

NORTHERN *Threads*

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The First Thread... Reflections From The Editor

by Karrie O'Connor



Sometimes, when you're a writer at heart, the inclination is to turn inward when times are trying, situations are uncertain, and change is occurring at a rapid pace. I find myself in that place currently. It has always been my nature to muddle through, sort things out for myself, and not put too much of what is actually running through my mind onto others. Something inside me has always found it easier to turn to the written word and to art. But—and this is a large but—I am learning that this is not always the healthiest way to deal with the things that make you go hmmm.

I grew up in a small Northern Ontario town where the trees and the brooks were my playground. We spent summers camping, away from home, returning only when school was about to begin in the fall. I had friends and a busy life. I was a figure skater, took part in public speaking competitions, and, to anyone looking in, it probably seemed like I was doing well.

The truth, however, is that this was an era before bullying was recognized as a serious part of childhood. It was a time when youth mental health wasn't talked about, and I learned to work through deep-seated pain by putting as many holes in the ice as I could during a skating practice.

Northern Ontario was its own beast. Small towns where everyone knew everyone, and by default, everyone knew everyone else's problems. Keeping things private often meant suffering in silence because once you told one person, everyone seemed to know. It wasn't that people were bad; it was simply that the circles were very, very small.

I was bullied throughout elementary school and even into high school. I struggled to fit in with my peers. As an adult, I can admit that I probably didn't always make it easy for people to like me. Perhaps it wasn't always bullying because, in many ways, I seemed to have a lot of friends—it was just that they came in cycles. I constantly found myself trying to fit in, and it didn't always work. Whenever I felt alone or found myself on the outside looking in, I turned to writing and art. I often had grand ideas. I was, for lack of a better word, a dreamer long before being a dreamer was considered cool.

I was fortunate to have some incredible role models who supported me and nurtured my talents, and those people still hold a very soft spot in my heart today. One of them was our grade school librarian, Mrs. Larouche. She was the kind of person who accepted each child exactly as they were, right where they were. Not once did she ever tell me, "You can't." Instead,

she fostered my love of words year after year. Recently, I had the opportunity to attend her celebration of life. There are not many people I would go out of my way to do that for, but for her, there was never any question.

When I think back on my childhood and how those years shaped the adult I became, I still struggle at times. Deep inside, I am still that insecure kid who was bullied and carried challenges she never shared with anyone. That part of me makes it difficult, even now, to resist the urge to retreat inward whenever life feels just a little off. It makes it hard to let the people closest to me truly in. There is a constant internal struggle.

The difference now is that, as an adult, I have the will to fight those urges. I am learning to let someone become part of the bigger picture—me.

I've spent a great deal of time reflecting over the past week while writing my new book, and it has been an enlightening journey. While I am the person who has published three books, the person who can stand on a stage and speak to a room full of people without batting an eyelash, there is still a carefully guarded part of me locked away where no one can hurt her.

I am working on letting that person out and sharing more of who she really is.

I really began thinking about this when a good

friend, who has been reading my book *Threads*, made a comment about something I had written. This is someone who stood beside me and supported me through some of the darkest days of my life after my nephew was murdered nearly five years ago.

Her comment caught me completely off guard.

"I'm reading your book, and I'm only just now beginning to understand what you went through."

This was someone who had been so very close to me during those days, weeks, months, and years. Yet I had guarded my heart so carefully that even she hadn't truly seen the real me. It made me stop and wonder just how much of myself I have sheltered over the years.

Now, as I sit here—the editor of a magazine, a public relations and marketing coordinator, an artist, an author, a mother, and a wife—I want to leave you with a simple reminder.

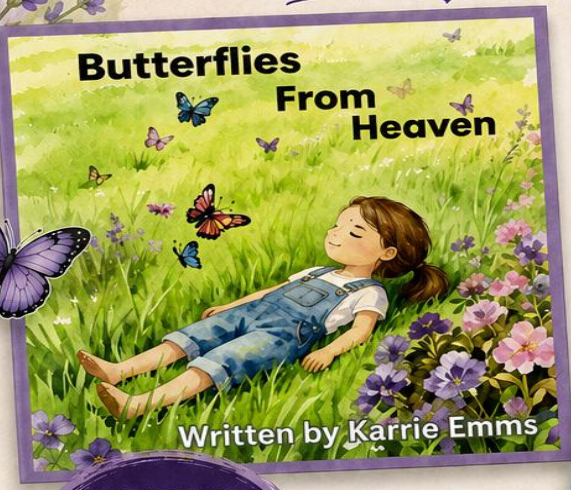
Be aware of the people in your life.

Take the time to truly see them. Get to know them. Cut through the noise of a world that has become saturated with technology, distractions, and outside influence, and discover who the people around you really are.

I promise you, the effort will be rewarded. Relationships will deepen. Connections will blossom. And you may find yourself feeling more connected to someone than you ever thought possible, simply because you took the time to listen.

Author Talk & Book Signing

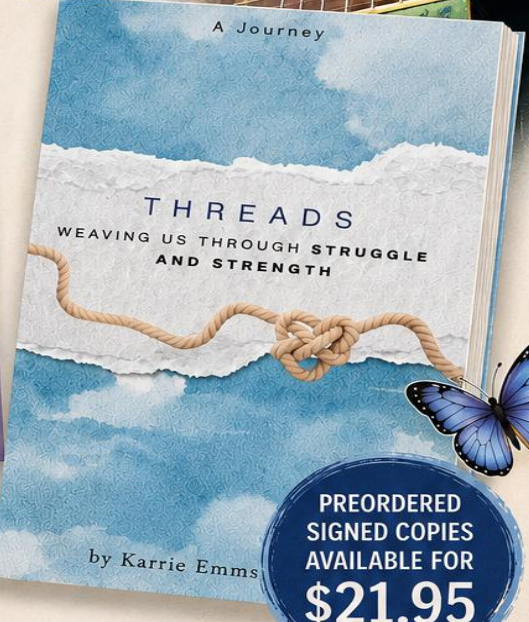
Meet local author
Karrie Emms O'Connor
as she talks about her two books
and the inspiration behind them.



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When Summer Gives Way to September

Back to school, changing seasons and the end of another Northern Ontario summer

by KARRIE O’CONNOR

There is a particular feeling that comes with August in Northern Ontario.

The days are still long, lakes are still calling, camps are still busy and there are probably a few more weekend adventures squeezed onto the calendar. But somewhere between the last family barbecue and the first cool morning, September begins to make its presence known.

Backpacks appear in store aisles. School supply lists are pulled out. Parents begin thinking about lunches, bus schedules and earlier bed-times. Students wonder who will be in their class, whether they will have the same friends and what the new school year might bring.

Across Northern Ontario, however, back to school doesn’t look exactly the same.

A September start — but different northern realities

For many families in North Bay, Sturgeon Falls and Parry Sound, the 2026-27 school year begins Tuesday, September 8, following Labour Day weekend. The Near North region is also welcoming students to a new chapter in Parry Sound, where the new Parry Sound High School begins full school operations in September.

In Greater Sudbury, Espanola, Manitoulin Island and communities throughout Sudbury East, students also return September 8. The area’s four English and French-language school boards have worked together on a common calendar, helping coordinate everything from transportation to the rhythm of the school year.

Further west, families across Algoma — including Sault Ste. Marie, Wawa, Elliot Lake, Blind River and communities along the North Shore — are preparing for the same September 8 start. The common calendar extends across a large geographic area, but the experience of getting to school can be very different from one community to another.

And in northeastern Ontario, the calendar can look different again.

Timmins-area families are preparing for a September 1 start under the common 2026-27 calendar adopted by the four local school boards. That agreement is connected to the region’s move toward a shared transportation system, an important consideration in a part of the province where students may travel significant distances between home and school.

For French-language families, the geography is even broader. The Conseil scolaire public du Nord-Est serves communities stretching from Hearst and Kapuskasing through Timmins, Temiskaming Shores, Sturgeon Falls, North Bay and Parry Sound

The dates may appear simple on a calendar.

The geography is anything but.

Back to school in the North can mean a long

way to school which is one of the things that makes Northern Ontario unique is distance.

In a large urban centre, a child might walk several blocks, ride a city bus or be driven a short distance to school.

In the North, the morning commute can look very different.

For some students, getting to class means a school bus travelling through rural roads, small communities and stretches of highway. For others, it can mean a much longer journey — particularly in remote communities where schools and services are separated by considerable distances.

That means September preparation isn’t just about buying pencils and finding the right pair of shoes.

It can mean checking transportation arrangements, confirming bus routes, planning around work schedules and making sure children are ready for mornings that may begin much earlier than they did during the summer.

It is one of those realities of northern life that people outside the region may not immediately see.

From lake days to school days

August in Northern Ontario has its own rhythm.

There are still boats on the lakes, children jumping off docks, cyclists on the trails and families trying to make the most of every remaining warm evening.

For many northern communities, summer is also about tourism, seasonal employment, camps, festivals, markets and outdoor recreation.

Then September arrives.
The camp signs come down.
The beaches become a little quieter.
The traffic around schools increases.
Community arenas begin filling with sports schedules.

And the familiar rhythm of the school year slowly takes over.

But perhaps the most northern thing about this transition is that summer doesn’t really disappear.

It follows us into September.

A child may arrive at school talking about a fishing trip. A family may spend the last weekend before classes camping. Students may still have sunscreen and lake water memories fresh in their minds as they walk through the school doors.

The North doesn’t necessarily separate summer from school with a hard line.

Instead, the two seasons overlap.

Small communities, big connections

In smaller Northern Ontario communities, back to school can also feel deeply connected to the community itself.

Schools aren’t simply places where children spend their weekdays.

They are gathering places.

They are where generations of families may have attended. Where teachers know parents. Where students see familiar faces at hockey rinks, community events and local businesses.

When school starts, the entire community feels the change.

Local businesses notice it. Sports organizations begin their fall programming. Libraries and recreation programs adjust their schedules. Families reorganize their evenings.

The September school bell becomes part of the community’s larger rhythm.

The return of routines

For parents, September often brings a mixture of relief and chaos.

Summer’s flexible schedules disappear almost overnight.

Bedtimes move earlier.
Lunches need to be packed.
Homework returns.
Extracurricular activities begin.
Appointments and practices have to be coordinated.

For students, the emotions can be just as complicated.

Some are excited to see friends. Others are nervous about a new school, new teachers or a new grade. For students entering high school, starting college or university, or moving away from home, September can represent a much bigger transition.

And this is worth remembering as we head back to school:

Not every student is returning with the same experience.
Some are excited.
Some are anxious.
Some are carrying worries that aren’t visible.
Some are starting over.
Some are grieving.
Some are discovering where they belong.

A new school year is more than a new timetable. It is a new beginning — and sometimes, a second chance.

Northern Ontario’s next generation

Perhaps that is what makes the back-to-school season so meaningful.

(Con’t On Page 5)

Healing Beyond the Clinic: Finding Movement in Nature

By KARRIE O’CONNOR

When it comes to staying active as we age, exercise doesn’t always have to happen inside a clinic or a gym. Sometimes, the best place to support our health and mobility is right outside our door.

We are fortunate to live and work in one of the most beautiful areas of Canada, where nature surrounds us and many of our outdoor spaces are free to enjoy. Within the North Bay area, we have beaches, waterfront paths, hiking trails, parks, green spaces and more—all offering opportunities to move, explore and stay connected to our community.

While Northern Ontario is known for its harsh winters, each season brings its own opportunities to stay active. From summer walks along the waterfront to crisp autumn strolls surrounded by changing leaves, outdoor movement can be adapted throughout the year to meet our individual abilities and comfort levels.

Movement Doesn’t Have to Mean a Workout

As we age, maintaining strength, flexibility, balance and endurance becomes increasingly important. But staying active doesn’t have to mean spending hours in a gym or pushing your body beyond its limits.

The goal is to find movement that works with your body, not against it.

The North Bay waterfront provides a beautiful

setting for incorporating simple exercises into a walk or an afternoon outdoors. You can use the walking paths for gentle endurance work, grassy areas for exercises that require more space, and even existing structures such as the stairs near the sundial for modified strength and balance activities.

And you don’t have to do it alone.

Getting outside can be an opportunity to spend time with family, meet up with friends or simply become part of the community around you. A walk with a friend can become a regular weekly routine, while a few simple exercises along the way can help turn an ordinary outing into an opportunity to support your mobility and overall well-being.

Simple Tools, Big Benefits

You don’t need expensive equipment to incorporate strength and mobility exercises into your outdoor routine. A few lightweight tools can easily be carried in a small bag or kept in the car, including resistance bands, small hand weights and walking poles. Of course, a comfortable pair of supportive shoes is one of the most important pieces of equipment you can have.

At Maple Leaf Home Healthcare and Nipissing Healthcare, physiotherapist Priyanka encourages clients to look at the environment around them as an opportunity for movement. With a little creativity, the waterfront’s walking paths, grassy

areas and stairs can become part of an outdoor exercise routine designed to support strength, flexibility, balance and endurance.

Below are five simple exercises that can be adapted using small hand weights, resistance bands or walking poles. The goal isn’t to move as quickly or lift as much as possible. Instead, focus on controlled movements, good posture and listening to your body.

Make Movement Part of Your Routine

One of the greatest benefits of exercising outdoors is that it doesn’t have to feel like exercise. A walk along the waterfront, a conversation with a friend or an afternoon spent enjoying the changing colours can all become part of a healthier, more active lifestyle.

Start where you are. Move at a pace that feels comfortable. Take breaks when you need them. And remember that consistency is often more important than intensity.

Before beginning a new exercise routine, particularly if you have an existing health condition, balance concerns or an injury, speak with your healthcare provider or physiotherapist about what activities are appropriate for you.

Our northern landscape gives us something that no gym can replicate: space to move, fresh air to breathe and a community to move with.

Sometimes, healing really can begin beyond the clinic.

Exercise 1: Step-Ups



PHOTO CREDIT: PhotoMill Photography
Priyanka a Physiotherapist Resident at Maple Leaf Home Healthcare demonstrates 3 exercises that can safely be done at the North Bay Waterfront.

Step-Ups:

Using a safe, low step, alternate stepping up and down at a steady pace. Step-ups strengthen your legs and improve balance, making everyday activities like climbing stairs, stepping over curbs and navigating uneven ground easier. Use a stable step and a handrail or support for added safety if needed.

Exercise 2: Resistance Band Squats/ Band & Bounce



Resistance Band Squats / Band & Bounce:

Place a resistance band just above your knees and slowly lower into a squat, gently pressing your knees outward. This exercise strengthens the hips and thighs while supporting balance, stability and everyday movement. Choose a comfortable resistance and keep each movement controlled.

Exercise 3: Sit-to-Stand/Bench Boost-Ups



Sit-to-Stand / Bench Boost-Ups:

Sit on a sturdy bench and stand up with control, then slowly lower yourself back down. This simple exercise strengthens the thighs and hips while making everyday movements like getting out of a chair easier. Keep your knees aligned with your feet and use a resistance band for an added challenge.

The Wellness Corner - Sponsored by:

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The Northern Chuckle

by GILLIAN HEBERT @StudioGillianArtwork
By Gillian Hebert

No butterflies were harmed in the making of this comic. Visiting my place means stumbling into whatever new adventure I'm persuing.

Between my ever-growing list of projects and the animals underfoot, there's rarely a clear path for me through my little apartment. I'm constantly tripping over something or someone.



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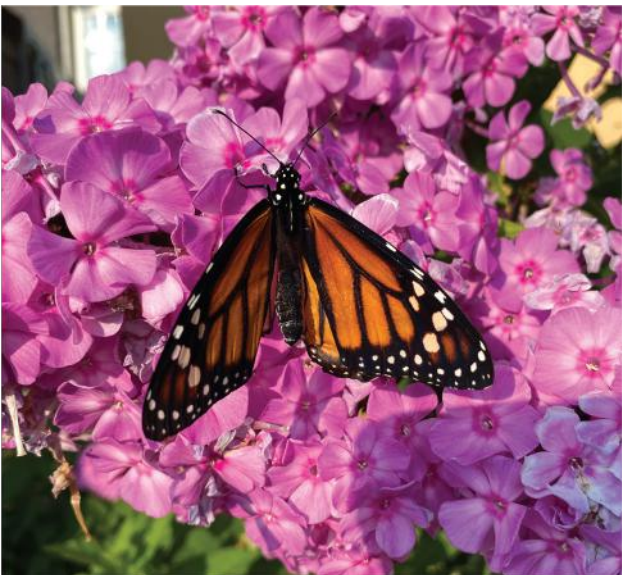
The latest addition to my endless collection of hobbies, this issue's comic, featuring my newest adventure: raising Monarch Butterflies!

I spent July and the first week of August raising 23 Monarch caterpillars, from tiny caterpillars to beautiful butterflies. Since I collected them at different stages, I had at least one butterfly emerge almost every day for a while.

Raising Monarchs was both surprisingly easy and incredibly challenging, and was definitely a learning curve. A few escaped while I was feeding them, but thankfully, none were harmed and they were healthy enough to be released.

It was certainly one of my more unusual projects, but incredibly rewarding to watch them transform from caterpillar to butterfly. Hopefully, I helped give the next generation of Monarchs a little boost.

Please enjoy some photos of my little friends and their growth journey!



(Con't From Page 3)

Across North Bay, Sudbury, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Manitoulin, the Temiskaming region and the many smaller communities scattered across the North, thousands of young people are beginning another chapter.

Some will discover a new passion.
Some will make a lifelong friend.
Some will find a teacher who changes their perspective.
Some will join a team, pick up an instrument, create art, discover a trade or realize they are capable of much more than they thought.

And while we often think about September as the end of summer, perhaps it is more useful to think of it as a continuation. The experiences of summer — the friendships, adventures, challenges and discoveries — come with

us.

The lake memories.
The campfires.
The road trips.
The long evenings outside.
The family time.
The lessons learned.

They become part of the story students carry into the classroom.

A Northern September

So as we prepare to say goodbye to another Northern Ontario summer, perhaps we should pause before rushing into the routines of fall.

Take one more swim.
Sit around the campfire.
Watch the sunset.

Take the family photograph.
Enjoy the final long evening.
Then sharpen the pencils, pack the backpacks and set the alarm.

Because September is coming.

And across Northern Ontario, from our largest northern cities to our smallest communities, another school year is about to begin.

The backpacks may look different.
The bus rides may be longer.
The communities may be separated by hundreds of kilometres.

But the feeling is remarkably similar:

A little nervousness.
A little excitement.
A fresh start.

And a whole new school year waiting to be written.

My Own Backyard: Discovering the Screaming Heads of Burk's Falls

By KARRIE O'CONNOR



PHOTO CREDIT: Some nice tourists visiting as well. My Wife, Myself and Casper visiting Screaming Heads. You can see the main home and dragon in the background. The artist has not opened the courtyard in 6 years!

There is something about summer in Northern Ontario that makes you want to get out and explore. We spend our summers talking about the places we want to visit, the roads we want to travel and the adventures we want to have, yet sometimes the most interesting destinations are much closer to home than we realize. That is the inspiration behind My Own Backyard, a new series for Northern Threads where I will be getting out and exploring some of the unique, unexpected and fascinating places that can be found throughout our own region. For the first adventure in the series, we headed to Burk's Falls to visit the famous Screaming Heads.

We made the trip this past Saturday, and I have to admit, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I had seen photographs of the massive concrete sculptures before, but photographs really don't prepare you for what it feels like to arrive at the property and see these enormous creations rising out of the Northern Ontario landscape. The Screaming Heads are the life's work of artist Peter Camani, who has spent decades transforming his property into an enormous outdoor art environment. Towering faces, creatures and unusual structures are scattered throughout the landscape, creating a place that feels part sculpture garden, part wilderness adventure and part glimpse into the imagination of one very determined artist.

Walking through the property is an experience in itself. The sculptures don't simply sit in neat rows waiting to be photographed. They become part of the landscape, appearing between the trees, overlooking the fields and emerging from the surroundings in unexpected ways. You can spend your time wondering about the story behind each creation, trying to imagine how it was built and thinking about what it must be like to live surrounded by artwork that has taken decades to create. There is something wonderfully unconventional about the entire experience. It doesn't feel manufactured for tourists; it feels like you have stepped into someone's imagination and been invited to look around. One of the highlights of our visit was the oppor-

tunity to see the courtyard open to visitors. People familiar with the property told us that this was reportedly the first time in approximately six years that the courtyard had been open. Knowing that made the experience feel even more special. There was a sense that we were seeing a part of the property that many visitors have not had the opportunity to experience in recent years. The courtyard offered another perspective on the artist's work and gave us a greater appreciation for just how much creativity and effort has gone into creating this remarkable place.

Another important part of the experience for me was being able to bring my service dog, Casper, along. Anyone who travels with a service dog knows that accessibility and acceptance can make a tremendous difference in how comfortable a visit feels. We were immediately made to feel welcome, and one of the small gestures that stood out to me was being offered a dog bowl with water for Casper. It was such a simple thing, but it was also a thoughtful indication that visitors — including those travelling with their dogs — were being considered.

That welcoming feeling continued throughout our visit. Everyone we encountered was friendly, approachable and happy to see people enjoying the property. The owner has also ensured that portable washrooms are available for guests, which is an important practical consideration when visitors are spending time walking around a large outdoor property. These may seem like small details, but they can have a big impact on the overall experience. It was clear that there had been thought put into making visitors comfortable while they explored.

What I found most interesting about the Screaming Heads is that they don't try to be something they aren't. This isn't a polished, conventional tourist attraction where everything is neatly packaged and presented. It is art in its rawest and most personal form. It is strange, sometimes haunting, sometimes fascinating and always interesting. You don't necessarily have to understand every sculpture or know what inspired it.

You can simply walk through the property, take it in and allow yourself to be curious. There is also something very Northern Ontario about the way the artwork and landscape exist together. The natural environment isn't simply a backdrop. The trees, rocks, fields and open spaces become part of the experience. It is a reminder that some of the most memorable attractions in our region don't require elaborate buildings or expensive admission experiences. Sometimes they are created by someone with an idea, a piece of land and the determination to keep creating.

Our visit to the Screaming Heads also reminded me why I wanted to start My Own Backyard. We often think that we need to travel somewhere else to find something interesting. We make plans for vacations in other cities, provinces or countries while overlooking the incredible places that exist within driving distance of our own homes. Northern Ontario is full of hidden gems, unusual attractions, artists, small businesses, trails, historic sites and natural wonders that deserve to be explored.

For me, this series is going to be about changing that perspective. I want to get out on the road and discover the places that make Northern Ontario unique. Some will be well-known destinations that we may have somehow never visited. Others may be places that even longtime residents have never heard of. The goal isn't necessarily to find the biggest or most famous attractions. It is to find the places that tell us something about the people, creativity, history and character of the North.

The Screaming Heads was a pretty perfect place to begin. It was unusual, unexpected and memorable, and getting to experience the courtyard during what we were told was its first opening in six years made the visit even more meaningful. Add in the warm welcome, the thoughtful accommodations for visitors, a bowl of water for Casper and the opportunity to wander through an incredible outdoor collection of art, and it became much more than simply a Saturday drive.

Sometimes we don't have to travel far to find an adventure. Sometimes we just need to turn down a different road, slow down and take a closer look at what has been sitting in our own backyard all along.

This is the first stop in My Own Backyard. There are plenty more Northern Ontario adventures waiting to be discovered.

Have you explored local sights this summer? If you would like to share what is in your backyard, email at least 1 photo and the name of the attraction. We will feature it in an upcoming issue of Northern Threads Magazine.



GILLIAN HEBERT



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ILLUSTRATOR

GRAPHIC DESIGN SERVICES:

- SET UP FILES FOR PRINT
- DESIGN
- DIGITIZATION
- PHOTO RESTORATION

ILLUSTRATION SERVICES:

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Who Will Care for the North?

Building the next generation of Northern Ontario’s health-care workforce

By KARRIE O’CONNOR



An arial shot of Sensenbrenner Hospital in Kapuskasing Ontario. Recruitment is an issue facing most Northern Ontario communities. The question becomes, how do we recruit physicians and staff who understand the unique nature of living in the North?

There is a question quietly sitting underneath almost every conversation about healthcare in Northern Ontario: Who will be there to care for us when we need them?

For patients, the answer can feel increasingly uncertain. Long emergency department waits, difficulty finding a primary-care provider, delayed appointments and stretched services have become part of the healthcare conversation across the North. For the people working inside the system, the question is different but equally important: How long can we continue asking healthcare workers to do more with less before they simply cannot do it anymore?

Northern Ontario has always faced unique healthcare challenges. Geography alone makes delivering care different here. Communities are separated by long stretches of highway, some patients must travel significant distances for specialists and smaller hospitals can have difficulty attracting and retaining physicians, nurses, personal support workers and other healthcare professionals.

But the challenge is no longer simply about finding enough people to fill positions. It is about building a healthcare workforce that can stay, thrive and provide the level of care Northern residents deserve.

When the waiting room becomes part of the system

For patients, one of the most visible signs of pressure is the amount of time spent waiting for care.

In North Bay, recent analysis of emergency department data has highlighted just how dramatically hospital wait times have changed. At North Bay Regional Health Centre, 90 per cent

of patients in 2024-25 waited 65.2 hours for hospital admission, compared with 16.4 hours in 2020-21 — an increase of 298 per cent. The same analysis found that 90 per cent of patients waited 7.3 hours for an initial emergency department assessment, compared with 3.6 hours five years earlier.

These numbers represent more than statistics.

They represent a person sitting in a hospital chair with an elderly parent. A family waiting anxiously for answers. Someone in pain wondering when they will finally see a doctor. A patient whose condition may change while they wait.

They also represent healthcare workers trying to provide care in an environment where demand can outpace available space, beds and staff.

North Bay is not an isolated story. Ontario Health’s provincial data continues to track the time patients spend in emergency departments, with waits varying according to urgency and whether a patient ultimately requires admission. The system is designed to prioritize the sickest patients first, meaning a patient who arrives later but has a more serious condition may be seen before someone who has already been waiting for hours.

For patients, that can be frustrating. For staff, it can be exhausting.

The people behind the numbers

It is easy to talk about healthcare shortages as though the problem is simply a number of empty positions.

(Con’t On Page 8)

CALANDER OF EVENTS

Bay Block Party, North Bay
Aug. 21–22
Free, all-ages downtown festival with music, food, artisans, local businesses and The Strumbellas.

Afrofest Sudbury, Sudbury
Aug. 21–22
Free celebration of African culture featuring music, dance, food, art, vendors and a cultural fashion parade.

Burwash Country Music Festival, Rock Lake, Sudbury District
Aug. 21–23
Three days of country music, camping and community on a 36-acre site near the Killarney turnoff.

Anishinaabe Keeshigun, Thunder Bay
Aug. 22–23
A free celebration of First Nations culture at Fort William Historical Park, including a Pow Wow, demonstrations, cultural activities and a community feast.

Northern Vibe Festival, Bruce Mines / Algoma
Aug. 28–30
Music and arts festival in a Northern Ontario forest setting, with camping and live Canadian music.

New Sudbury Days, Sudbury
Aug. 28–30
A community celebration featuring entertainment and activities as summer begins winding down.

Smoke ‘N’ Spurs Mattawa
Sept. 4–6
Country music, outdoor concerts, camping and a full weekend of western-themed entertainment.

Ribfest Sudbury, Sudbury
Sept. 4–6
Labour Day weekend barbecue festival featuring competing rib teams, vendors, live entertainment and family activities.

Powassan Fall Fair, Powassan
Sept. 5–6
The 129th annual fall fair with agricultural exhibits, heavy horse pulls, children’s activities, vendors, entertainment and a demolition derby.

Jazz Sudbury Festival, Sudbury
Sept. 10–12
Three days celebrating jazz musicians from Sudbury and beyond, with performances centred around Place des Arts.

Submit your upcoming event listings by email to:

info@northernthreadsmagazine.ca

But every empty position affects the people already working.

A nurse who stays late because there is no one to take over. A PSW who is trying to provide care to more residents than they feel they can adequately support. A physician working another shift. A hospital worker picking up overtime because the department needs another set of hands.

The 2026 State of Nursing report provides a sobering look at that pressure. Among RPNs surveyed, 72 per cent said their workloads had increased, while 63 per cent reported being asked to take additional shifts or work overtime to cover staffing shortages. Seventy-seven per cent said they had seen patient, resident or client care negatively affected by staffing issues, while 51 per cent said they did not feel they had the time and resources necessary to provide adequate care.

For those planning to leave their positions, workload was identified as a major factor by 82 per cent of respondents.

Those numbers should concern everyone — not just healthcare administrators.

Because recruiting more people won’t solve the problem if the people we recruit enter an already exhausted system and quickly burn out themselves.

The North is recruiting — hard

There are significant efforts underway to bring more healthcare workers to Northern Ontario.

Ontario Health’s Community Commitment Program for Nurses offers incentives for eligible nurses who commit to two years of full-time employment. Nurses working in Northern Ontario may also qualify for a Northern Top-Up Grant, while eligible nurses relocating to Northern communities can receive relocation support.

Personal support workers are also being targeted through recruitment incentives. Eligible PSWs can receive a \$10,000 recruitment incentive, with an additional \$10,000 available for eligible commitments in rural, remote or Northern communities. Those relocating to eligible Northern communities may qualify for another \$10,000 in relocation support.

These are significant investments.

But money isn’t the only factor influencing whether someone chooses to move to — or stay in — a Northern community.

A healthcare worker needs somewhere to live.
They need transportation.
They need access to childcare and schools if they have children.
They need a community where their partner can find employment.
They need opportunities for professional development.

And, perhaps most importantly, they need to believe they can build a life here rather than simply fill a vacancy.

When there is a job but nowhere to live Manitoulin Island provides a striking example of how complicated recruitment can become.

The Manitoulin Health Centre reported success in attracting healthcare professionals, including local graduates returning home, nurses from elsewhere in Ontario and internationally educated nurses. But the organization also identified a growing lack of affordable, suitable housing as a significant barrier to actually bringing those workers into the community.

It is a problem that increasingly forces Northern communities to look beyond healthcare itself.

You can offer someone a job.
You can offer a recruitment bonus.
You can offer relocation assistance.

But if that person cannot find an affordable place to live, the job offer may not be enough

This is where healthcare becomes a community issue rather than simply a hospital issue.

Housing, transportation, childcare, education, recreation and employment opportunities all become part of the healthcare recruitment conversation.

Growing our own

One of the most promising solutions may be sitting in Northern classrooms.

If Northern Ontario wants healthcare professionals who understand Northern communities, one strategy is to help young people from those communities see healthcare as a career they can build close to home.

Ontario’s 2026 budget includes an additional \$124.2 million over three years for clinical training and education connected to the expansion of 2,000 registered nursing and 1,000 registered practical nursing seats at publicly assisted colleges and universities.

The province is also supporting internationally educated nurses and other recruitment initiatives. Ontario Health reported that more than 2,200 nurses were recruited into high-need communities and healthcare organizations through its Community Commitment Program, while nearly 2,400 PSWs were brought into long-term care and home and community care roles through its PSW incentive program in 2024-25.

For Northern communities, however, recruitment isn’t just about convincing someone to come here.

It is about convincing them to stay.

What makes someone stay?

Ask a healthcare worker why they chose their profession and the answer is rarely simply money.

They talk about people.
They talk about making a difference.
They talk about relationships with patients and families.
They talk about growing up in a community and wanting to give something back.
They talk about being part of a team.

Those relationships are particularly important in smaller Northern communities, where healthcare workers may become familiar faces to generations of families.

But passion has limits.

A healthcare worker can love their patients and still be exhausted.

They can love their community and still feel overwhelmed.

They can believe deeply in their profession and still wonder whether they can continue working under the same conditions for another five, ten or twenty years.

That is why retention deserves as much attention as recruitment.

We cannot recruit our way out of burnout

There is an understandable tendency to respond to staffing shortages by focusing on recruitment.

More nurses.
More PSWs.
More physicians.
More students.
More internationally educated professionals.

All of those things matter.

But if the working environment remains unsustainable, recruitment becomes a revolving door.

New employees arrive.
Experienced employees leave.
The vacancies remain.

The answer has to include making healthcare a place where people can actually build sustainable careers.

That means manageable workloads, adequate staffing, competitive compensation, supportive leadership, mental health resources, opportunities for advancement and a workplace culture where asking for help is not viewed as weakness.

It also means listening to frontline workers.

They know where the pressure points are because they experience them every day.

The future of Northern healthcare

The healthcare system Northern Ontario needs in the future will not be built overnight.

It will require education.
Recruitment.
Retention.
Housing.
Community investment.
Better coordination.

And a willingness to listen to the people already doing the work.

There is encouraging movement. Training opportunities are expanding. Recruitment incentives are being offered. Hospitals and healthcare organizations are actively searching for new employees. Communities are looking at creative ways to attract professionals and bring Northern graduates home.

But the real measure of success will not be how many positions are filled this year.

It will be whether those people are still here years from now.

It will be whether a young person growing up in North Bay, Sudbury, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Manitoulin or one of Northern Ontario’s smaller communities can imagine a future in healthcare — and build that future without having to leave the North.

And it will be whether the nurse, PSW, physician, therapist, technician or support worker who begins a career here can come home after a shift with enough energy left to live their own life.

Because the question “Who will care for the North?” isn’t only about who will be standing beside a hospital bed tomorrow.

It is about who we are willing to invest in today.

If we want Northern Ontario to have a healthcare system that is accessible, compassionate and sustainable, we have to care for the people who provide the care.

The future of Northern healthcare isn’t just about building more capacity. It’s about building a workforce that can stay — and a North that gives them a reason to.

After the Fire: Going Home When the Evacuation Ends

For Northern Ontario communities, returning home is only the beginning of recovery.

By KARRIE O'CONNOR

There is a sound many of us who grew up in Northern Ontario remember. The familiar warnings about fire danger. The reminders about never leaving a campfire unattended. The smell of smoke hanging in the air. And, for many of us, the image of Smokey Bear, forever reminding children that only we can prevent wildfires.

For those of us who grew up here, fire safety was not simply something we learned in school. It was woven into our childhood memories. We knew the rules: put the fire out, don't play with matches, respect the forest and pay attention when the smoke starts to rise. At the time, those lessons seemed simple. Today, the conversation around wildfire has become much more complicated.

This summer, communities across Northern Ontario once again found themselves facing the frightening reality of fast-moving forest fires, evacuation orders, hazardous smoke and the possibility of losing everything. By July 20, more than 1,800 people had been displaced by wildfires across Northern Ontario, with 13 communities either evacuated or in the process of evacuating. For some communities, the evacuation was temporary. For others, returning home became a question mark. And for some, there may not be a home to return to.

The Moment Everything Changes

An evacuation order changes the meaning of the word home. Suddenly, home is no longer simply the place where you feel safest. It becomes the place you are being told to leave, often with very little time to make decisions about what you can take with you.

What do you pack when you don't know how long you'll be gone? Medications, important documents, pet supplies and a few changes of clothes are obvious choices. But what about the things that cannot be replaced? Family photographs, children's artwork, your grandmother's dishes or a box of memories you've kept for decades? You can't put your entire life into a vehicle, and that is one of the most difficult realities of evacuation.

During this summer's fires, residents of communities including Armstrong, Whitesand First Nation, Collins First Nation, Gakijiwanong Anishinaabe Nation and Lac des Mille Lacs First Nation were among those forced to evacuate as fires threatened their homes and communities. For some residents, leaving was itself a terrifying experience. Members of Namaygoosisagagun First Nation, also known as Collins First Nation, described fleeing by boat as fire approached the community. One evacuee recalled having only minutes to pack before getting to the beach where boats were waiting.

Imagine leaving your home knowing that you may not see it the same way again.

The Waiting Is Its Own Kind of Trauma

Once people are evacuated, another difficult part

of the experience begins: waiting. Waiting for information. Waiting for updates. Waiting to find out whether the fire is moving closer. Waiting to hear whether the road is open. Waiting to learn whether you can go home. And perhaps most painfully, waiting to find out whether your home is still standing.

During this summer's fires, evacuees were spread across Northern Ontario and much farther south, with people finding temporary shelter in communities including Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Toronto, Niagara Falls and other host communities. For some First Nations, being evacuated hundreds of kilometres from home brought another set of challenges.

Being removed from a community is not simply about finding somewhere to sleep. It can mean being separated from family members, cultural practices, familiar surroundings and the land that forms an important part of community life. Cat Lake First Nation Chief Russell Wesley, for example, raised concerns about the social costs of evacuating community members to Toronto and said he would have preferred an evacuation location closer to home where residents could maintain cultural practices such as fishing and hunting.

That raises an important question for the future:

When Northern communities need to evacuate, what does a safe evacuation actually look like?

The Kindness of a Host Community

There is another side to these stories that deserves to be remembered. When people leave their homes, other communities open their doors. Hotels provide rooms. Restaurants provide meals. Community centres become reception centres. Volunteers collect donations. Organizations provide clothing and supplies. People offer transportation. Businesses find ways to help. Municipal employees work long hours. Healthcare providers prepare for additional patients. And strangers become neighbours.

Ontario's wildfire response has included reception centres offering accommodation, food, water, pet accommodations, hygiene supplies and medical supports for evacuees. These efforts demonstrate something that Northern Ontario has always understood: when one community is hurting, the surrounding communities help carry the load.

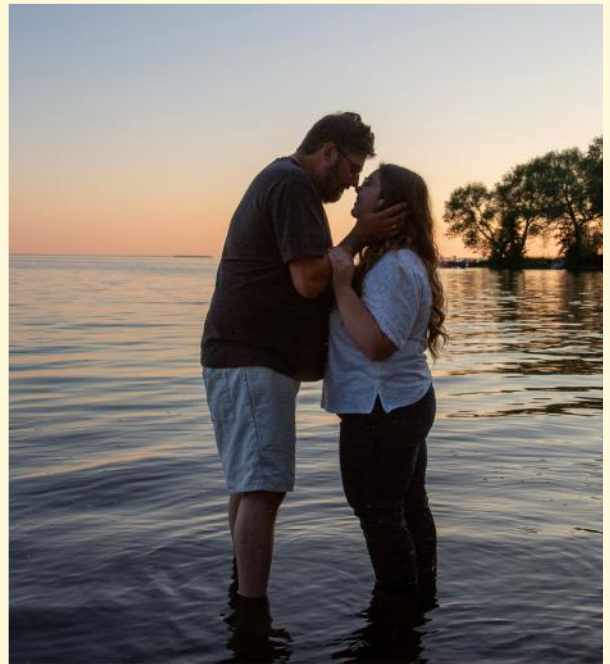
We know that a disaster somewhere else in the North could just as easily become our disaster. The kindness shown during an evacuation is one of the stories that can get lost when wildfire coverage focuses entirely on flames, hectares and evacuation numbers.

Behind every evacuation number are people. And behind those people are communities
(Con't On age 10)

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People watching from neighboring shores as 2026 forest fires close in on remote Northern Ontario towns. What happens when the flames go out? How do entire towns rebuild?

willing to help.

Then Comes the Trip Home

Eventually, if conditions allow, the message comes: You can go home.

For many people, that should be the happy ending. But it isn’t necessarily that simple. Returning home after an evacuation can be emotional, overwhelming and even frightening.

The road may look different. The landscape may be changed. There may be smoke damage, ash, debris or damaged infrastructure. Power may not be restored. Water systems may need to be checked. Businesses may not be open. Schools may not be ready. And even when the house is untouched, the person walking through the front door may not feel quite the same.

They have spent days imagining what could have happened. They have experienced uncertainty. They have watched images of fires consuming forests and homes. They have wondered whether their community would still be there.

You can return to the same address and still feel as though something has changed.

When Home Is Gone

For communities that have suffered significant destruction, “going home” can mean something completely different. The wildfire that devastated Collins First Nation destroyed homes and infrastructure, prompting calls for support to rebuild the community.

For those residents, recovery is not about cleaning up a yard and reopening the front door. It is about rebuilding homes, infrastructure, services, community spaces and lives.

Rebuilding after a wildfire is measured in months and years, not days. The physical damage is visible, but the emotional damage can be much harder to see.

A person who has lost their home has also lost the sense of security that comes from knowing where they belong. A community that loses buildings may also lose gathering places, familiar landmarks and pieces of its collective history.

Wildfire Fatigue Is Real

For some Northern residents, another emotion is creeping into the conversation: wildfire fatigue.

The first evacuation warning can be frightening. The second feels familiar. After several seasons of smoke, alerts and emergency planning, people may begin to feel exhausted by the constant possibility that they could have to leave.

Emergency bags become part of household planning. People keep medications and important documents somewhere easy to grab. Pet carriers are kept accessible. Families discuss where they would go if an evacuation order came. The possibility of leaving home becomes part of summer planning.

And that can take an emotional toll. We are accustomed to thinking of resilience as something positive. But resilience should not mean expecting people to endlessly absorb crisis after crisis without consequences.

Northern communities can be incredibly resilient while still being tired. Both things can be true.

What Did We Learn?

Perhaps the most important part of any disaster is what happens afterward. What worked? What didn’t? Where were the communication gaps? Did people know where to go? Were there enough accommodations? Could families stay together? Were pets properly accommodated? Were people evacuated close enough to home to maintain important connections? Did communities have enough resources?

Were Indigenous communities given the autonomy they needed to determine how and where

their people should be evacuated?

These are difficult questions, but they are necessary ones.

The wildfire response of the future needs to consider more than simply moving people out of harm’s way. It needs to consider how people live once they have been moved.

Remembering the Lessons of Childhood

I think back to those childhood lessons about fire: Smokey Bear, campfire safety, warnings about dry forests and the understanding that Northern Ontario’s forests are both beautiful and vulnerable.

As children, those lessons seemed simple. Don’t play with fire. Put out your campfire. Respect the forest.

Today, the conversation has become much more complicated.

Wildfire is no longer simply something we teach children to avoid starting. It is something communities have to prepare to live alongside.

That doesn’t mean giving in to fear. It means being prepared. It means knowing where emergency information comes from. It means having an evacuation plan. It means knowing what you would take if you had only 15 minutes. It means making plans for children, seniors, people with disabilities and pets.

And it means making sure our communities have the resources they need before the next fire starts.

The Story Doesn’t End When the Flames Are Gone

Eventually, the smoke clears. The evacuation order is lifted. The roads reopen. The firefighters go home. The news cameras leave. And the rest of us move on to the next headline.

But for the people who lived through the evacuation, the story doesn’t end there.

There are homes to repair, businesses to reopen, children to reassure, memories to process and communities to rebuild. There are also difficult questions to answer about what worked, what didn’t and what needs to change before the next fire season. Northern Ontario has always lived with fire. It is part of our landscape and part of our history. But perhaps the greatest lesson of another wildfire season isn’t simply that we need to become better at fighting fires.

It is that we need to become better at caring for the people left behind after the fire.

Because resilience isn’t just about surviving the evacuation. It is about having somewhere to return to. It is about having people waiting for you when you get there. And when home has changed forever, it is about having a community willing to help you build a new one.

The flames may eventually disappear from the headlines. But for the people who lived through them, recovery is a story that continues long after the smoke clears.

Frequency-X Is Taking August Off — But We’ll Be Back in September!

By KARRIE O’CONNOR

ISSUE 5 APRIL 2026



Frequency X: The New Voice of the North (By Us, For Us)



The North is loud.

Are you a photographer capturing the neon lights of a Timmins winter? Are you in a band that only plays in garages because there aren’t enough all-ages venues? We want to see it.

We’re moving past the traditional “nature art” (though we still love a good lake view) and diving into the contemporary scene. We’re talking:

- Northern Youth Scene: What is going on in your school, your town, your life that may interest others?
- The Underground Music Scene: Interviews with local rappers, punk bands, and bedroom pop producers from Sault Ste. Marie to Kenora.
- Digital Frontiers: How Northern youth are using tech to connect with the global art world from small-town Ontario.

ing ever happens here or that the “real world” is somewhere else like Toronto or Ottawa. Frequency X is here to prove that the real world is exactly where you are standing.

The North is a playground for innovation. Because we don’t have the same crowded infrastructure as the south, we have the space to build our own thing. We have the space to be loud. We have the space to fail and try again.

Frequency X is the hub for that energy. It’s the Directory for your generation’s movement.

How to Get Involved

We aren’t looking for “professional” journalists with degrees. We’re looking for people with something to

A little summer break, a lot of adventures, and a new school year waiting just around the corner

August is here, and while summer may feel like it is flying by, we believe our youth deserve a little time to simply enjoy it.

That’s why Frequency-X will be taking the month of August off. Our youth have spent much of the year balancing school, homework, jobs, sports, activities, friendships and all of the other things that come with being a young person. Before another school year begins, we want them to have the opportunity to slow down, get outside, spend time with friends and family, and enjoy those final precious weeks of summer.

Of course, we still want to hear about what they are up to!

Whether it is a road trip, a day at the beach, camping with friends, exploring somewhere new, staying up too late around a campfire, creating art, playing sports or simply spending a day doing absolutely nothing, we want to hear about the fun — and safe — summer shenanigans our youth are getting themselves into.

Summer is about making memories, and we can’t wait to hear the stories when Frequency-X returns in September.

A New School Year, New Goals

September also brings a fresh start.

For some, it means starting high school. For others, it means moving into a new grade, meeting new teachers, making new friends or taking on new challenges. Some youth may be thinking about graduation, post-secondary education, careers or figuring out what they want their next chapter to look like.

When we return in September, we want to know what your goals are for the new school year.

Maybe you want to improve your grades.

Maybe you want to try out for a team.

Maybe you want to learn a new skill, get in-

involved in your community, make more friends or finally have the courage to try something you’ve always wanted to do.

Maybe your goal is simply to make it through the year and take better care of yourself along the way.

There is no right or wrong goal.

What matters is that it is yours.

We Want Your Voice

As Frequency-X continues to grow, we are looking for youth writers from across Northern Ontario who enjoy writing and want to share their experiences, ideas and perspectives with other young people.

You don’t have to consider yourself a professional writer. You don’t need a journalism background. You don’t even have to know exactly what you want to write about yet.

Maybe you love telling stories.

Maybe you have strong opinions about things happening in your community.

Maybe you enjoy poetry, photography, music, gaming, sports, art, books, fashion, nature or pop culture.

Maybe you simply want a place where you can talk about what it is like to be a young person growing up in Northern Ontario.

We want to hear from you.

Frequency-X is about creating a space where young people can see themselves and their communities reflected in the pages of Northern Threads. It is a place for youth voices, youth creativity and youth perspectives.

And we don’t want those voices to come from just one community.

We want to hear from North Bay, Sudbury, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Temiskaming, Manitoulin, Nipissing and the many smaller

communities that make Northern Ontario what it is.

Your community matters.

Your experiences matter.

Your voice matters.

A Community Just for Youth

We are also building a Discord community exclusively for our youth contributors and members, giving young people a place to connect with one another, share ideas, talk about upcoming projects and be part of the Frequency-X community.

If you are a young person in Northern Ontario who enjoys writing and would like to become part of the conversation, we would love to have you join us.

Interested youth can email info@northern-threads magazine.ca to request membership information for our youth Discord community.

So, for now, enjoy August.

Go outside.

Laugh with your friends.

Explore your community.

Try something new.

Make memories.

Be adventurous — but be smart and safe while you’re doing it.

Then come back in September ready to tell us what you did, what you learned, what made you laugh, what challenged you and what you want to accomplish next.

Frequency-X will be back in September.

And when we return, we’re ready to hear what Northern Ontario’s youth have to say.

