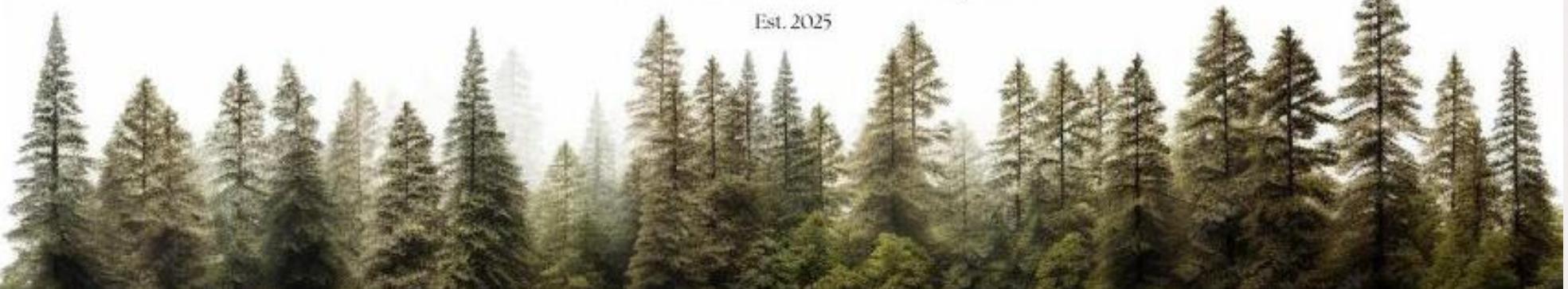


Welcome to Northern Threads Magazine

Our Northern Stories Woven Together

Est. 2025



FROM THE EDITOR...

A new year opens quietly in the North—carrying hope, reflection, and the promise of what's to come. Across long roads and wintered landscapes, Northern communities continue to create, care, and move forward together.

Northern Threads looks ahead with intention, weaving the stories of this place and its people into the months before us.

Here's to fresh beginnings, shared strength, and the North—always connected, always becoming.

UPCOMING EVENTS

* Elliot Lake Winterfest

February 5-8 2026

Glow-in-the-dark skate, arts workshops, Model Railroad Club, family bonfire at Spine Beach, Science North exhibits, brunch, a community scavenger hunt, crafts, plus a drone show finale!

* Onaping Falls Winter Carnival

January 26-February 1, 2026

Pancake breakfast, carnival pride drag bingo, vintage snowmachine show, cardboard box derby, curling for kids, face painting, and more!

* Bon Soo Winter Carnival

February 13-21, 2026

Northern Ontario's largest winter festival! Includes bum slides, the Polar Plunge, music, family activities, Kids Zone, food, and more.

* Thunder Bay Winter Fundays

Throughout February

Family-friendly winter games, fat tire biking, arts activities, outdoor fun at Marina Park.

* Cochrane Winter Carnival

February 8-17, 2026

It features a polar 'spiel, pancake-eating contest, princess storytime, snowmobile drag races, scavenger hunts, torchlight parade, demolition derby, ice sculpture competition, and a fun parade.

* Canadian Under-18 Curling Championships

February 8-17, 2026

National-level curling tournament at McIntyre Community Centre.

Northern Innovators

Winter Wisdom from the North: Tips from Those Who Know the Roads

by KARRIE O'CONNOR

Winter driving in Northern Ontario isn't just about getting from point A to point B — it's about patience, preparation, and listening to the quiet lessons passed along at kitchen tables, in comment threads, and from parents who've pulled more than one car out of a snowbank. When the highways stretch long and cell service fades, these small pieces of wisdom can make a big difference.

One of the most repeated lessons from seasoned Northern drivers is simple but powerful: slow down sooner than you think you need to. Merissa M. puts it plainly — always brake before you think it's necessary. On icy stretches and snow-packed highways, that extra distance can mean the difference between staying in control and sliding into trouble. Winter roads demand anticipation, not reaction.

Preparation is another theme that comes up again and again. Gillian L. swears by a well-stocked car, especially when driving outside city limits. Warm gloves, a blanket, extra windshield washer fluid, oil, a rechargeable battery booster pack, and a first aid kit all earn a permanent place in her vehicle. And, as she jokes, plenty of "snot rags" — because winter colds and long drives seem to go hand in hand. It's not about expecting the worst, but being ready if it happens.

Not all winter travel advice is about the drive itself — sometimes it's about your mindset. Kim H. reminds us that winter is long, and planning something to look forward to matters. Even a short day trip, like a visit to a conservatory or greenhouse, can make winter travel feel purposeful instead of daunting. A reason to go can make the road feel shorter.

Then there are the old-school tips that never go out of style. Alexandra B. shares

advice passed down from her dad: keep cat litter in the trunk. When tires spin uselessly on ice, a bit of traction under the wheels can be a lifesaver. It's one of those tricks you hope you never need — until the day you really do.

Alongside these shared experiences, a few more practical reminders are worth weaving into every winter drive:

- Paul R. suggests never letting your gas tank drop below half in winter. In the North, gas stations can be far apart, and extra fuel means extra heat if you're delayed.
- Nina L. recommends always telling someone your route and expected arrival time, especially on longer trips. If something goes wrong, that information matters.
- Jason T. keeps a shovel in his trunk year-round from November to April. It's simple, but when snow piles up fast, it can save hours of waiting.
- Emma C. advises cleaning snow and ice completely off your vehicle — roof included — before driving. Flying snow can blind other drivers and create dangerous whiteouts behind you.

Taken together, these tips form a quiet Northern rulebook: slow down, pack smart, think ahead, and look out for one another. Winter driving here isn't about bravado — it's about respect for the road, the weather, and the distance between places. And if you carry a little extra patience, preparation, and cat litter, you'll be better equipped for whatever the North throws your way.

Have a northern travel story to share email:

info@northernthreadsmagazine.ca

Resilience Report

Merissa Mills on Community Care, Boundaries, and Photography That Captures Feeling

by KARRIE O'CONNOR



In North Bay, social worker and photographer Merissa Mills is the kind of neighbour who shows up — tending to people, telling their stories, and using her camera to hold onto the feeling inside a moment. Her days stretch between community care and creative work, both rooted in the same belief: connection heals. Neighbours know her for the steady way she listens and the gentle way she notices small, ordinary beauty — the kind of attention that reminds people they belong.

Mills will tell you she's a mom first. She's also a wife, a social worker, an entrepreneur, and a photographer. She spent her teen years in North Bay, moved to Windsor for a decade to earn her bachelor's in social work, and returned north two years ago with her family. She started her social work career up north and, alongside it, launched her first photography venture here at home. The move back felt like both a return and a beginning — picking up familiar threads and weaving new ones with the people around her.

When the pandemic slowed formal work, Mills stepped in to help neighbours facing poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness. "I started volunteering," she says. "That turned into something bigger than I ever could have imagined." She founded Street Angels, which became part of a registered Canadian charity with five programs — including a soup kitchen built from a refitted mobile sleeper camper trailer. Those programs still operate

today, serving about 400 neighbours every night, 365 days a year. "It's incredible to watch — not just an organization, but a movement."

Finding Home Again

Coming back to North Bay meant rebuilding community from the ground up. Mills leaned on a simple idea: do what you love alongside people who care about the same things. She got involved right away — volunteering, showing up at local activities, and meeting folks through work.

Professionally, the move north brought her first foray into clinical work — therapy and counseling — where she spent a year and a half learning things "you can't learn in books." She valued the training, but felt a steady pull back to her long-standing focus: homelessness, extreme poverty, and housing and food insecurity. Today, she's in the nonprofit sector working on policy, procedure, grant writing, and program development. After two years of trying different roles, she realized she'd "had it the whole time."

Photography as Therapy

Mills also turned to photography as a gentle kind of self-care. "I realized I needed some therapy of my own — something that was mine, based on passion, something just for me." Captivated by the beauty she noticed after moving back, she tried sharing scenes with friends in Windsor, only to find her phone couldn't quite catch the feeling. A \$75 used camera body from Facebook Marketplace — "the deal of a lifetime" — opened the door to recreating and sharing the emotion behind what she saw.

Her social work background shows up behind the lens. Sessions move at a thoughtful pace. Consent and comfort are part of the process. "When somebody's going through a difficult time, you can't always solve that for them," Mills says. "But what I can do is sit with them in the mess so they're not alone — be a witness to that moment as it is. Photography is like that because my job isn't necessarily to create the moment, it's to witness it. It's not always about perfection or accuracy — it's about the moment

and the feeling that goes with that."

A favorite project was a creative session inspired by Little Red Riding Hood: a woman in a red hooded cloak running through the forest at dusk, lantern in hand. The team custom-ordered a red velvet cloak from Spain via Etsy and built a series meant to be viewed as a whole. "That was the first time I really explored long-form storytelling through photos — a beginning, middle, and end."

The Weight of Caring Too Much

Like many people who care deeply, Mills hit a limit. "I was working 70-hour work weeks and it consumed me. I wasn't able to make time for myself or prioritize my needs," she says. The old refrain — "If we don't do it, who will?" — proved unsustainable. "There's a lot of things that need to be done — I can't do them all."

Clarity arrived during a silent retreat. "I came out with one word written on a card: 'family.' That was the most important thing, and I realized there was no way I could be the mom I wanted to be and the leader I wanted to be in that capacity at the same time." With a young family, the Millses treated change as a season of transition, giving one another grace and time.

Showing Up Authentically

These days, Mills centers authenticity in every space she enters. "When somebody shows up and says 'this is who I am,' other people see that and feel more confident to show up as themselves too. Authenticity looks different in different settings, but you can find a way to show up authentically anywhere."

She shares that message with young people navigating a post-COVID world where face-to-face connection can feel daunting. "Having that fear and anxiety is super valid, but the real question is: is it serving you? Does it serve you to not introduce yourself to new people? Being brave isn't being unafraid — it's being terribly afraid and doing it anyway."

Her advice is gentle and direct: "Don't wait until you're unafraid, because that day may never come. Be brave and do it anyway. If you try and it doesn't work out, it's okay — you can try again."

Looking ahead, Mills is testing a new creative experience for couples this month, designed to spark genuine emotion in the moment. It blends the same values that guide her days: care, presence, and an eye for what's real. It's a natural next step for someone who keeps finding soft, sturdy ways to care for her community — whether through service, strong boundaries, or the lens of a camera that doesn't miss the heart of things.

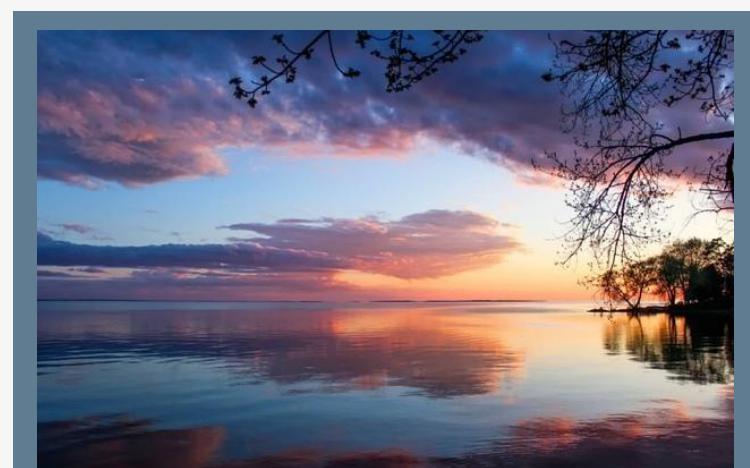


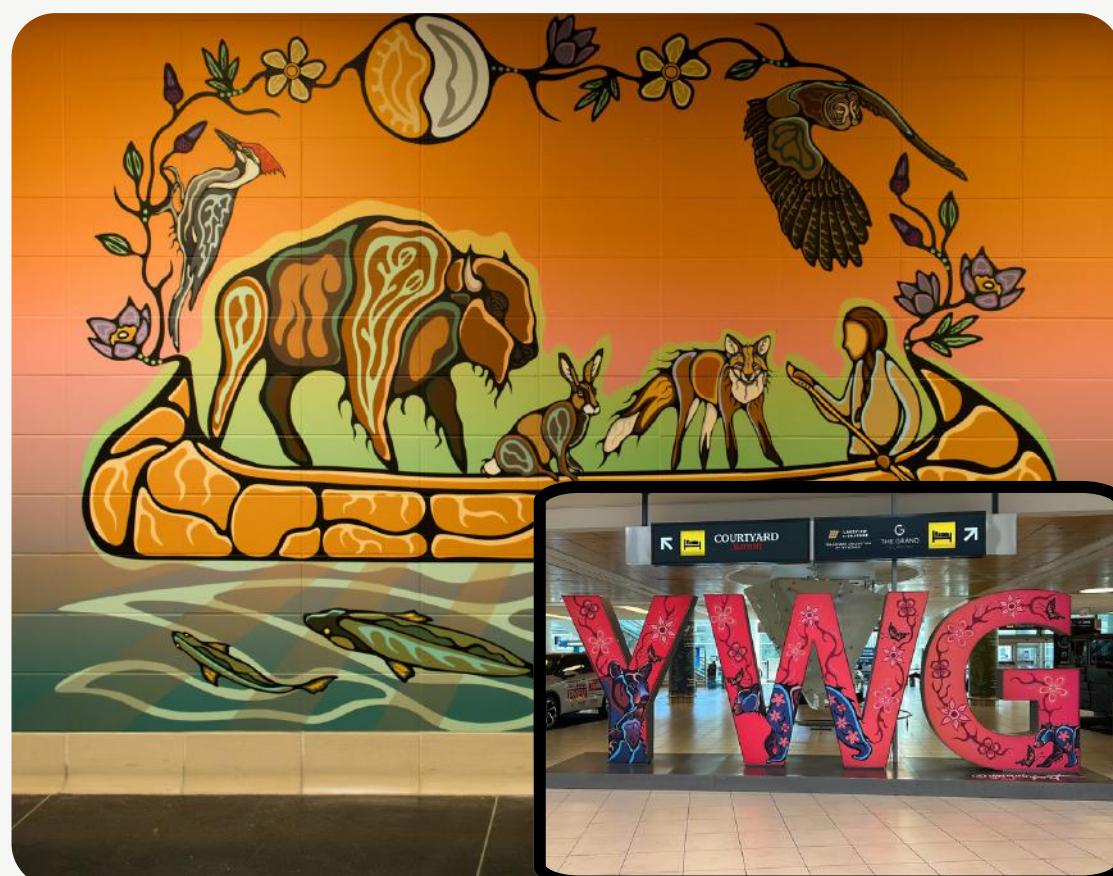
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**Listen to The Universal He-Art Podcast
Featuring Merissa Mills [HERE](#)**

Artists Spotlight

Rooted in Balance: The Art and Voice of Storm Angeconebe

by KARRIE O'CONNOR



Storm Angeconebe's artwork grows from a quiet, steady place—creative moments, however, happen one rooted in connection, balance, quietly at home. Painting in her own and lived experience. A proud space feels different—more personal Anishinaabe woman from Lac Seul and instinctive. At home, the work First Nation, Storm is a member of feels pure, coming directly from her Treaty Three, with roots that also heart and her body, without extend into Treaty One territory. expectation or deadlines. It's where Those lands, teachings, and her own body of work continues to relationships shape both who she grow slowly and thoughtfully. She isn't is and how she creates.

Some of Storm's most meaningful grows from a quiet, steady place—creative moments, however, happen one rooted in connection, balance, quietly at home. Painting in her own and lived experience. A proud space feels different—more personal Anishinaabe woman from Lac Seul and instinctive. At home, the work First Nation, Storm is a member of feels pure, coming directly from her Treaty Three, with roots that also heart and her body, without extend into Treaty One territory. expectation or deadlines. It's where Those lands, teachings, and her own body of work continues to relationships shape both who she grow slowly and thoughtfully. She isn't is and how she creates.

for now, that uncertainty feels right.

Her creative practice reflects The work exists because it needs to Anishinaabe teachings that remind exist.

us everything exists in relationship:

to the land, to one another, and to the natural world around us. Whether she is painting, creating artwork by other artists. Supporting murals, or working alongside youth fellow creatives matters deeply to her. in schools, Storm's art carries these teachings gently, allowing meaning uplift and invest in others, creating a to unfold rather than be explained. circle of mutual respect and encouragement within the artistic

Much of Storm's public work community.

takes place in shared spaces. She

is currently creating a large-scale mural in the high school cafeteria and gratitude carries into Storm's first in Red Lake, a multi-semester published children's book, *In All My Relatives* – *Indinawemaaganidag*. respect. She speaks about this work Rather than presenting a lesson, the with gratitude. "I'm so thankful they book offers a gentle reflection of a hired Indigenous artists from the worldview shaped by relationship. community," she says. "They're Through her artwork, Storm explores starting with Indigenous artists and how people, land, animals, and water teachings in a respectful way, and exist in connection, each holding a I'm really happy to share my gifts place of importance. Language is with them."

That same sense of connection woven naturally throughout the book, offering readers an invitation into

Working in schools and Ojibwe while reinforcing Anishinaabe community settings brings her a teachings about relatedness and deep sense of purpose. Teaching respect. through art allows Storm to share culture in a way that feels open and welcoming. "I love when I work Storm says. "I'm not the best with my in schools and communities," she words, but sharing my culture in such says simply. "It makes me happy." a proud way—it was very

empowering." The book mirrors her broader artistic practice: grounded, intentional, and rooted in gratitude rather than explanation.

The response to Storm's work—both her visual art and her book—has been largely positive, something she feels deeply grateful for. "It felt like a big wave," she says. "It was all over social media." Even so, sharing her work publicly still brings vulnerability. There is a small voice inside her that worries someone may not connect with it. Storm acknowledges that voice, but chooses not to let it lead.

"So I try to quiet it," she says. "I remind myself that the work I'm doing does mean something. It's important to share your gifts."

Through her artwork, her book, her teaching, and her quiet moments of creation at home, Storm Angeconebe continues to work from a place of balance—honouring her Anishinaabe identity, her Treaty roots, and the relationships that guide her work, while inviting others to reflect on their own connections to the world around them.



To learn more about Storm Angeconebe you can follow her on social media and check out her website:

www.stormangeconebe.com

<https://www.instagram.com/stormangeconebe/?hl=en>

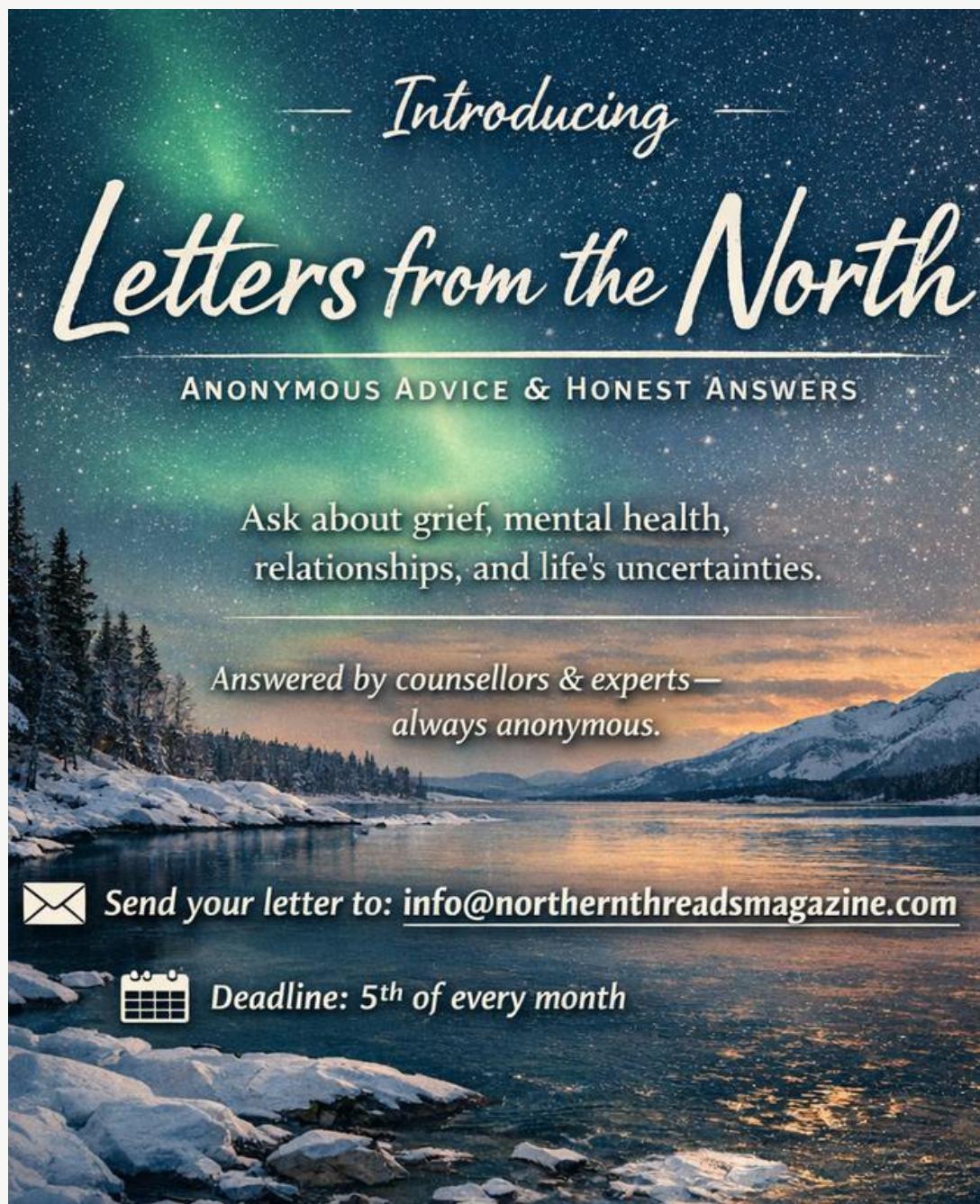
<https://www.facebook.com/storm.angeconebe/>

Miigwech Storm for taking the time to share with Northern Threads!

Letters From the North

Introducing “Letters from the North”: A New Anonymous Advice Column

by KARRIE O'CONNOR



Some of the most important questions are the ones we carry quietly. have easy answers.

This month, Northern Threads Magazine is introducing a new ongoing feature designed to hold space for those questions—Letters from the North, an anonymous advice column grounded in care, confidentiality, and community wisdom.

Northern life comes with unique challenges and strengths. Distance, weather, isolation, tight-knit communities, and generational resilience shape how we live—and how we struggle. Letters from the North exists to reflect those realities by offering a safe, respectful place for readers to ask about the parts of life that don't always

The column welcomes anonymous letters touching on topics such as mental health, grief, relationships, parenting, identity, addiction, creativity, work, healing, and the quiet moments of uncertainty that many people experience but rarely name out loud. No question is too small, too complicated, or too human.

Selected letters will be answered by a collective of counsellors, therapists, and trusted subject-matter experts. Each response is written thoughtfully and with care, offering reflection, perspective, and guidance rooted in professional experience—while remaining accessible and compassionate.

Anonymity is at the heart of this feature!

All letters and responses published in Letters from the North are kept completely anonymous. Names, identifying details, and specific locations are never shared. When necessary, editorial discretion may be used to adjust details in a submission to further protect the writer's identity while preserving the spirit of the question.

Readers who wish to submit a letter are invited to email info@northernthreadsmagazine.com. Letters may be written in any style or length, though clarity and honesty are encouraged. Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis, with a deadline of the 5th of each month for consideration in the upcoming issue.

While Letters from the North is guided by professionals, it is important to note that the column is intended for general informational and reflective purposes only. It does not replace professional counselling, medical advice, legal advice, or crisis support. Northern Threads Magazine does not provide diagnosis, treatment, or emergency intervention. Individuals experiencing a mental health emergency or immediate risk are strongly encouraged to contact local emergency services or a trusted crisis support line.

“Across long roads and quiet nights, you’re not alone in what you’re carrying.”

By submitting a letter, writers acknowledge that publication is not guaranteed and that letters may be edited for clarity, length, and sensitivity. Submissions grant Northern Threads Magazine permission to publish anonymized content in print, digital, and promotional formats related to the magazine.

At its core, Letters from the North is about connection—about recognizing that even across long roads, snowy stretches, and quiet nights, we are not alone in what we carry.

Sometimes, the first step toward clarity is simply asking the question.

Event Coverage

Do you have an event happening in the north that you would like to see featured in an upcoming issue?

You do? Great! Submit your event details and we will be in touch if your event is selected for coverage. We are also developing an event calendar for the North.

Please submit your article to:
info@northernthreadsmagazine.ca

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North In Focus

Why Northern 'Mom-and-Pop' Businesses Matter : And Why We Need to Tell Their Stories

by KARRIE O'CONNOR

There's something about a long stretch of Northern Ontario highway that makes you appreciate the little things. The way the trees blur past your window. The quiet hum of the road beneath your tires. And then : just when you're running low on gas, coffee, or hope : a small business appears like an old friend waving you in from the cold.

We used to call them mom-and-pop shops. The kind of places where the owner knows your name by your second visit. Where someone might offer you a fresh cup of coffee while your car gets looked at. Where "going above and beyond" isn't a marketing slogan : it's just how things are done.

Along Highway 11/17 between North Bay and Thunder Bay, these businesses are more than conveniences. They're lifelines. And it's time we started telling their stories.

The Backbone of Northern Communities

Small businesses account for 44% of Canada's Gross Domestic Product and create two-thirds of net new jobs. But in the North, the numbers only tell part of the story.

When you're driving through remote corridors where the next town might be an hour away, a family-run gas station or diner isn't just a pit stop. It's a community hub. A place where truckers swap road condition updates. Where families on summer road trips stretch their legs and grab a butter tart. Where someone having car trouble in January might find a stranger willing to help them out : no questions asked.

These businesses don't have big marketing budgets or viral

social media campaigns. They survive on word of mouth, loyal customers, and a stubborn commitment to doing right by the people who walk through their doors.

And that's exactly why we need to talk about them more.

Why Word of Mouth Still Matters

In the age of Google reviews and algorithm-driven recommendations, it's easy to forget the power of a simple story shared between friends.

"You have to stop at this place in Wawa : they helped us when our tire blew out and wouldn't take a dime for the coffee."

"There's this little restaurant outside Nipigon that makes the best pie you've ever had. The owner still remembers us from five years ago."

These stories matter. They drive traffic to businesses that might otherwise get overlooked. They remind us that commerce can still be personal. And they create a ripple effect : one good experience leads to a recommendation, which leads to another customer, which keeps a family business alive for another season.

Northern Ontario's economy depends on these ripples.

Four Businesses Going Above and Beyond

Along the 1,100+ kilometre stretch between North Bay and Thunder Bay, countless small businesses have earned devoted followings for their exceptional service. Here are four that have been recognized through social media shoutouts, news features, and the kind of loyal word-of-mouth that money can't buy.

1. The Wawa Motor Inn : Wawa, Ontario

The iconic goose statue might be what Wawa is famous for, but locals and travelers know the Wawa Motor Inn for something else entirely: genuine Northern hospitality. Over the years, guests have shared stories online about staff going out of their way to help stranded travelers, offering warm meals and assistance during winter storms. It's the kind of place where you check in as a stranger and leave feeling like family.

2. Buck Fever Services : Between Nipigon and Longlac, Ontario

On one of the most remote stretches of Highway 11, Buck Fever has become a lifeline for travelers. Recent travel features and social media shoutouts praise the team for helping stranded riders, offering hot food, Wi-Fi, fuel, and pointing folks to lodging when weather turns. It's the kind of above-and-beyond stop that keeps people safe — and coming back.

3. Voyageurs' Lodge & Cookhouse : Batchawana Bay, Ontario (Highway 17, north of Sault Ste. Marie)

Located on Highway 17 in Batchawana Bay, north of Sault Ste. Marie, Voyageurs' Lodge & Cookhouse is a beloved stop for hearty home-cooked meals and warm service. Travelers often mention staff offering road advice, checking in during rough weather, and making sure nobody leaves hungry.

4. Algoma's Water Tower Inn : Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

While technically a larger establishment, the Water Tower Inn has maintained a mom-and-pop spirit that keeps travelers coming back. From personalized service to staff who remember returning guests by name, this spot has been highlighted in regional news and travel blogs as a standout example of Northern hospitality done right.

Why These Stories Need to Be Told

Here's the thing about Northern businesses: they don't always get the attention they deserve.

Big cities have tourism boards, influencer campaigns, and media coverage. A trendy new café in Toronto might get written up in a dozen publications before it even opens.

But a family running a gas station in Terrace Bay? A couple serving homemade soup at a roadside stop near Marathon? They're doing the same extraordinary work : often with far less recognition. That's where we come in.

When we share our stories, we shine a light on these hidden gems. We help fellow travelers find the spots worth stopping at. And we remind these hardworking business owners that what they do matters : that people notice and appreciate the extra effort.

(Con't on page 7)

North In Focus

Why Northern 'Mom-and-Pop' Businesses Matter : And Why We Need to Tell Their Stories (CON'T)

by KARRIE O'CONNOR

We Want to Hear Your Stories

Here's our ask: **Tell us about a Northern Ontario business that went above and beyond for you.**

Maybe it was the mechanic who stayed late to fix your car so you could make it home for Christmas. Maybe it was the diner owner who noticed you were having a rough day and slipped you a free slice of pie. Maybe it was a small gesture that meant everything in that moment.

We want to hear those stories. We want to celebrate the businesses that make Northern Ontario special : the ones tucked away on quiet stretches of highway, doing extraordinary things without expecting anything in return.

Send us your story. Tell us the name of the business, where it's located, and what happened. We'll share the best ones right here : because these businesses deserve to be recognized, and their stories deserve to be told.

Keeping the Spirit Alive

The mom-and-pop businesses along Highway 11/17 aren't just relics of a simpler time. They're proof that community, kindness, and personal connection still have a place in our world.

Every time we stop at a local shop instead of a chain, every time we share a positive experience with a friend, every time we take a moment to thank someone for going the extra mile : we're keeping that spirit alive.

So next time you're driving through the North and you spot a hand-painted sign or a small parking lot with a few trucks outside, consider pulling in. You might just find your new favourite stop.

And when you do? Tell someone about it.

That's how we keep these places going (one story at a time.)

If you want to share your story please send us an email at: info@northernthreadsmagazine.ca

We would love to hear from you!



Buck Fever Services where good food, friends and adventure await!



The Wawa Motor Inn where guests are welcomed like family and fun is just minutes from your door!

Great food and good times are had here!

Voyageurs' Lodge & Cookhouse waits to welcome you for a rest stop where you will find great food, friendly staff, travelling essentials and unique gifts.

Stop in on your next trip!



The Watertower Inn where you will enjoy a great meal, wonderful rooms, attractions at your doorstep and wonderful relaxing times in their amazing indoor pool!

Be sure to make this a stop!

The Northern Chuckle MOVING THE SNOWFLAKES

by GILLIAN HEBERT @StudioGillian



ART BY: GILLIAN HEBERT - ACRYLIC ON CANVAS & ACRYLIC ON WOOD

We are deep into the winter season and for some reason, I still live in a place where winter doesn't just arrive, it storms in. The kind of cold that turns a boogery nose into an instant science experiment, and where a family member will casually ask you to "go push around some snowflakes," as if shoveling an entire driveway is a light, character-building activity I can do before bedtime. Also without fail, I always slowly transform into an alligator, and my chap stick clocks more hours than I do.

Believe it or not, I do actually love the winter season. Despite having to shovel every other day, I enjoy how it seems the world slows down while watching the snow fall into a thick blanket. The hidden beauty that most people can easily rush past. It's the beauty of frost clinging to branches like lace. Deep blue, clouded skies set against warm, sunlit trees and buildings, glowing as if they're holding onto summer out of pure stubbornness. Ice tracing delicate patterns on windows. The hanging icicles catching light like they were placed there on purpose. It's also the time of year I'm actively looking for ways to fight the ever persistent seasonal depression.

Once the holidays are over, I always feel like I've been living inside a dream. Waking back up is the hardest part of Christmas vacation coming to an end.

The lack of sunlight, the weight of adult responsibilities, and the constant low hum of life's stresses all seem to land at once, hitting my head so hard it feels like I get whiplash. The New Year doesn't really give you a chance to ease back into reality; it shoves you forward and expects you to keep up. Preferably, while you're performing the ritualistic "New Year, New Me" trend (that I've never succeeded in maintaining for more than three days).

And so, I do what any of us do; our best. Easier said than done of course, but I find seeking out the little, fun things, and taking it one breath at a time can be a good start to this seemingly everlasting mental ice age. Just like every other artist I know, I'm not able to be my most creative and bubbly self every second of every day. I can however, keep trying to find what works best for me when I'm "crispy" and my mind is "froggy" (frosty + foggy).

Winter may freeze my face, dry out the skin and test my willingness to leave the house, but I still wouldn't have it any other way. Cold makes warmth feel earned. Darkness makes light feel intentional. And sometimes, choosing to look for beauty, is the thing that brings you back to life during the coldest times of the new year.

Check Out Studio Gillian on Facebook & Instagram!

Northern Newsline

When Survival Turns Dangerous: Encampment Fires in Thunder Bay and Sudbury

by KARRIE O'CONNOR

It's the middle of winter in Northern Ontario. The temperature has dropped well below freezing. Somewhere in a tent, a person lights a small propane heater: not because they want to, but because they have no other choice.

This is survival. And right now, survival is dangerous.

A Fire in the Night

On July 25, 2025, Thunder Bay Fire Rescue responded to a late-night blaze near Simpson Street. When crews arrived, tents were fully engulfed in flames. Propane cylinders were exploding.

No injuries were reported that night. But the scene told a story that's becoming far too common in Northern Ontario.

People without homes are using propane barbecues, small heaters, and open flames to stay warm in tents and makeshift shelters. When something goes wrong: and in these conditions, something almost always goes wrong: the results can be devastating.

Fire officials said these fires are unpredictable. They escalate quickly. One moment, someone is just trying to get through the night. The next, everything they own is gone.

This Isn't New

The July fire wasn't an isolated incident. Thunder Bay Fire Rescue noted that similar fires had occurred the previous fall and winter. Each time, the cause was the same: people using flame-based heating in spaces never designed to handle it.

Tents aren't built to contain

propane heaters. They're not insulated. They're not fireproof. They're not safe.

But when you don't have walls, when you don't have a door that locks, when you don't have anywhere else to go: you work with what you have.

And what you have might kill you.

Sudbury Faces the Same Crisis

Thunder Bay isn't alone in this. Just this week, Sudbury experienced its own encampment fire: another reminder that this crisis stretches across Northern Ontario.

The details are heartbreaking in their familiarity. An encampment. A fire. People scrambling to escape with whatever they can carry.

These aren't statistics. These are people. People with names, with histories, with reasons they ended up where they are. People who deserve better than choosing between freezing and burning.

The Question Nobody Wants to Answer

Why does this keep happening? The answer is simple and painful: there isn't enough housing.

Shelters are overcrowded. Waitlists for affordable housing stretch for years. Rent prices have climbed beyond what many people can afford. And the support systems meant to catch people before they fall? They're stretched thin.

So people end up in tents. In encampments. In places never meant for human habitation.

And when winter comes: as it always does in Northern Ontario: they're left with impossible choices.

Stay cold. Or stay warm and risk everything.

Who Lives in These Encampments?

It's easy to think of "the homeless" as a single, faceless group. But walk through any encampment and you'll find:

- The worker who lost their job and couldn't make rent two months in a row
- The senior on a fixed income whose landlord sold the building
- The young person who aged out of foster care with nowhere to go
- The person battling addiction who's been turned away from every program
- The veteran who came home and couldn't find their footing
- The family that's been on a housing waitlist for three years

These aren't strangers. They're neighbours. Former coworkers. Classmates. Family members. They're us: just with fewer safety nets.

What Happens After a Fire?

When an encampment fire happens, the immediate crisis gets handled. Fire crews put out the flames. Paramedics check for injuries. Sometimes, outreach workers show up to connect people with emergency resources.

But then what?

The person who just lost everything still doesn't have a home. They might get a cot at an emergency shelter for a night or two. They might get a meal. But the underlying problem: the lack of stable, safe, affordable housing: remains.

So they find another spot. Set up another tent.

Light another heater.

And the cycle continues.

Thunder Bay Is Trying Something Different There is some hope on the horizon.

Thunder Bay is currently building a temporary shelter village at the Alloy Place site. The project costs just under \$10 million and is expected to open in late spring 2026.

The goal is to provide a safer alternative for people who would otherwise be in tents. A place with proper heating. Proper structure. Proper support.

It's not a permanent solution. The word "temporary" is right there in the name. But it's

(Con't Page 10)

Northern Newsline

When Survival Turns Dangerous: Encampment Fires in Thunder Bay and Sudbury (Con't)

by KARRIE O'CONNOR

something. It's an acknowledgment that the current situation isn't working: that we can't keep asking people to survive in conditions that might kill them.

What Can We Do?

If you're reading this and feeling helpless, you're not alone. These problems are big. Systemic. They won't be solved by any single person.

But there are things we can do:

- Listen to people with lived experience. They know what's needed better than anyone. Their voices should be at the centre of every conversation about housing and homelessness.
- Support local organizations. Shelters, food banks, outreach programs: they're doing the work on the ground. They need volunteers. They need donations. They need people who show up.
- Push for change. Talk to your local representatives. Ask what they're doing about affordable housing. Ask about shelter capacity. Ask about long-term solutions, not just band-aids.

• Check your assumptions. The next time you see someone in an encampment, remember: you don't know their story. You don't know what brought them there. But you do know they're human. And they deserve dignity.

The Hardest Part

The hardest part of writing this

isn't finding the facts. It's sitting with what those facts mean.

It means that right now, tonight, there are people in Northern Ontario who are cold. Who are scared. Who are lighting propane heaters in tents because it's the only way they know to survive.

It means that some of them won't make it through the winter.

It means that we: as communities, as a society: have allowed this to happen.

Why This Story Matters

At Northern Threads Magazine, we believe in the power of stories. We believe that sharing what's real: even when it's hard: is how we start to heal. How we start to change.

This story isn't comfortable. It's not wrapped up in a neat bow. There's no happy ending to offer.

But it's true. And sometimes, truth is where everything begins.

The fires in Thunder Bay and Sudbury aren't just news stories. They're wake-up calls.

The question is: are we listening?

Submissions

Do you have a Northern Ontario human interest story you would like to see covered in a future issue of Northern Threads Magazine?

If so please email your story idea to:

Info@northernthreadsmagazine.ca

We would love to hear from you!

Are you a writer at heart? We are also looking for writer's who would like a byline in Northern Threads.



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(Scheduled upon purchase 2 per issue)

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Threaded Through the North When Winter Raised Us: Memories from a Northern Childhood

by KARRIE O'CONNOR

Growing up in the North there was always something meant winter wasn't a season else to look forward to. March you endured — it was a way Break — once known simply as of life that shaped who you spring break — felt like a became. It arrived early, promise. It often rolled into stayed late, and wrapped Easter, giving families a rare itself around everyday chance to plan trips or visit moments until snow and cold relatives. Even if you didn't go felt as ordinary as breathing. far, the idea of escape And somehow, in the middle mattered. It broke winter into of all that frost, warmth was chapters and reminded always found. everyone that thawing days would come again.

It lingered in curling clubs where the ice was cold enough to see your breath, but the friendships were anything but. Curling was a gentleman's game, played with quiet respect and a shared understanding of sportsmanship. Games ended not with rushes to leave, but with conversations — laughter echoing through drafty clubhouses, hands wrapped around hot mugs, stories exchanged between generations. The ice brought people together, but it was the community that kept them coming back.

Winter ruled the schoolyard, too. Recess meant freedom measured in snowbanks. Kids ran until their cheeks burned, racing up and down hills, building forts taller than themselves, and declaring snowy peaks the site of fierce games of king of the castle. We dug tunnels, packed walls, and brushed off bruises with mittens stiff from ice. These were adventures born of imagination and cold air — the kind now labeled risky, regulated away by modern school boards. Back then, they were just childhood.

After Christmas faded and decorations came down,

Winter sports thrived in those years. Hockey arenas and figure skating rinks became second homes. Families piled into cars or coach buses before dawn, thermoses rattling, gear stacked high. Kids bonded in the back seats, sharing snacks, secrets, and laughter, while adults tried to sleep upright, lulled by highway hum and heater noise. Towns welcomed one another through tournaments and competitions, spending money locally, filling diners and arenas, turning sport into a form of connection that stretched across the region.

Those long drives and shared victories reflected something older — something rooted deep in the North itself. Early settlers survived by watching out for one another, by checking in, lending tools, sharing heat, and making sure no one was left behind in a storm. That instinct never left. In Northern towns, community meant people and place intertwined. You knew your neighbours, noticed when a light didn't turn on, and showed up without being asked.



Looking back now, winter feels different. Safer, perhaps. More structured. But also quieter. What remains is the memory of a time when cold built character, snow built friendships, and community wasn't an idea — it was a necessity. Winter raised us, and in doing so, taught the North how to look after its own.

Submit your own memories to:
info@northernthreadsmagazine.ca