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Legendary Canadian tree planter brings talents to local farm

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Kenny Chaplin got his start in the business when he was 16 in 1986. Since then, the Canadian has planted an estimated 3 million trees.

Thousands more will be added to that total, as Chaplin was summoned recently to Frederick County by Jaclyn Mommen to help plant 7,500 Osage orange trees at her planned regenerative wine farm near the Mount Williams community.

In 2021, Mommen purchased 450 acres with the idea of opening Laurel Grove Wine Farm, which will eventually have a vineyard, a tasting room and a farm market. The Osage orange trees — dropped into the ground two weeks ago — will form a hedge encircling the multipurpose vineyard, acting as a natural fenceline.

Chaplin, 53, arrived in the Shenandoah Valley for the first time and was soon donning planting gear, with knee pads, and saddled with bags. He then planted the native trees across a scenic 100 acres, nestled between two mountains.

On the first day, he planted 1,700 trees. Another 2,000 were added on the second day. By the end of 3½ days, all 7,500 trees had been planted by hand. Even if that may sound like a great deal of planting, Chaplin secured a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records after planting 15,170 red pine trees over 19 hours in the wilds of Prince Albert, Canada, when he was 31, a personal best and, at the time, a global best.

Chaplin held the tree-planting record for 20 years. Then fellow Canadian Antoine Moses, 24, shattered it in 2022 by planting 23,000 trees in less than 24 hours — but Chaplin noted that Moses had a six-man crew with him. Although the thrill and sweat of planting always meant more to Chaplin than the record, he'd like to try to reclaim the title. The work near Mount Williams found him faced with an altogether different terrain.

"You have to find the right ground at the right time of the year. If the land comes available, I'll try it again. I can only tree plant at this age for two months at a time and then I'm done," he said.

A rite of passage

In Canada, Chaplin said planting trees is a rite of passage for young people.

"It gets them away from the city, gets them out of their head, or it gets them into their head, depending on how you look at it," Chaplin said. "It cleanses your soul right out.

You leave out of there just changed because you are in nature for three months. You come out of there fit, with a bank full of money."

Oftentimes, young Canadian men attracted to an outdoors lifestyle are recruited on college campuses by tree planting companies — which are hired by logging companies to replant areas that have been logged. It is a common summer job to help fund college.

The work invariably occurs in remote areas often only accessible via helicopter. Tree planting crews set up campsites, complete with mess tents and bathrooms, for the duration of planting sprees.

"Trees are good for the earth," Chaplin said. "You feel good about that."

Planting trees all day is grueling work, but it's more lucrative than one might expect. So-called "highballers" can earn \$400 to 600 a day, sometimes more. Over three months, planters can earn \$25,000-\$30,000, Chaplin said. The planters work for three weeks, then are off for a period. One of the companies to which he has long been loyal plants an average of 42 million trees annually, working six crews at a time.

Chaplin is far from a full-time planter now — in fact, few are — and he is a father. A resident of Regina in the Saskatchewan Province, he works in the film industry and as substitute teacher. But he still plants trees several months a year to keep fit and draw himself closer to the earth.

Most recently, that has been in Frederick County.

Laurel Grove Wine Farm

The local planting project will not help him reclaim the record, but Chaplin knew he wanted to contribute when Mommen reached out via social media.

Mommen found herself with 7,500 tiny Osage orange trees but did not know how to get them into the ground. A friend mentioned the "Highballers" documentary — featuring both Chaplin and Moses — that introduced the rugged tree-planting lifestyle to American audiences. So she contacted Moses on social media. Although Moses said he could not make the trip to Virginia, Chaplin responded about a month ago saying that the project piqued his interest.

Of her vision for the farm, Mommen said, "The idea behind the winery is to celebrate regenerative farming and connect people more to being healthy. It's about this principle: soil health is human health. A huge part of this journey for us and me is I think the way we are farming now is causing more harm than good."

The 7,500 Osage orange trees will surround the recently cleared 100 acres. This will be the location of the regenerative vineyard, to be laced with a variety of native flora,

vegetables, and fruits among the vines. The initial portion of the vineyard is slated to be planted next spring.

Osage orange trees give rise to an odd-looking green fruit that can be employed as a natural pesticide, according to Mommen.

"Then these limbs become this chain fence that becomes impenetrable," she said of the natural fence line.

Animals and insects will be able to live within this natural fence, and the relatively impenetrable hedge is an ecosystem in itself.

"The tree is native to the region, has a crazy looking fruit that is inedible but the phenolics of which are a natural pesticide and mosquito repellent and leaves that are prickly (deer hate them!). They also serve as shelter to birds, snakes and other animals we want around the vineyard. Less expensive and huge ecosystem gains... talk about a win!" wrote Mommen in an email.

A project in its early phases, it's one that Chaplin knew he wanted to contribute to.

"I'm used to monoculture, set ten feet apart. This is the way trees should be planted. This is about a foot and a half apart, right, so underground they can say hello to one another," said Chaplin.

Other plans for the property include a tasting room and "Patty's Place" — a farm-to-market store and community center — that Mommen envisions as a community hub for workshops and events. While the timeline is flexible, this aspect of the project could open in spring of 2024.

The high-end tasting room is slated to open in 2030. Ultimately, Laurel Grove Wine Farm will have vines that span 30 acres.

Mommen has been working with the Shenandoah Permaculture Institute to design a farm layout that incorporates a variety of ecosystems so that they overlap, shoring up soil health.

"The premise of all of it fundamentally is that diversity makes the whole ecosystem stronger. We want as many different ecosystems present as possible and having a hedge provide a perimeter ecosystem can only do that," Mommen said, touting the benefits of the Osage tree line versus an actual fence.

Besides the wealth of vines, pigs, cattle and sheep will also be kept at Laurel Grove Wine Farm.

Precision agriculture

Mommen's husband, Dustin, is the chief technology officer of a hedge fund based in New York. He has brought that interest and expertise in technology to the farm to implement the application of what is known as "precision agriculture."

Laurel Grove Wine Farm will use instruments including eight weather stations, 23 weather racks and 200 sensors — all solar powered — that will track temperature, soil moisture, humidity, sunlight, rainfall and soil PH. Such measurements will be continuously recorded every three minutes.

"When I started to learn about vineyards and farming practices, I felt like there was a lot of imprecision in the way people apply data. Conventional farming just involves a lot of synthetic chemicals with very little thought to how to use the information that is available," said Dustin Mommen.

His project, dubbed "Scarecrow," attracted a trio of robotics students at the University Idaho working on a doctoral dissertation on precision agriculture. At the farm, the students are now heading the project that will eventually use technology and artificial intelligence to create an automated, smart vineyard.

"Precision agriculture is just the idea of using technology and data to have better farming outcomes," Dustin Mommen said. "We have a dashboard with a data science application that just plots graphs. It'll be interesting when we plant vines because we'll do sap analysis."

"In vineyards, we can understand the relationship between that information and how it influences the sugar content of the grapes. And if we connect all of this together, we have a circle, and we can kind of use that data to formulate a very interesting formula, a repeatable formula, but we can do it at a micro climate level," he added.

The Mommens, who plan to relocate from New York to Frederick County in the coming weeks, intend to harness this information to produce some quality wine.

Though 100 acres have been cleared, the remaining 350 will remain forest — with sassafras, sycamore, and sweet-gum trees — for "eternity," Jaclyn Mommen hopes.

3 siblings graduate from local high schools in a 4-year period. They didn't miss a single day.

June 5

WINCHESTER — It's not uncommon for siblings to attend Frederick County Public Schools. What is uncommon is for a trio of siblings to not miss a single day of school from kindergarten through high school graduation. But in a herculean effort, Logan McBride, Tyler McBride and Ariel Helmick did just that.

The three siblings showed up thousands of times for the morning bell without fail, scoring perfect attendance records across their combined 30-plus years in the school division. The streak was completed last week when Logan, the youngest sibling, graduated from Millbrook High School on Friday.

"I especially wanted to do it after I saw my brother did it. He was the first one in my family who went to college. I really wanted to go to college, too, and follow in his footsteps," said Logan McBride, who will be attending Potomac State College in West Virginia this fall.

Tylor McBride, the eldest, scored perfect attendance in 2019 when he graduated from James Wood High School.

He played baseball and football for the Colonels and has since graduated from James Madison University with a bachelor of science degree in sports management and a minor in business management.

"If I wasn't at school, I was going to miss out on all these opportunities," Tylor McBride said. "With my being the first born, I tried to set an example for my family members. I tried to be a good role model."

He said experiences he didn't want to miss out on included sports, seeing friends, building relationships and receiving an education.

The middle sibling, Ariel Helmick, graduated from Millbrook in 2022. She now plays volleyball at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, studying psychology and criminal justice.

Logan played football at Millbrook — a running back — and, reflecting on his high school experience, said his fidelity to attending school each day taught him a great deal about commitment, while also providing a concrete goal.

Like his brother, Logan also was often aware that, if he missed a day, he wouldn't be able to participate in sports that night — a rule some schools have in place to encourage attendance among athletes. By the time he got to high school, he realized he probably had the legs to pull off the perfect attendance streak set by his brother and sister before him.

He credits his mother with starting off the challenge.

"Honestly, it started off because my mom was like, 'you've got to go to school, man. You're never missing.' I was OK with that. By middle school, it was just a habit," said Logan. "I think we were also blessed to have never been really sick."

Their spotless attendance records come as school systems across the country face a new challenge brought by the coronavirus pandemic: students missing from classrooms.

Roughly 27% of schools in Virginia had a chronic absenteeism rate above 25% for the 2021-2022 school year, according to a survey conducted by the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, The Washington Post reported in April. In the two years before the pandemic, 2 to 4% of the 132 school divisions in the commonwealth had a chronic absenteeism rate that high, The Post reported.

For Ariel Helmick, never missing a school day helped prepare her to be a student-athlete at Huntingdon College.

"Being a college athlete, it was extremely helpful. I've always been the type of person to take commitment seriously, and I just wanted to know if I had it in me," Ariel said. "It was great of our mother to push all three of us, no matter what. I would say it shaped us to be better people."

For her part, Melissa Helmick is proud of her children during this graduation season.

"Commitment is huge in life, your commitment to who you are as a person, your friends, your family, your teachers," she said. "I just tried to instill in them how important it is to show up. I'm beyond proud of my children and of who they are and where they are going."

A smashing good time: demolition derby a must-see at Frederick County Fair Aug. 7

CLEAR BROOK — The haze from smoldering engines occasionally obscured the metal-crushing havoc on the track at the Frederick County Fairgrounds on Thursday for the annual demolition derby, a grandstand favorite that filled the bleachers with spectators.

A deep-seated American tradition, the demolition derby is always a popular fixture here.

Clad in red, William "Wild Bill" Orndorff, 55, of Woodstock, and from the "old school," climbed from his battered vehicle after capturing first place in the Motor Swap Full-Size heat. Orndorff is a 38-year veteran of demolition derbies. He'd just taken first in the full-size competition at the Warren County Fair several days earlier.

“Tonight, a small track, not a lot of places to hide. There’s no taking your time — you’ve got to go after it. How long was the whole thing, 10 or 15 minutes probably? So there’s no waiting around,” Orndorff said.

“Plus, I got a name for myself, so a lot of guys are out to get me,” he added.

Orndorff said it’s the ingenuity that comes with building demolition derby cars, as well as the camaraderie among drivers, that keeps him coming back. He’s not wrong about the target on his back, though: according to a Washington Post article published in 2012, Orndorff has been a known commodity in derby driving across the Shenandoah Valley for some time, with the trophy cabinet to prove it.

“Ingenuity, hard work on the car. If you don’t understand it, you never will. You know how they have a Jeep thing? Well, it’s a derby thing,” Orndorff said. “It used to be five months a year at the county fairs. Now it’s 12 months a year. We ran all the way in Illinois, we run in Ohio.”

Drivers say it’s not just the rush of adrenaline — perhaps what first comes to mind when one imagines the colliding of vehicles — that makes the motorsport attractive, but also how it’s a family affair. A number of the drivers in the ring Thursday said their relatives got them interested in demolition derbies. They say they enjoy being part of this unique community of individuals who delight in smashing up cars.

Chaos in the Valley hosted Thursday’s demolition derby at the Frederick County Fair. The organization puts on a series of demolition derbies throughout the region to raise money for the Toms Brook Fire Department in Shenandoah County. Those who competed Thursday were vying for several different cash prizes.

Elijah Frame, who landed second place in the Bumper Swamp Compacts heat on the heels of a strong showing at the Warren County Fair, blew out the tires on a car that appeared to be reduced to a mere shell. He thanked his family members for the hours they put in helping him work on the vehicle.

“I just lost the wheels and popped the tires. We didn’t have enough time get the skids on it for today because something’s bent, so with the stock tires and everything, we did pretty good,” Frame said.

What does he enjoy most about derbying? “Just building the cars with your family, having the bonding time, and letting it all loose. You can’t get in trouble for it,” Frame said.

Levi Nicholson, 17, of Bunker Hill, West Virginia, said he’s just beginning to wade into the sport and that the Warren County Fair was his first derby. On Thursday, a mannequin head positioned on the dashboard distinguished his rig.

“I just do it to have fun, for real,” Nicholson said. “Pedal to the metal.”

It’s not all lawlessness, whiplash and anarchic steering. Some drivers talked about strategy, how they hang back a bit in the initial stages, looking for an opening to strike a key blow to another car.

Ronnie Renner, a veteran of demolition derbies for 21 years, drives for a garage based in Winchester known as “Cardiac Arrest,” but he lost his steering Thursday night.

“I didn’t too well. I got hit and the front end come up,” he said. “All of us stick together, help build together and help one another do everything.”

Saturday marked the end of the week-long Frederick County Fair, and Fair President Richard Leight summed up the festivities by saying “we had a super good week.” Leight said the livestock sale went very well for the kids, food vendors were happy, the carnival was a success — and it all unfolded with great weather.

“We had a super good week...Everything we did just seemed to come together great...Everybody seems happy, and that’s what we shoot for,” he said.

Planners have already started working to ensure next year’s fair goes just as smoothly, as Leight explained planning began last month.