

Joe needs help getting back home

But home needs work — it can't handle his wheelchair



JEFF MAHONEY

The Hamilton Spectator

William Hart has a special bond with his grandfather Joe Cannon.

They fish together off the pier.

William, 10, sleeps in the bed Joe slept in as a boy — in the old Cannon family home on Picton, in the north end where Joe grew up.

And William plays a fierce game of hockey, like Joe used to do in his youth and later with Hamilton's Regional Non-Contact Old-Timers Hockey League (RNOHL).

Until Joe was diagnosed with spinal stenosis, a condition that causes narrowing of the spinal canal.

"You want to be on the same team as him," says William of his granddad's hockey-playing style.

But Joe, 67, isn't playing hockey anymore; he's not even walking. Since surgery last November to address the stenosis, he hasn't been able to live at home. The small house on Picton needs costly renovations and an addition to make it wheelchair accessible.

That might not have been such an insurmountable challenge if Joe and his wife Bernice were having the retirement they'd planned. But they're not. They're bringing up three kids.

That's why Jim Vacon wants to help out, and why he's appealing, on behalf of a very special guy, for others to help, too.

Joe and Jim also have a special bond. Friends, hockey buddies (from the old-timers' league). North-enders.

"North-enders stick together," says Jim, who works for Keymaster Lock & Safe. "They (Joe and Bernice) need a ramp, a roll-in for the shower and a porch lift, basically an addition to the house."

Jim's willing personally to put up the required labour and materials, but obviously



JOHN RENNINGSON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Joe Cannon, centre, with his grandchildren Courtney Hart, 14, William, 10, Liz, 15, Bernice Cannon and friend Jim Vacon.

can't do it all himself. So he's wondering if there's a person, organization, service club, church, business — carpenters, anyone — out there who might pitch in with equipment, supplies, labour, skills.

Jim would like to get things rolling because Joe, who's living at St. Joseph's Villa in Dundas, is missing home.

And William is missing Joe.

Joe and Bernice adopted William and his sisters Elizabeth, 15, and Courtney, 14, when their mother, Joe and Bernice's daughter, died in 2004. William was only one year old. He has been with Joe, his de facto father, practically his whole life.

William was all set for his big 10th birthday party last November, but when Joe couldn't be there — he was in the hospital undergoing surgery — William postponed it.

He won't allow the party to go ahead until Joe's back home.

For Joe and Bernice, this is the third go at parenting. They were raising their first three girls when, after a gap, they had another three. When *they* were finally all out of the house, Joe and Bernice thought they'd get a much-deserved rest.

But when Michelle died suddenly, her three children were going to be separated

and sent to different homes.

"It was a no-brainer," Joe says, of his and Bernice's decision to adopt.

"This is our third set, but first time we've had a boy," says Bernice.

She gave up her job to be home with them; Joe retired early from U.S. Steel a few years later.

It's been challenging, but is working well. Elizabeth and Courtney enjoy figure skating, William plays hockey with the Mount Hamilton Senators; they all like watching *The Big Bang Theory*, the new *Hawaii Five-O*, and *The Fairly Odd Parents*. And, of course, there's Sherbet the cat.

Bernice visits Joe every day, and the kids do so every two or three days. It's been hard.

"He's provided emotional and financial support for his grandchildren throughout their whole lives," says Jim.

Everyone wants Joe back home. Joe wants Joe back home, even if it'll look a little different when he gets there.

He belongs in the north end.

To help, call Bernice at 905-525-8961 or email Jim at vacon.1@sympatico.ca.

jmahoney@thespec.com
905-526-3306