

## Warden presents 2019 Awards of Excellence

Lanark County Council honoured three people for their outstanding contributions to the community at the regular council meeting Wednesday evening as part of the 2019 Awards of Excellence.

The Awards of Excellence recognize and honour citizens or organizations that have made a significant and/or extraordinary contribution to Lanark County. This year council recognized Shelley and Brent McLaren of Perth, Director and Manager (respectively) of Men and Women of the Tay Choruses, in the categories of Volunteerism, Community Service, Arts, Culture and Heritage; and Cindy McCall of Lanark Highlands in the categories of Arts, Culture and Community Service, for her work with Blue Skies Community Fiddle Orchestra located in Tay Valley Township.

“These awards were established in 2005 and give Lanark County Council a chance to recognize and thank local residents who have gone above and beyond to enhance life in our community,” said Warden Richard Kidd (Beckwith Reeve). “These volunteers have touched many lives with their contributions and serve as role models for others.”

The program began as a way to recognize recipients for contributions to the county at large or in at least two municipalities. It was developed to say thank you to citizens of Lanark County, to provide community recognition and visibility, to support citizens for their contributions and to inspire further community service.

**Shelley McLaren** is director of the Men and Women of the Tay Chorus, and was nominated by her husband, Brent, who is manager, on behalf of the 90 members of the choruses.

More than 20 years ago, a group of 12 men started getting together to sing weekly under Mrs. McLaren’s leadership. The group grew and began performing in 1999. It currently has 32 members. The Women of the Tay formed 12 years ago and is at full capacity at 55 members, with a waiting list.

The choruses perform two or three times per year for free-will offerings, receive no grants or subsidies, and no one is remunerated. Costs are kept low and consist of purchasing music rights, covering liability insurance and rental of rehearsal space. Rehearsals and preparation average at least 12 hours per week of volunteer time for 43 weeks per year.

Mrs. McLaren has retired from a teaching career that began in Lanark County in 1980. She soon became involved in her parish churches as organist and choir director, including 25 years at St. John’s in Perth and St. Francis de Sales in Smiths Falls, and currently at St. Bridget in Stanleyville. She played a pivotal role in Perth Community Choir productions for years, and is also known as “Mrs. Town Crier,” accompanying Mr. McLaren in his official role as Town Crier for Perth since 2005.

Despite health challenges this year, Mrs. McLaren has continued to lead her choirs, including a concert hailed by Mr. McLaren as the most moving choral concert that has taken place in the area. “Her perseverance to lead her choir during this difficult time was nothing short of remarkable.”

Many letters of support were submitted for Mrs. McLaren. Lise Larocque said “the choir has opened a world of music to me and has given me confidence in my ability to sing with a group.” Roxanne Shew added her “voice to the chorus” of nominations, noting Mrs. McLaren “is a genuinely warm, caring person, who shares her many talents freely.” Wendy Hanna spoke of her “generous spirit” and “fantastic guidance and expertise.” Brian Peters called her “a wonderfully capable musician who brings out the best in everyone around her.” Elizabeth Rymal spoke of her work by the Town Crier’s side “as a goodwill ambassador” for Perth, adding: “in this world of strife and conflict, Shelley McLaren truly does spread a blanket of joy, peace and love over a lot of people.” Peter Peckham wrote of her efforts to encourage students to pursue education in the arts. Several spoke of how the choir and Mrs. McLaren have served as a warm welcome for newcomers to the community, and highlighted her kindness, humour, caring nature and ability to build confidence.

**Brent McLaren** was nominated by his son-in-law Adam Baines who, when he learned of Mrs. McLaren’s nomination, wanted to ensure they were recognized together for outstanding contributions to the community. His nomination was submitted on behalf of their daughter Sarah and son Nathan.

“Their hearts are full, and their intentions are selfless – (they are) an example for future generations to follow in a world that increasingly is looking inwards at oneself instead of how to make a positive contribution in the communities around them,” Mr. Baines wrote. “Brent and Shelley have been doing this since starting work in Lanark County in 1980 and will likely do so until they are physically or mentally unable to do so.”

Mr. McLaren was also a teacher, and was known for his generosity with students who were less fortunate, including lending his own instruments so they could participate in music class or other extracurriculars. In 2005 he took on the Perth Town Crier role, and upon retirement from teaching, Mr. McLaren was ordained as a deacon in the Catholic church in 2011.

“Deacon Brent is much like Town Crier Brent when he engages his commanding but soft voice to deliver the word of God,” Mr. Baines said, adding that the couple “make any event special and beam with pride representing their community with a historical component that educates your population as much as it adds a visual flair...Their commitment to the practice was evident early on in their organization and planning into their attire and carefully selected words.”

In the summer, Mr. McLaren has donned a wireless microphone and led groups of visitors to Perth on historical walking tours of the downtown. He also helped to outfit the church with sound equipment and keeps it in good working order.

Letters of support for Mrs. McLaren frequently referenced the talents of Mr. McLaren in his work with the Men and Women of the Tay choirs and his support for Mrs. McLaren, particularly in light of the health challenges she has faced. “I consider Shelley and Brent as two sides of the same musical coin,” said Mike FitzPatrick. “They complement each other. Learning is enjoyable because of their skill set and banter.”

“Every choir member walks out of the church doors proud because a couple of Lanark County citizens took a couple of hours each week to share their gift of music,” Mr. Baines said. “I don’t know if there is a way that you can measure such a thing.”

**Cindy McCall** of Lanark Highlands was nominated by Noelle Reeve for her work with Blue Skies Fiddle Orchestra, which operates out of the Maberly Hall in Tay Valley Township and was created 20 years ago by the Blue Skies in the Community organization.

The orchestra provides free violin, fiddle and viola lessons to anyone in Lanark County and is made up of a number of orchestras: Beginners Fiddle for those with no experience; preparatory that prepares newer players for the regular orchestra; and the regular orchestra. There is also an instrument-lending library for low-cost rentals, which facilitates decisions on whether to commit to learning an instrument.

“It provides a very welcoming introduction to music that has been a part of Lanark County’s history since European settlement,” Ms. Reeve said.

She also highlighted the quality of teaching instruction. “Cindy McCall makes everyone feel welcome in the Beginners Orchestra and really encourages you by sharing her love of the music.” She commended the generosity of the volunteer-run organization in keeping musical heritage alive and allowing people to learn an instrument, and for providing a social benefit. “Being in the orchestra builds community across Lanark County as people come from all over the county to participate.”

There are more than 50 members in the orchestra currently, ranging in age from 8 to 80-plus. It began in 1999 with Carolyn Stewart as the conductor, who mentored Ms. McCall to take over in 2010.

A letter of support from Rebecca Worden, registered psychotherapist within the scope of music therapy, noted the benefits of music for people’s mental and emotional health. “We are fortunate to have the Fiddle Orchestra in our community to experience the rich melodies and unique texture of fiddle music as an audience or orchestra member.”

Susan Freeman highlighted the orchestra’s role in the fiddle music traditions in the community through instruction and community support in concerts and fundraising. “They give our county a pro-social creative endeavour that enriches all areas of our individual and community life. The multi-generational aspect of the orchestra allows for unique friendships to develop based on a common love of music and community.”

Warden Kidd congratulated the recipients for their contributions. “They are role models for generosity and we thank them for leaving a positive legacy in Lanark County.”

Awards of Excellence recipients receive an individually designed award commissioned by Mississippi Mills-area artist Stephen Braithwaite, who also created the stained-glass windows in the council chambers. They will be recognized on a plaque in the county administration building, as well as on the county website at [www.lanarkcounty.ca](http://www.lanarkcounty.ca) and in notices in local newspapers.

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For more information, please contact:

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Lanark County

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**Presentation photos available at**

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/p6phcrkvzch41pm/AAD4inDlfsr3FDxbCutcfmvma?dl=0>