

From the garden to Queen's Park



The gnomes marched to the Toronto to deliver a letter to the Minister of Energy in hopes that he would hear their cry for help against raising hydro prices which many community residents can't afford. / DON WILSON Special to This Week

By Sarah Sobanski

"We are people of the soil and we have embraced this project," said Dianne Eastman, also known as Gnome-y Cline from the North Hastings chapter of the Gnomes for Justice and Equality. "People need to eat. We have to get out of the garden."

The *Bancroft this Week* stopped by the Place for the Arts to meet the gnomes and discover their origins.

The gnomes have been making waves in the community after waking for the fall harvest from Bancroft's community gardens. They're worried for the community gardeners who have tended them all year besides the coming fate of all their hard grown food now stored in local fridges and freezers if community members face hydro disconnects this winter. Sixty-thousand people in Ontario have been disconnected by Hydro One so far this year.

"Our gnomes do not promote any particular political party or social agency," said Eastman, explaining that the gnomes are community members who want to stand together and bring rural poverty into the light. Many of the gnomes are people who have experienced hunger and poverty themselves.

The political theatre group self-identifies as a joyous rebellion, after finding similarities with advocacy festivals happening in the United States.

"[They're] happening post Bernie Sanders. People are asking what is advocacy about regardless of party or politics. They are creating these festivals in small communities and trying to fix what needs to be fixed," added Eastman.

The gnomes first got together to plan a harvest festival. These led to community consultations to discuss the hardest issues facing North Hastings residents.

"One of the problems is there hasn't been enough study into the poverty of North Hastings. The declining industry has been felt for the last 30 years," said North Hastings Community Trust program co-ordinator Jane Kali. She sat in on the gnome interview as an expert on local poverty. She suggested poverty runs through many generations of North Hastings families.

The gnomes first partnered with Toronto organization Put Food in the Budget for a rally to fight poverty following their community consultations in Coe Hill, Maynooth and Bancroft. They marched to Riverside Park on Sept. 24 with their consultation results. A number of community organizations also offered support, including A Place for the Arts, North Hastings Community Trust, Harvest the North, Health Providers Against Poverty and the Hastings Prince Edwards Poverty Round Table.

They are documenting their movement with local filmmakers and photographers like Don Wilson and Harold Eastman. They said they hope other rural communities will band together to stand against poverty in similar fashion.

"If we're going to effect change, it needs to be large," said Kali.

Currently, the gnomes march to have the Ontario government lower hydro rates. Their other missions include stopping hydro

disconnects, raising social assistance radically, raising minimum wage to \$15 while subsidizing small businesses, raising pensions for low income seniors and raising corporate income tax.

‘Right now, it’s about hydro,’ said Eastman. ‘It could be about social assistance next. Anyone who wants to put on the red hat right now can join us gnomes.’

After sending two unanswered emails to the Minister of Energy Glenn Thibeault, 11 gnomes travelled to Toronto to deliver a letter signed by over 300 North Hastings community members on Oct. 11.

The letter stated ‘legislation recently introduced to reduce most electricity bills in Ontario by eight per cent [was] a sign that the Ontario government recognize[d] that the cost of hydro bills in rural and northern communities is a problem.’ Later, it stated ‘hydro rates are set to increase on Nov. 1. We want you to come and meet with members of our communities before this date.’ We are committed to making sure that the immediate crisis is dealt with and that longer term strategies are developed that ensure everyone has access to and can pay for the energy we need to live and work in our rural communities.’

‘We want the minister to take it seriously enough to come here and meet with gnomes and a few key stakeholders,’ said Kali.

Signatures came from members of the gnomes, area residents and those who attended Hydro One ombudsman Fiona Crean’s visit to Bancroft earlier this month. The gnomes made the letter available to community members outside the event as a means to a common interest and goal. The gnomes had spoken to organizers of the event prior and per their request didn’t disrupt the meeting but instead sang songs outside after the meeting’s conclusion in the spirit joyous rebellion.

Eastman said the gnomes understood that the ombudsman could help individuals with particular billing problems. They did not want to interfere with that. She said the gnomes want big policy issues to be addressed. She wasn’t surprised people in the community who share that opinion spoke forcefully to that point in the meeting.

As of Oct. 18, the gnomes had yet to hear back from the minister. They were told that the letter would get to the appropriate people and a response would be issued.

Whether or not the minister replies, Eastman said the gnomes will continue to work to create positive change in the community.

‘[It’s not the] poor against the rich, or country against the city,’ said Eastman.

‘[It’s about] the resiliency of community to look after each other and that acknowledgement gives us a lot of confidence and courage,’ said Kali.

Bancroft This Week has reached out to the energy minister’s office for a response to the letter presented by the gnomes. As of Oct. 31 it had yet to hear back.