



South West Chronicle

FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE



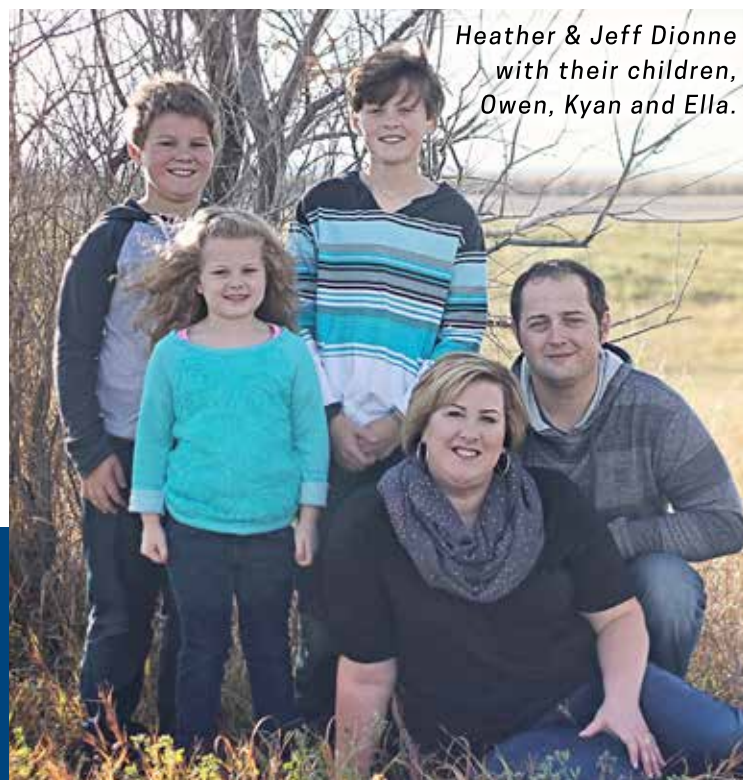
FEATURED STORY

Building recreation in small town Saskatchewan



FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE

Small towns sometimes face community challenges unknown to larger urban centres. A smaller population can mean fewer resources - but no less heart or spirit. This past year, the community of Coronach came together to address a decline in their recreational offerings and proved that challenges can bring out the best in a community.



Heather & Jeff Dionne with their children, Owen, Kyan and Ella.

Heather and Jeff Dionne grew up in Coronach. When they remember dark winter mornings and the squeak of skates, or sweating through the longest days of a hot summer, those moments are tied to their hometown, their friends, and the neighbors that helped shape their young lives.

Coronach is still home. Jeff works at the power plant. Heather works at Canada Post and is mother to three active kids. They want their children to enjoy the same opportunities and experiences they remember from their childhood. But times change. Fifteen years ago Coronach had a full time Recreation Director. In those days there was a full roster of hockey teams. Now there are three. Owen (age 10) is able to play in the local Atom league, but Kyan (age 12) would have had to commute an hour to Assiniboia to play and practice. After counting the cost, Kyan had to say goodbye to hockey.

Families all over small town Saskatchewan are familiar with the story. Some towns face a decline in overall population, some are faced with uncertainty as the interests of the emerging generation change, and some have seen a once robust recreational structure fragment and grow dusty as their maintenance and management budgets have declined or completely disappeared. For a parent whose child has just lost an opportunity, it can seem like an insurmountable problem, too big for any one person to fix.

Heather explained it like this, "Small towns are limited in what they have to offer. We accept that we don't have everything a city does, but the limits make you appreciate what you do have, especially with regard to recreation, because there's times when there's not much else to do. As you look ahead, you anticipate and rely on the seasonal things that you've got in place."



In the spring of this year she learned the local pool would not be opening. “It was a bummer summer.” And it was the tipping point for her. She committed herself to doing whatever was necessary to have the pool open next year. She formed a pool committee that would dedicate itself to the task.

The pool is connected to the main building of the Coronach Sportsplex. It houses a regulation size, artificial ice skating rink with seating for 300. It also has a curling rink with four sheets of ice and seating for 100. The original rink has been repurposed as a year-round equestrian arena. It’s an extraordinary accomplishment, but the Coronach Sportsplex is much more than its name suggests. “We were married there,” says Heather. “In a town of 700 people, its home base.” From wedding receptions, to trade and community fairs, to funerals, it is where the people of Coronach gather to celebrate who they are.

“Committed volunteers are the lifeblood of small town recreation.”

As Heather was searching out grants that would enable the town to repair and upgrade the pool, she learned that the fire suppression system in the Sportsplex was no longer to code. The community had 2-3 years to replace it (at a cost of \$40,000) before the hub of their whole recreational system shut down.

She wasn’t sure where to turn for help, or how to rally the community around its need. She knew her neighbors cared deeply about the community, but there was no dedicated point person who had all the answers. The town’s priorities were on matters of governance. The existing rec board was under resourced; it rarely met or acted. Most local activities were championed by individuals who mostly operated alone. She did what many of us would—she searched for “recreation” and “Saskatchewan” on Facebook and Google looking for examples of how others had found a way forward.

Her search quickly led her to the South West District for Culture, Recreation and Sport (SWDCRS), a non-profit which serves communities by walking alongside them, guiding them into an assessment of their needs and priorities, then connecting them to the resources they require. Heather contacted Marian Campbell, a specialist in community development with SWDCRS.

The group detailed their practical concerns and problems, but also opened up about their fears. “We’ve invested so much, over generations,” said Heather. “My parents helped build the curling rink. They created all these opportunities for me, now it feels like we’re failing our kids. What if my town is dying out?” Heather wasn’t going to let that happen.

The phone conversation with Marian was reassuring. Coronach was experiencing a normal phase in the life of a small Saskatchewan town. Marian explained what the SWDCRS could provide – consultation, guidance and encouragement. They planned a community visit. Marian would come to Coronach and meet with community stakeholders. She’d prompt them to express and discuss their wants, needs and priorities, she’d listen and guide them into making an action plan. She could also connect them to the organizations and programs which could provide real support and expertise. To this end, Marian brought Jaclyn Davis, a consultant with the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association, to the meeting.

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Part of Heather remained concerned that when all the stakeholders gathered, their different interests might pull them in different directions. But as Marian and Jaclyn guided them through an examination of their needs and priorities, the town came together. “It was like friends around a table,” said Heather. “We all had the same points on our lists. Everyone from all these different parts of life were on the same page. It was an a-ha moment.”

The Coronach stakeholders identified three key priorities. The first was their facility needs. Thanks to grants and gifts the community sought out and received, “that has been accomplished,” said Heather. “The fire suppression system is in, there’s been roof repairs, a lot of needed maintenance and painting.” The community is now working toward their second goal: the development of a well-educated Rec Board that is able to serve the community’s vision. Third on the list is the creation of a paid position to oversee the programs and facilities. “It’s a lot of work,” said Heather. “But it’s time well spent.”

“We’ve invested so much, over generations.”

Committed volunteers are the lifeblood of small town recreation. Heather’s advice to anyone intent on improving their town’s recreational offerings, is to persevere. “Get people involved. Pick up the phone and talk to the District. There are people who are waiting to guide you, and encourage you. You’re going to have to do the work, but they will come along and help you make a plan that answers your needs so you can take the next step.”

For now, Heather remains busier than ever, often heading to the rink several times a day with her youngest, Ella (age 5) “a true rink rat”, to oversee practices, conduct maintenance, recruit volunteers or to watch her son’s practices and games. At home there’s always another email to answer, and more material to research, but the work is deeply satisfying. The support of her husband and both sets of parents have been invaluable, as has the work and encouragement put forward by the community. She’s encouraged by the success they’ve found by working hard together, and knowing that she’s made a real difference for her children gives her the energy to keep on.

Is your community in a similar season? SWDCRS exists to help. The District has offices and community development coordinators in three locations. They’re ready to take your call, field your questions and guide your community toward a stronger understanding of its needs, strengths and opportunities.

WRITTEN BY ANDRE HARDEN

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A STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM

South West District Community Development Coordinators work with dozens of communities every year to help build sport, culture and recreation programs and services. When communities need more on-going support for recreation board development, that’s when SWDCRS staffers turn to Jaclyn Davis, Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association Field Consultant. Jaclyn’s expertise has been instrumental in helping south west communities reach their recreation board development goals. We thank her sincerely for being by our side at community meetings and look forward to working with her in the years to come.



DISTRICT FOR CULTURE,
RECREATION & SPORT INC.



Contact us today

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