**Overcoming Personal Challenges**

Gary and his wife, Gayle, are pillars of the arts and culture community in Port Carling in Muskoka. It keeps them very busy. They have a gallery attached to their home, they run artist-in-school programs, give lessons, and do other cultural programming. Their life turned upside down, though, on June 27, 2013 when Gary ended up in the intensive care unit (ICU) at the hospital because of an unidentified virus. He was totally paralyzed; unable to move anything but his eyes. The exact cause is unknown but is an unidentified virus. Faced with the challenge to adapt to a new way of living, they have approached it with the same vigor as when they were building the arts community. Their experience shuttling between various hospitals and healthcare facilities in Toronto and Barrie has made them aware of some of the gaps in the healthcare system. They’ve seen first-hand what it’s like to hit road blocks along the way.

One of these road blocks was learning that Gary wouldn’t be able to go home. He uses a ventilator to help with his breathing and they were told that there weren't enough resources (nurses or trained staff) in Muskoka to be able to provide care for someone who uses a ventilator. With some creativity, persistence, and help from Heather Hollingshead, they’ve been able to find another way.

Gary and Gayle met Heather, a Regional Services Coordinator with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Ontario, when Gary was in the ICU. She has been with them on this journey ever since. At the time, they hadn’t really wrapped their heads around what Gary would need to be able to live independently. He would need things like a wheelchair, a modified vehicle, and renovations to make their home accessible, and 24-hour care. Heather was able to let them know about all these things and right away began the process to get Gary a wheelchair. She was also able to put together one of the biggest pieces of the puzzle - getting Gary home.

After more than a year in ICU they were accepted into the Transition to Home Ventilation Program at West Park Healthcare Centre in Toronto. During this 14-week program, that turned out to be almost year, they learned that local healthcare resources would not be able to provide that level of care for Gary to return home. Fortunately, they applied for the Direct Funding Program and were successful. This was the key to enable Gary to return to his life in Port Carling.

Throughout his time in the ICU and at West Park, Gary remained involved with the running of Muskoka Chautauqua, which he and Gayle co-founded 20 years ago, and since returning home he is right in the thick of things. With the help of an eye-gaze computer he is again able to work alongside Gayle and Chautauqua staff in the office.

Now that he has been home for two years and has experienced the breadth and depths of the health care system inside and outside of institutions, and the challenges he has had to face, he is committed to making a positive difference in the future of healthcare delivery in Muskoka and the province. Gary has become a healthcare advocate, working with professionals within the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the North Simcoe Muskoka Local Health Integration Network (NSM LHIN)

Gary and Gayle have lived in Muskoka for many years and have been long-time advocates for the arts, culture, and life-long learning. They have been celebrated and received several awards for their work in the community. Gary was named Citizen-of-the-Year, the year before his ordeal began. Now they happily accept speaking engagements such as at Critical Care Services Ontario Community Care Council, Rotary Clubs, and TVO’s The Agenda to advocate for positive change in healthcare delivery.

Gary and Gayle are proud and grateful to live in such a caring and supportive community and acknowledge Independent Living and the Direct Funding Program in playing such an integral part in Gary’s ability to live at home and his ability to contribute to his community.

*(Gary Froude and Gayle Dempsey, May 2017)*