

Westben Arts Festival Theatre Receives Provincial Tourism Award

by Brian Schuette, Community Press
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Westben recently took second place in a competition held by the Tourism Federation of Ontario (TFO). As a finalist for the Ontario Tourism Excellence Awards in the Event/Business of the Year category, the festival was placed in the company of such

well-known provincial tourist meccas as the Ontario Science Centre. The award recognizes a business or event that effectively promoted and enhanced tourism in Ontario over the past year. Westben owners, Brian Finley and Donna Bennett, were justifiably excited about the win and the recognition they got from companies and organizations within the tourism industry from all across the country.

At the conference, they made a number of valuable contacts with hotel chains, resorts, other cultural venues, government agencies, tourism operators, and tourism organizers such as Attractions Ontario. They also participated in talks on foreign and out-of-province markets.

The TFO recognized Westben as a tourism generator for Ontario after looking over ample evidence that tourists come to Trent Hills just for their concerts. While in the area, many of the 10,000 annual visitors to the festival spend time and money at local businesses in Campbellford, Hastings and Warkworth, such as restaurants, the chocolate factory, and bed and breakfasts. Donna said that they were told that tourism and cultural events are now seen as a prime way to revive economic development in a municipality. To find out just what impact it is having on local business, Westben has sent out a survey to 5,000 people on their mailing list, asking them where they eat and stay for instance while attending the festival. The government has formulas that will compile the data and will be able to estimate just how much business Westben does generate for our community and for Ontario.

Northumberland County recently brought a travel writer to tour local businesses, communities and events that could be promoted to tourists. As a writer for Toronto Life and Via Rail, she told the county that if they had to promote only one thing in Northumberland, they should promote Westben.

Donna says they plan to work more with the whole community to bring even more tourists to this part of the province. "Northumberland is competing with every other county and we have to be special and offer first class service," she explained. "I'm looking at more partnerships within the community and looking at our organization to make sure our service is tops." She and Brian both have set their eyes on international tourists as well and they are looking at upgrading their on-site facilities down the road. Installing permanent washrooms, perhaps having permanent structures on the grounds where local artisans can show their work during the festival, and giving visitors wider access to the actual farm setting are all things under consideration. Partners within our



community include many of the businesses on Warkworth's Main Street, the municipality's economic development and tourism staff, Westben's legion of volunteers, and even some of the dining and accommodations businesses in and around the area.

International tourists expect to see international calibre performances. With this in mind, Westben will be striving to make sure their shows meet this standard. The acts don't have to come from outside the country, but they must perform at a world-class level. This should make for some exciting concerts in upcoming seasons, and bring even more tourist dollars into the community. At the conference, Brian and Donna learned that the number of American tourists coming to Ontario is down by roughly a million visitors. While they continue to be our biggest market, Ontario is now promoting itself to China and Britain. Westben will also pursue these markets.

Brian said that Westben is starting to develop relations with places like the Banff Centre and to develop new work with them. There is a possibility of performing their production of Rapunzel there, and of bringing some of their best performers here for concerts. While the idea of working with such well-known organizations is exciting, and bringing Westben up to world-class standards is a bold vision and goal, the two say they don't want to get too far removed from Westben's roots. "We're a community organization," Donna said, "and I never want to lose that or become too slick. Westben should be 'best in class,' whether it's a community musical, a master class..." "...Or a professional concert," Brian interjected, picking up the conversation. "The whole tourism thing is developing what we have here already. It's not supplementing it with something else. The Barn is not a place you build to exclude the rest of the world and recreate a new one. It's where you enhance the world you're in. That's what is attracting the whole tourism attention to Westben. It's highlighting the area as opposed to excluding it." Donna echoed his views by saying, "We didn't open Westben just to make money. We moved here with a certain number of talents and the area had its talents. We put them together and it felt natural."

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