



Keeping the home fires burning

Josie Stern is a real-estate agent with a mission

Has had a hand in changing the face of overlooked area

CHRISTIAN COTRONEO
STAFF REPORTER

They meet at the end of a driveway on a chill autumn day.

It doesn't take long for the familiar banter of neighbours to begin. *What ever happened to so-and-so?*

"There was an Italian family there," says Tom McMullan, pointing across the street. "And the father, a real short guy, always came out well-dressed. He wore a bowler hat."

Then there was Mr. Taylor, a "tall, robust man" who had retired from the police force. He died about three years ago at 93.

Mr. Taylor's wife passed away soon after. She was 97.

Josie Stern listens intently to this community fixture whose mastery of local lore stems from a 30-year view from the same house at 168 Pinewood Ave. — a neighbourhood nestled a little north of downtown Toronto.

Although decades younger than McMullan, Stern keeps up with him every step of the way.

Old Mrs. Cressy lived over there, McMullan continues, nodding at a nearby home.

And then Stern catches him.

"No, Mrs. Cressy lived here," she interrupts, pointing out another house.

"No," McMullan shoots back, his Irish accent getting just a tad richer. "Mrs. Cressy lived there."

"No, Mrs. Cressy lived at 154."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the old Irishman yields at last. "You're right! You're right!"

"She was here forever," Stern muses. "And she had the most immaculate house."



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

The Humewood neighbourhood of Toronto feels right at home for real-estate agent Josie Stern, who has been involved in most of the area's house sales since 1989. "I began to see a very vibrant community was living here. A very passionate community," she says.

Josie Stern isn't from around here at all. But the 44-year old can match memories with McMullan when it comes to this community that sprawls between Bathurst St. and Oakwood Ave., just north of St. Clair Ave. W.

After all, she sold it — or at least most of it. Not too many homes go up for sale in the area without Stern's name on the sign.

"There are a lot more young professional singles and couples moving into the area," she says. "Before there were a lot of people living here for a very long time."

There was another Irishman in

the neighbourhood, long before McMullan arrived on the scene.

Celebrated politician and lawyer William Hume Blake built his estate here in the 1850s. He called it Humewood after his ancestral home in Ireland. Over time, the rolling 10-hectare estate was divided and subdivided into smaller properties. Today, there are about 2,000 homes where only one once stood — most of them built in the 1930s.

When Stern walks along the sidewalk, she gives a knowing nod to nearly every house. Like old friends. And none more dear than a modest little two-storey on Wychwood Ave.

It was her first.

"Through the marketing of that property, through holding many open houses, I met a lot of the neighbours. A lot of them became my friends. And I became quite interested in some of the causes that were a concern to them at the time," Stern says. "I began to see a very vibrant community was living here. A very passionate community."

This cluster of old-world culture seemed overlooked, next to such popular spots as the Annex, Leaside and Forest Hill.

"I realized soon after that real-estate values didn't really reflect what the community had to of-

fer. Possibly one of the reasons for that disparity was the area was not promoted."

So Stern promoted it, touting the neighbourhood to her clients in other parts of the city. The result?

She's sold about 200 homes since 1989. About 40 per cent of all her sales today.

"It's perfectly situated," she says, falling easily into the language of real estate. "Near downtown. Near the St. Clair subway."

At the heart of the community, Vaughan Road Academy features a world-renowned program for Grade 11 and 12 stu-

dents that emphasizes analytical and critical thinking.

That's where Don Harron went to school. And, as Tom McMullan proudly declares, the radio and television icon lived on the same street as him.

"He wasn't very good at cutting lawns, but a very sharp guy, intellectually."

McMullan recalls the early days as a time when people lived and died in the same house.

"We were fortunate enough to see the original owners," he says. "So many characters."

Like Mrs. Cressy.

"One physical characteristic she had," he says. "When she was in her late 80s, she would pass here — and could she walk! It was so obvious, it startled you."

"Oh, could she walk!" Stern chimes in, as if Mrs. Cressy passed by her own front window every day.

Mrs. Cressy moved on to a nursing home, making way for a fresh wave of young lawyers, doctors and artists — many of them sold on the local scene by Stern.

"She's the real-estate agent that I think has done a lot for selling and moving things forward," resident Pauline Roy says, ambling on the sidewalk with her mother. "I see positive growth. I see a lot of renovations and improvements to houses."

After Stern passes, McMullan remains at the end of his driveway, seemingly lost in a haze of neighbourhood nostalgia.

"We were the young couple and now we're the senior members of the street," he says.

There's one thing, though, that has prevailed on these changing streets.

"Ninety-nine per cent of the time, if you smile at someone, they'll smile back at you."

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