

Teen Ranch's roots traced to late 1950s

By Tabitha Wells

If there's any local organization that could be deemed a complete underdog story, it would be Teen Ranch Canada.

The non-profit facility, which runs both summer camps and year-round options, is recognizable to anyone who has frequently travelled Highway 10 between Orangeville and Caledon village.

Its large arena, as well as reputation in horsemanship, has drawn the attention of multiple NHL teams, the Canadian Special Olympics team, rodeos and hundreds of campers annually since its inception in 1968.

The actual story of the Ranch's inception began in the late 1950s, when a music group called King's Men set off to Australia with their wives and a dream to help start a North American-style Christian Camp. The group travelled across Australia, promoting their idea on radio and television, and after two years, had purchased a property.

'The other guys all returned to Canada, but my wife, Janet, and I stayed,' explained Mel Stevens, founder of Teen Ranch Canada, and one of the co-founders of Teen Ranch Australia. 'I was the only guy who had any camp experience, so by default I became the first Director of Teen Ranch Australia.'

After five years, Stevens decided it was time to return home and pursue his own dream 'to launch Teen Ranch Canada, a Western Riding-inspired Christian camp that could also be used to mentor and guide kids forward in their lives.

'We came back to Canada with \$10 in our pockets, three kids, and a dream of starting Teen Ranch Canada,' he said. 'After looking at 65 properties, we settled on our Caledon location.'

The owner of the property at the time asked them to make an offer, and laughed when Stevens said they had \$10.

'He wanted to know why I was wasting his time, and I told him it was because I believed God wanted us to have the property,' said Stevens. 'He told me, 'I'm Jewish and an atheist, so I don't believe God has anything to do with it,' and if we could come up with \$80,000, he would sell us the property.'

They were able to come up with a \$20,000 down payment, thanks to two generous couples loaning them the funds interest-free, and Teen Ranch Canada was born. At the time, the property was nothing like what one sees now. Stevens describes its original state as barren of anything, save for a large dearth of trees, an old dilapidated house, and a barn.

Now, the Ranch spreads across the wide property with a large barn for their horses, multiple fields, four residences, a barn-style toolshed, dining hall, hotel/snack parlour, cabins, Coach House and Carriage House, along with a large arena and multiple riding rings.

'What you see at the Ranch today is the result of a lot of hard work by a lot of people, a lot of volunteers, and a lot of generous donors,' said Stevens. 'It took a lot of time and money to get where we are now.'

While finances have always been the biggest struggle the Ranch has faced, Stevens attributes the funds always coming through to God's hand over their work, as well as the lasting impact they have made on campers, parents, and many well-known athletes through their mentoring programs, of which many have become donors and supporters.

The first camp started in 1968, with 35 kids over the summer and a staff of about 12. As of last year, the Ranch saw approximately 135 campers throughout each of the nine weeks, and hosts approximately 80 volunteer staff throughout the summer and around 30 full-time staff year round. They now offer a variety of camp options, including Western and English Riding, Hockey Camp, Adventure and BMX camps and more. The Ranch also hosts school groups, retreats, and hockey teams throughout the year (including NHL teams like the Florida Panthers and Montreal Canadiens).

'People want to be a part of Teen Ranch because they see the impact we have on the lives of young kids,' said Stevens. 'They see we are touching their lives, giving them guidance and helping prepare them, and they want to be a part of that.'