



Denis & Margaret Brennan

KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE

BY JENNA CAPUTO | PHOTOS BY TARA WILEY PHOTOGRAPHY AND CONTRIBUTED BY THE BRENNAN FAMILY

“*History defines who we are, as well, I believe, who we become,” says Denis Brennan, Niskayuna Town Historian. “History is not about remembering the past lest we repeat it – history does not repeat! Understanding the history which produced us, affords the opportunity – but not the certainty – of determining who we become.***”**

Growing up in Yonkers, NY, Denis enjoyed playing sports, but especially loved baseball and going to Yankee Stadium to see his boyhood hero, Yogi Berra. He always liked history but initially decided to pursue a degree in accounting, which he did not complete. As often happens in life, plans changed.

Deciding to finish his BA at University at Albany in 1985, Denis registered in an American History course as his first class since it was a favorite topic, and he quickly realized that he wanted to matriculate as a History major. After he switched, he continued classes at night working through his BA, MA and finally completing his Ph.D in American History in 2003. Starting as a Teaching Assistant at University at Albany, he then began teaching as an adjunct at a variety of area colleges before working at Union College for 15 years.

His wife, Margaret, was originally from Buffalo, NY and spent her childhood years in Seattle, WA and Scarsdale, NY, reading, visiting with her cousins in Canada and hanging out at the ice rink going to hockey games. She originally received her BA in Sociology and a minor in Elementary Education before working on her MA in Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Hunter College in the Bronx.

Her mother suggested she join the local theater group for young adults that met at their church. Margaret checked it out and thought it seemed fun, so she joined. She ended up acting in several of their plays, where she met Denis, who was one of the directors at the time. They married in Westchester and first moved to Saratoga before eventually settling here in Niskayuna in 1978.

After watching some members of their families deal with substance abuse, Margaret decided she wanted to learn more about it and found she really enjoyed the education and work. In 1986, a year after Denis returned to college, she began taking night classes in the Community Psychology Program at Sage Graduate School. After completing her MA, she became a Credentialed Alcoholism Counselor first at Samaritan Hospital in Troy, then as a Case Manager for Substance Abuse at Community Health Plan (CHP). “Those jobs only reinforced my belief that



prevention was greatly needed since most addiction starts early in life due to a variety of causes,” she says. After CHP closed in 1999, she became the Community Prevention Coordinator for Rensselaer County, assisting communities in building coalitions to help reduce alcohol and other drug use by teenagers.

Since she retired, Margaret has been active in continuing her volunteer work through her church, Progressive Schenectady and NiskyNOW, the weekend backpack food program for families in need throughout the community. The backpack program has been especially busy during the COVID-19 crisis and can always use volunteer help for packing and/or distributing the food.

While making his plans to retire from Union, Denis heard about the available Town Historian position, and he thought it might be a great opportunity to still use his skills, but on a more part-time basis. He quickly realized that the new position changed his focus a bit. “After being chosen to be Town Historian, one distinguishing aspect of this change quickly became clear; town/municipal history is public history, which is distinctly different from academic history. The academic’s focus is research and education, and it is largely an individualized endeavor; the public historian’s focus is also research and education, but it is also about preservation and advocacy, which is best accomplished through community interaction and involvement.”

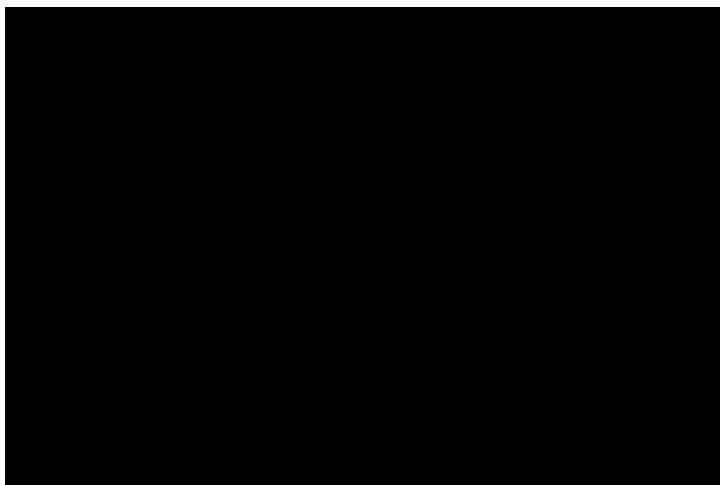
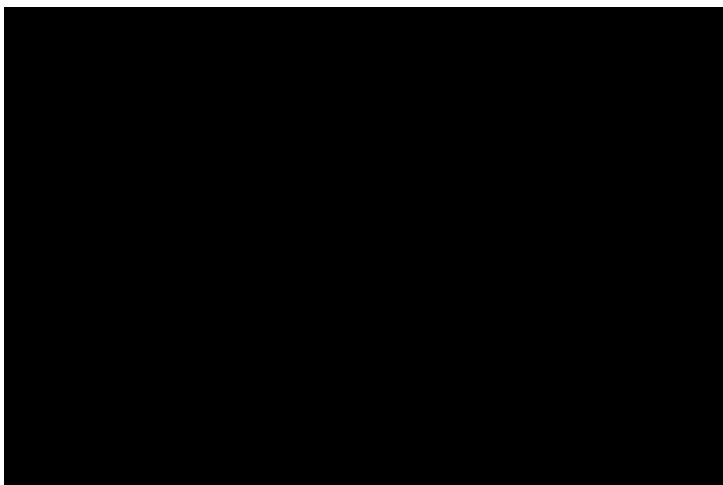
The new position has been an enjoyable one and has allowed Denis to not only be more involved in the town and community, but to also learn some fun facts about local history, like the 1921 Studebaker that had been used by bootleggers to run liquor from Canada to the US during prohibition. It was shot up by troopers, but somehow found its way to Niskayuna (no one knows how). Purchased for \$1, the car was retrofitted to carry fire-fighting equipment and found a home serving the Niskayuna Grand Boulevard Fire Company until they retired it in 1935. Denis has a picture of it in the town’s archives, but the car has since disappeared; no records have been found to explain

what happened to it.

Most of their current projects are on pause for the pandemic, but Denis is looking forward to the unveiling of the new historical marker for the Rosendale Common School (aka Niskayuna Grange Hall #1542), which is one of four town buildings now on the National Register of Historic Places. Niskayuna’s Historical Committee also contributes monthly articles for the Niskayuna supplement, “Gleanings from the Corn Flats” in the *Daily Gazette*, and he is collecting documents, articles and stories about the COVID-19 crisis to create an archive for future generations to see and understand this historical event in the making. In addition to the documents released from the newspapers and town-to-town employees and residents, Denis has also received personal stories and experiences from town residents and is hoping to receive more. He urges everyone to write their own personal essays and journal entries about their experiences during this historic time.

Denis loves being involved in the community in this new way and especially enjoys finding unexpected discoveries or unanticipated connections. “Researching history often involves systematic examination, which seemingly more often than not can lead to a dead end. But when those examinations lead to a fact, information or connection, whether by perseverance or serendipity, it is like finding a lost gem; something to celebrate!” he says.

The love of history carries over into their family life as well. Margaret’s family are all into genealogy with her parents, brother, herself and several cousins all researching the family history. Luckily, their family has kept many original documents over the years, and she uses Ancestry.com and Family Search to try to fill in the rest of the holes as best they can. Some records only go so far. She says it’s almost impossible to go back farther than the mid-1700s at best for Irish genealogy, but French records go back to the 1600s. Over the years, she has





found new cousins and even discovered that she was not 100% Scots/Irish like she thought. She learned she was also partially Acadian French. “Turns out my Dad’s grandmother on his mom’s side was 100% Acadian French from the Maritimes in Canada. In the census, she is listed as a French speaker. I have found I have tons of cousins we never knew about because we always thought that her parents’ names were either White or Casey. Turns out they were LeBlanc/Caissie. It was quite a shocker!”

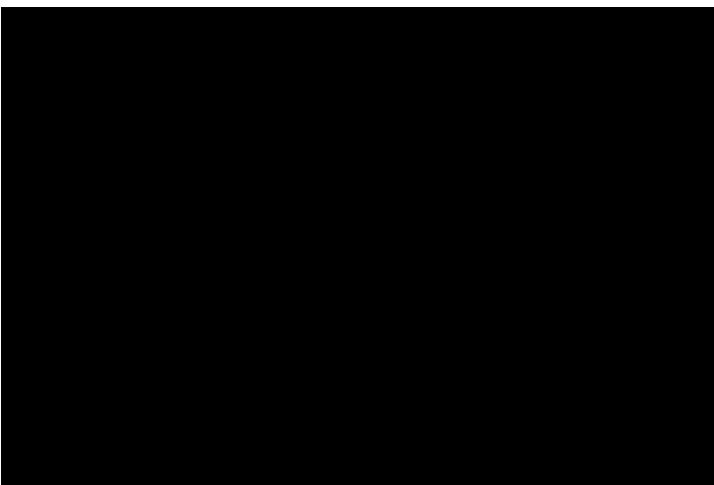
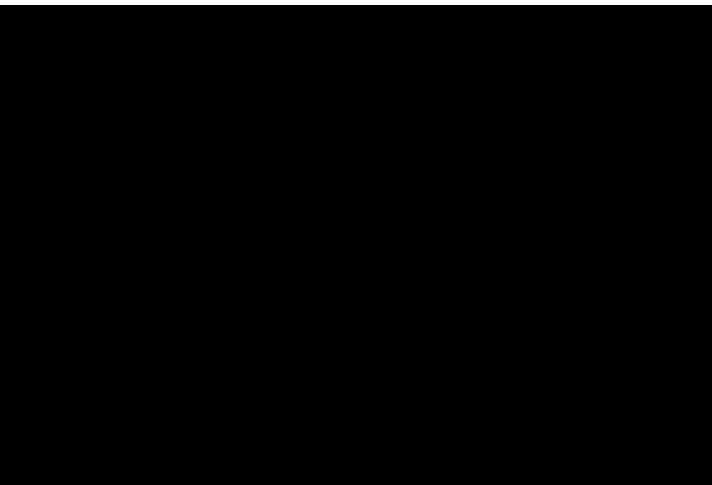
In 2002, they purchased an old schoolhouse that resided on her great-great grandfather’s property in Leeds County, Ontario, about 14 miles north of the Thousand Islands Bridge. The one-room stone school, built in 1860, is situated across the street from the family’s old farmhouse. It was active until 1960. The Brennans rehabilitated it back to the way it was in about 1910 and now participate in community historical days and arts festivals by opening the school for tours and art shows.



Denis’ name is actually part of his family lore as well. Named after his grandfather, who was born in Ireland with the traditional British spelling of “Dennis,” but as an Irish nationalist, he decided he wanted nothing to do with anything British, so he eventually changed his name to the French version with only one n.

Denis and Margaret now have four children and two grandchildren: Timothy lives in Niskayuna with his wife, Diane, and owns and operates Brennan Landscaping; Norah is a healthcare Software Product Manager for Cognizant Technical Solutions and resides in Saratoga with her partner, Andrew. Ian is currently a Communications Consultant with Perspecta after having worked in communications for five governors, two mayors and the Baltimore City Fire Department. He lives with his wife, Maya, and their two daughters, Solveig and Asta, in Washington DC; and Daniel, who now works in the restaurant/bar industry in Rochester.

Their family is close and they strive to keep that connection even after moving to different areas. The movie *Field of Dreams* became an important beacon in their family. After they had all seen it together, they each had taken a different moment to heart and continue their family traditions like going to Opening Day at Yankee Stadium or Ian’s tradition of playing catch with his dad and his daughters always finding something special to do with grandpa as well.





students from the AFS program at Niskayuna High School. And Tim had quite a few German college students through the US Congress/German Bundestag program. Those were education experiences for all of us and we stay in contact with many of those people.”

They also all love to travel and believe it is an important part of life. “When the kids were in their teens and early twenties, we encouraged them to travel with various programs or on their own. I believe seeing new places open our eyes to the world. We also had a total of six foreign exchange

One of their favorite trips was a four month stay in Galway, Ireland in 2014. Through Union College, Denis was chosen as the Faculty Director for the semester abroad with 19 students. Teaching them one course himself, the students were then free to choose three other courses at the University at Galway. “There were also five mandatory excursions, which were wonderful,” says Margaret. “Each excursion included a local expert so we learned a lot more about the areas visited than we would traveling on our own. I got to go along, which was great. What I really enjoyed was evening walks out along Galway Bay and looking back at the city. I never could quite believe we were having that opportunity. It was one of those things that come to us in life that we never expected to do that turned out to be a phenomenal experience. In many ways it was life changing. Meeting such wonderful people, seeing things we never expected to see and spending time in one place and getting to know the culture and the people better than a short visit ever would have given us.”

They had planned to leave in March for a trip to Italy, Ireland, Scotland and England, which was cancelled due to the crisis, but they are hoping to make the trip again soon, this time adding the Shetland Islands to the itinerary after watching the BBC series, “Shetland.” Having to postpone the trip was a disappointment, but they are making the best of the time trying to help others as much as possible.

“During this difficult time, I believe it is important to share our wealth with others,” says Margaret. “Not necessarily monetary wealth but through our actions being kinder and doing more for others. Many people need help now and once people start back to work there are going to be needs for childcare and food supports for people who are not able to go back to work. We live in a very giving community, and I believe that there are opportunities every day to do something for our neighbors.”

To send Denis any of your stories or questions about Niskayuna history, stories from the COVID-19 crisis or if you have any artifacts or documents about the town’s history, Denis would love to hear from you at dbrennan@niskayuna.org.

To help with the NiskyNOW backpack program, contact Jessica Brennan at JBrennan@niskyschools.org.