



A one-room school house sits on the corner of the road, white paint peeling, wind whistling through broken windows, and the front door swinging open, beckoning thrill seekers and history lovers alike. Star School once functioned as a place of learning for the area children of Jamestown Township, and the building serves as a reminder of the backbone of Ottawa County - the regular, hardworking citizen. The Ottawa Way is respectfully recognizing the County's past, while constantly working to improve the present and future. As part of the Ottawa Way, the citizens have direct input on the changes being made in order to create a better future for themselves and Ottawa County as a whole.

The celebration and recognition of the ordinary citizen is seen throughout the County, including the many parks. Trekking through the fields at Eastmanville Farm Park, I was surprised to stumble upon a small cemetery. A nearby sign described how, in the early 1900s, the underprivileged people who worked the farm were buried in unmarked graves at this spot. Thanks in part to a local citizen searching for an ancestor, the graves were identified, and these people now have the dignity of gravestones. At Pine Bend Park, I gazed upon the grounds that once held a menagerie of animals, an early kind of zoo, which entertained visitors who arrived via train and boat from Chicago during the Prohibition. Each Ottawa County park has carefully preserved both the history of the average citizen, providing a snapshot of life at that time, and the beautiful land for the use of current and future generations.

Three years ago I began to search for a home to purchase in Ottawa County, and, as a result, I saw many old homes, each representing a different family's story. In Hudsonville, I toured a Victorian house that still had an original door bell and wood work. In downtown Spring Lake, I marveled at the original gargantuan, octopus-like heater of a 1800s era home that once belonged to the mayor. In Holland, I peered through the gaps of weathered wood on a huge barn, seeing rusting farm equipment inside. I crouched down in rooms with ceilings too low to allow a modern person to stand, stared

through original glass windows so thick and infused with lead that the view was wavy, and crept across original creaky hardwood floors.

This past July, I finally purchased a home in Jamestown Township, a farm house built in the 1860s, complete with a giant willow tree and a door with a skeleton key lock. With help from the Jamestown Township Deputy Clerk Bonnie Oosterink and Herrick District Library in Holland, I was able to track down some of the history of my home, including tax records dating back to 1894. I know in that year, a man, his brother, and a dog lived in the home. They were original Ottawa County residents, and now I carry on the home's tradition. Though my address is in Byron Center, when people ask me where I live, I am quick to say Byron Center, near Jamestown, so I can proudly identify myself as an Ottawa County resident. The fact that all these homes, including my own, still stand is a true testament to the craftsmanship and hard work of the citizens who built and maintained these homes.

I am originally from Grand Rapids and moved to Ottawa County six years ago to work at Harbor Humane Society. As an employee there, I had the privilege of watching Ottawa County's Animal Control Officers Jeff Hannah and Todd Taylor at work, pursuing cases of animal neglect. I still remember the case of Gypsy, a dog that lived outdoors, often chained with a padlock and never fed. That winter, a concerned citizen brought him to us, every rib evident, ice growing off his fur, and thirty pounds underweight. Along with the rest of the staff, I helped nurse him back to health while Deputy Taylor pursued a criminal neglect case. Though I no longer work at Harbor Humane Society, I take deep satisfaction and pride in knowing that I live in a community that protects and care for its animals.

As part of this community, when I had concerns about an issue, I contacted my area Board of Commissioners member, James Holtrop. Within a day, I received a phone call from Commissioner Holtrop to listen to me and to discuss my concerns. After I hung up the phone, I sat there absolutely stunned and came to realize that his prompt response is part of the meaning of being an Ottawa County citizen. We have the privilege of living in a community where not only can we voice our concerns;

we can expect that they will be heard and responded to as well. A few months later, I even received a follow up call from Commissioner Holtrop. I felt reassured through this interaction that I am a valued part of the County.

In 2011, I became an Ottawa County employee and now work as a clerk in the Environmental Health department. I help improve the lives of the citizens by assisting with well and septic inspections and food inspections, among other things. As part of my job, I take complaints from people concerned with environmental health issues and give these complaints to the appropriate employee to handle. This process is yet another way people can have a voice in helping to improve the County.

Many of the old homes I visited with my realtor had well and septic systems, which are inspected by the Environmental Health specialists prior to sale of the home. These inspections are done for health and safety and helped guide my real estate decision. In fact, one of the homes I was in the process of purchasing failed both a well and septic inspection, so I stopped the purchasing process. Prior to moving into my Jamestown home, I had an inspection done with positive results so I knew my home was safe to occupy and ready for me to create a future. As a clerk, I now process and send these inspections to other potential County homeowners, so they can make the same informed decisions.

I also felt safe when Ottawa County Sheriff's Department Deputy Scholma came to my assistance on one of the coldest nights of this winter, in blizzard conditions. When I arrived home that night, there was a ladder leaning against my home. I had not put it there and knew no one who had, so I called the Sheriff's Department. Deputy Scholma arrived quickly and walked through all of the rooms of my house while there and even put together my mailbox, which had been knocked over by the snow plow. He was kind and patient and left me feeling relieved.

Ottawa County is not only the home of internationally recognized Tulip Time and the healthiest county in the state; it's a place where the average person can feel respected, safe, and powerful. Part of the Ottawa Way is the ability for a citizen to be part of change for the better, to help improve the

present and the future. I am a proud Ottawa County homeowner, resident, voter, park explorer, and employee. I look forward to living many more years as part of the Ottawa Way.