the Ontario median and \$4,000 more than the Canadian median.

Ed Baiden, owner of S&B Motors, said Keswick offers all the benefits of a small town combined with a variety of services.

He said outsiders have traditionally looked down their noses at Keswick without getting to know the heart of the community.

"The reputation was there but it was unfounded. It's always had a pretty good image, except we had a former mayor (Johnston). He's no longer here. He called it murder city," he said.

Baiden called Johnston's remarks "a little grandstanding and some wrong words said



PHOTO/CHRISTINE SMYTH

Ed Baiden, the owner of a Keswick car dealership, insists outsiders have the wrong impression of the northern York Region town. "Keswick is getting bigger," Baiden said. "When it started, there were no services. This town was never planned, it happened by accident."

at the wrong time."

During his years in Keswick, Baiden has seen the area grow 10-fold to 24,000 people. At the same time, his successful business changed from a small lot of 15 cars to a dealership displaying hundreds of shiny new vehicles.

"Keswick is getting bigger. When it started, there were no services. This town was never planned — it happened by accident," he said.

"Now, there are some excellent facilities. But it's still a small-town atmosphere. You don't have the fumes or air quality of Toronto. It's open concept. It has good air quality. This community is more upscale than what it was."

But not everything is rosy in Keswick. Its schools annually rank no higher than the middle of the pack compared to schools in the southern half of the region.

And, with three-quarters of residents leaving town each day to work, the community is crying out for more employment opportunities.

Nakeff is also less than impressed with Keswick's transit system and the lack of amenities for youth.

"The transit sucks royally in this town." While she also complimented Keswick's

small-town atmosphere, she said growth has eroded much of the community's friendliness.

But she has fighting words for any outsider who dares knock her community.

Keswick has made huge strides in the past few years, including the establishment of the Sandgate women's shelter.

The community, which used to be a collection of older homes and cottages, is now a more upscale, urban community typical of many York neighbourhoods.

"If they think Keswick is so bad, why the heck are so many people moving up here?" she said. "Just because you get a couple of bad apples, it doesn't mean it's all like that."

Her friend Richard Vaughan thinks Keswick is a good place to live, despite the fact he was attacked by two thugs about six years ago.

"I got beat up by two drunks for no reason," he said, as two bikers wearing their gang colors zoomed by on their motorcycles. "I was walking and two drunks jumped out and kicked me and damaged my bladder."

Craig Wolfenden had heard the nasty rumors of Keswick being overrun with "bik-

ers and low-lives" before he moved to the community from North York 3-1/2 years ago.

Now, he and his wife Carol are expecting their first child. They see Keswick as a wonderful community in which to raise a family.

"I heard it didn't have much to offer in the way of community services and there wasn't any work. I think that's changed," Wolfenden said.

"The population is changing. There's a lot more city folk up here. Obviously, construction is booming. Community services are improving. It's an excellent place to live."

A York Regional Police constable, who grew up in Keswick and has spent half his 10-year career in the community, said the area has improved but still has a long way to go.

"It's definitely made strides. However, there's obviously a lot of problem areas," said the officer, who did not want to be named.

He pointed out there are other communities that have had or still have problems such as Oak Ridges in Richmond Hill and Milliken in Markham.

"It (Keswick) has a reputation that it's not in the '90s yet. They're all rednecks. But it's just like any other area. Every area has a reputation for something. You're never going to get a perfect area," he said.

"You have to deal with a lot of idiots but I've worked in a lot of areas and you have to deal with the same (type of) idiots. Keswick's reputation is unfair."

Mayor Rob Grossi, who said Keswick's population will reach 50,000 by 2020, credits both growth and community spirit with turning the town's image around.

Ironically, Grossi said garbage had a lot to do with Keswick's cleaned-up outlook.

When council introduced its controversial user-pay garbage pickup policy, critics said the town would be buried under a mound of litter.

But residents have had enough community pride to keep their neighborhoods clean, Grossi said.

He also praised individual neighborhoods for beautifying their little corners of the world.

Just this week, the community's caring image made headlines when Keswick firefighters rushed to replace the bicycle of a young boy who was struck by a hit-and-run driver.

The bicycle belonged to the boy's father, who died just three months ago. His mother was overcome by the support.

"I've lived here for 10 years and I have never had the opportunity to feel how the community cares, until now."



PHOTOS/CHRISTINE SMYTH

Keswick's rapid growth has transformed the community from a collection of older homes and cottages to a more upscale, urban community typical of many York neighbourhoods.