

## **Building a Charity, One Basket at a Time**

By Heather Dunster and Lauren Hall

Imagine savouring an eclectic variety of local foods, expertly prepared by one of Ottawa's premier caterers in the unique surroundings of a heritage barn at the Canada Agriculture Museum on the Central Experimental Farm. Live Dixieland music fills the air with infectious excitement. Your glass of Prince Edward County wine or your ale from an Eastern Ontario microbrewery glints in the early evening sun as you gaze at the country fields and farm surroundings nestled in the centre of Canada's capital.

Celebrity auctioneer Stuntman Stu soon steps onto the stage to encourage the guests to bid generously. He is surrounded by a dozen or so exceptional live auction items such as a catered brunch for you and your friends in Ottawa's oldest home; original pieces of art; and first class travel opportunities.

This is **Baskets with Panache!** The baskets have "panache" because they are created by community leaders who have filled them with items selected to reflect their personality and interests. After just three years **Baskets with Panache!** has become a consistent winner — and one of the most distinctive fundraising events in Ottawa. **Baskets with Panache!** is social, it's enjoyable, it's classy, and — most importantly — it's worthwhile because the money it raises each year enables children in our community with financial challenges to attend the Museum's school programs and summer day camps, for an unforgettable hands-on farm experience. Children benefiting from **Baskets with Panache!** learn about agriculture and about where their food really comes from.

**Baskets with Panache!**, to be held on June 16 this year, is the creation of Wally Parsons. Wally believes in his community, and enjoys volunteering his time and money to causes he believes in — especially if the cause supports people who are less fortunate. He is a passionate person who devotes most of his retirement hours to charity because he believes it's the right thing to do. Since 2007, **Baskets with Panache!** has raised more than \$80,000, which has brought 7,000 very deserving children to participate in educational programs at the Canada Agriculture Museum.

“Coming from a family that was poor, I really felt that you should give back to the community, to the people that needed help,” says Parsons. “I decided then that when I retired I would do a lot more of that, because it was so rewarding.”

Over the past few decades, Parsons has helped create and nurture many local events, raising thousands of dollars to benefit area charities. And at a young 72 years, he’s showing no signs of slowing down. Parsons retired as Senior Vice-President and General Manager of Neilson Dairy, Ottawa, in June 2000, but his love for the various events he’s helped to create keeps him busier than ever.

A countryman to the core, Parsons latest endeavour gives many local children their first exposure to a farm, teaching them about the science, technology, and labour required to produce their food. This valuable fundraiser is a tribute, of sorts, to his own summers working on his grandparents’ farm.

“I’ve always loved the Agriculture Museum and the Experimental Farm,” says Parsons, “I have always believed that every child should get to see a farm because I was lucky enough to learn many of life’s lessons there when I was younger.”

After building a supportive team that includes Gay Cook, prominent Ottawan and former *Ottawa Citizen* columnist and food critic, Sheila Whyte, owner of Thyme & Again Creative Catering, and Jacquelin Holzman, former mayor of Ottawa, **Baskets with Panache!** was realized.

“By having the Baskets with Panache! fundraiser, we’ve achieved three things,” says Parsons. “We’ve established a group of people through the committee who are really dedicated to this museum, we’ve created more of an awareness of the Canada Agriculture Museum in the city of Ottawa, and we’ve raised a lot money to help some very deserving children.”

Wally and his committee also challenge their friends, neighbours, and peers to take up the cause by supporting the “Fill-a-Bus” project. With every \$10 donation, one child’s bus transportation to the Museum is covered. Donors receive a tax receipt and can feel really good about helping a child receive an enriched education. New donors are encouraged to call the Canada Agriculture Museum Foundation at 613-991-6271 to help “Fill-a-Bus” or to visit the Museum’s website to read more about the programs.

Since food is a large component of the **Baskets with Panache!** event, efforts are made to ensure that local produce and meat are used, thus re-affirming support for local farmers and agriculture.

For Whyte, the idea of promoting locally grown foods was a perfect match for the event and for her own beliefs.

“My first love in this project is the fact that I think it’s essential for the next generation to know the importance of farms and food,” says Whyte. “The fact that this was bringing children to a spot where they would actually see where the food is coming from was essential for me.”

Now in its fourth year, the fundraiser has grown annually with increases in both the number of sponsors, and the number of baskets donated. Over the next few years, the committee hopes to increase not only sponsorship but attendance as well, building the event name so that it is circled on calendars year after year.

And because Wally Parsons believes, he says he will be around to make sure it gets to that stage. If you ask him if he is going to stop or even slow down his involvement, the answer is a resounding no.

“Not as long as I can physically do it,” says Parsons. “My involvement will always continue in some way as long as I can. It’s a labour of love.”