

William Albert Tiessen

By Jessica Klassen

Born and raised almost exclusively in Leamington, Ontario, William Albert Tiessen could be considered quite an expert on the workings of the little farming town. He can still recall the now-closed Oakwell Hospital where he was born on August 25, 1940 or his elementary school, Selkirk School, where he and about 300 other students were taught in only 8 classrooms.

Affectionately called Willy, the Leamington man actually spent the first year and a half of his life in Windsor before his family moved back to his birthplace where he has stayed to this day.

Willy's father, George Tiessen was part of one of the first ten Mennonite families to settle in the Leamington area. He worked as a car manufacturer in the 1930s until the Second World War began. The factory switched from cars to war machinery. Although he did not support the war he kept his job as he needed to continue working and supporting his family.

Mary Tiessen (née Koop) immigrated to the United States of America landing in New York. Her family moved to live in Pennsylvania before coming to Leamington where she met Willy's father. Her father, Willy's grandfather, Jacob Koop, was one of the builders of the United Mennonite Educational Institute, now known as UMEI Christian High School.

Willy's parents had three other sons apart from himself. His older brother was named after their father. His two younger brothers were called Edmund and Victor. Their names, including Willy's, are derived from various European royals throughout the ages. Their parents had one other child before their sons. She was born with a birth defect called spina bifida and tragically died four months after her birth.

The four boys grew up in a two-story home in Leamington. They did not have a television during his childhood. Instead Willy remembers playing sports and building go-karts from lawnmower engines. Back then popular fashions involved Levi jeans and white short-

sleeved tee shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Willy finds that the only difference from kids back then and kids these days are technology and opportunity. They all enjoy playing and having fun.

Their family attended the Leamington United Mennonite Church. This church still exists in the same place it did back then though it has been rebuilt. Willy describes it as “the same land but a different church”. His son, Jason, and his family still attend LUMC to this day.

At eleven, one week before his twelfth birthday, Willy got his first job at a now-closed tomato cannery. After this job he began working on a farm, a path that he stuck with the rest of his career. His first farming experience involved an evening job where he would work at night until ten or twelve o’clock. Though he retired at around 65 years old he still likes to help his son out around their family farm, Pyramid Farms.

Willy is married to Janet Tiessen. They met at the wedding of a mutual acquaintance after which he claims, she “chased” him. They were engaged in 1964 and married the same year on a beautiful October day in LUMC. The two have been married for 50 years now.

Willy and Janet had their first child, Dean Tiessen, in 1967, who sadly passed away in 2013. Dean married Jennifer Lehn Tiessen and the two had four children; Julianne, Rachelle, Kian, and Josh. Their second child, Jason Tiessen, is four years younger than his brother. He is married to Josey Tiessen. Two of Willy’s granddaughters, Mykayla and Cassidy, are their children. When asked about Dean and Jason as children Willy affectionately responded with “‘They were perfect children.’ That’s what you’re supposed to say right?”

Willy said that the key to raising children was the same then as it is now and that it will, for the most part, be the same forever. You have to teach them things like respect and appreciation and make sure they have enough common sense to figure it out on their own.

In 2013, Willy was diagnosed with skin cancer in his ear. Treatment started in March of that year. He has been through both radiation and chemotherapy. The cancer spread and developed into lymphoma and lung cancer. He still continues to go through treatments and fight his disease.

When asked about what he considers his greatest accomplishment, Willy admitted that he did not see anything that he did especially noteworthy apart from his family. He said, “We raised two good boys. We kept a roof over their heads. Food. Clothes.” Hopefully, when reading this, he is reminded of how important he is to many people. He has made a huge, positive difference in the lives of family and friends and that is much more than many can claim.