

WHEN THE BELL CALLS: A minute matters

IN AN INTENSELY PERSONAL STORY, A HALIFAX JOURNALIST LOOKS AT AN ACT OF RARE HEROISM BY HALIFAX FIREFIGHTERS, INCLUDING HER OWN FATHER

BY JANICE LANDRY



This is the second in a series of four Halifax Magazine articles looking at Halifax's firefighters. The stories began in late fall 2012 with an examination of the incredible role Halifax's firefighters played during the Halifax Explosion, when nine were killed. It remains the single biggest loss of firefighting life, in one incident, in Canadian history. Our second story involves my own late father, a veteran Halifax firefighter, who died almost seven years ago. This account commemorates the 35th anniversary, in 2013, of Basil (Baz) Landry's near-impossible rescue of a two-month-old infant.

Timeline: 6:40p.m. October 2, 1978.
3390 Federal Avenue, Halifax

Time of call: 18:40

Nature of call: 51-52

How received: Phone

Remarks: Sound of caller's voice: Excited

Caller: Male

Weather conditions: Fair

Response: 7-7A-R2

These are verbatim details taken from the official Dispatcher's Report, filed in 1978, with the former Halifax Fire Department.

In the late 70s, Code 51 meant "tentative working fire" and Code 52 indicated a "confirmed working fire." The numbers and letters 7-7A-R2 reveal three fire engines

July 13, 1979: Lieutenant Basil (Baz) Landry in his dress uniform, standing in front of Rescue #2 (the truck on which he arrived to 3390 Federal Avenue with driver Joe Young).

and crews attended a fire call at 6:40pm on October 2, 1978: #7 Engine, #7 Aerial and Rescue #2, who, together, formed #7 Company, working out of Halifax's Bayers Road Fire Station.

One of those firefighters was my late father, Basil (Baz) Landry, who was 46 years old and a lieutenant. In 1978, his driver was Joe Young, who is now 67 years old. Young was behind the wheel of Rescue #2. He drove Landry to and from countless fire scenes but this one that still moves him to tears 35 years later, "#7 Engine is out first and we're [Rescue #2] out second. #7 Engine went into Romans Avenue and took a right onto Federal Avenue. I also went the same way; left onto Romans, right onto Federal."

On the way, Young says Rescue #2 was informed, via radio communication, by late Captain Gordon (Champ) McIsaac, who had arrived first on #7 Engine, to expect "Smoke Condition." Young says the term meant there was smoke showing from the residence.

While en route, the crew was also told by Captain McIsaac to, "Run us a feed line," Young explains, "That meant the second unit arriving is going to take a hydrant; which is to wrap the hydrant with a hose, drive down and feed the water into #7 Engine, which is a pumper... We could see the back of the building where the fire was and where the smoke was coming out. [Landry] said to me, 'When you get up there, Joe, get a ladder in, around back.' As soon as we stop, Basil gets out of the pumper." At that point, Young and veteran Halifax firefighter Frank Zwicker jumped out and grabbed a ladder.

Young elaborates. "I got on the back of the ladder and Frank Zwicker was on the front carrying it in. As we came around the corner of the house, there was a fellow standing there and I could see he was going to be in the way. I think I armed him and caught him in the chest. I didn't even realize it at the time. I was so focused on not hitting him with the ladder and getting it back there as fast as possible."

Given what unfolded, it was imperative Young and Zwicker did not waste even one second moving the ladder into place.

Now 89 years old, Frank Zwicker still vividly recalls October 2, 1978. While Young was uncertain of just what was



The rear of 3390 Federal Avenue, where the rescue took place. Landry climbed the white trellis onto the overhanging porch roof. He then shimmied across the gutter, broke the window with his helmet and swung up into the bedroom, which is to the left of the porch roof in the photo. July 13 1979. This shows the residence after it was restored and renovated.

initially occurring (because he was busy doing his job and running the feed line) Zwicker quickly saw what was at stake. "There was no visible flame when we arrived," he says. "Just black smoke and a lot of it, mainly inside, except it was pouring out of the windows."

Zwicker went around the rear of the two-storey building with Landry. This was, by all accounts, while the feedlines were being hooked up by Young, but, before the ladder was later unhooked and carried to the back.

It was there, at the building's rear, firefighters learned a baby was trapped upstairs in its crib. Zwicker says that crucial piece of information was integral to the baby's eventual rescue because whoever went inside the fire would have a much better idea of where to look for the child; searching for a crib in the black smoke is somewhat easier than searching anywhere inside a room or building.

In the panic and chaos, Landry decided not to wait for the ladder to gain entrance. Zwicker is one of many people who watched my late father's almost physically impossible entry; a desperate and selfless attempt to save the trapped baby.

Zwicker confirms Landry immediately went for a trellis attached to the side of the house near the back door. Landry started climbing up. When Zwicker saw Landry start his ascent, he immediately ran for the ladder.

While Landry's peers retrieved the ladder from the fire engine parked out front, behind the home a miraculous rescue was unfolding. Eyewitnesses say Landry climbed up the trellis onto a small overhanging porch roof that jutted from the rear entrance.

Young describes the rescue attempt from there. "Basil jumped off from the roof to his left and clung onto the gutter that ran across the roof line. He was hanging from it with both hands. He went hand over fist, clinging onto the gutter, towards the bedroom window where the child was trapped. Basil described this all to me later. He said, 'Joe, I hung on with one hand and busted the window out with my helmet. Then I went in.'"

Young explains an important physical factor in this part of the rescue. "It had to have been someone of Basil's slight build, with upper body strength, to be able to make that entry, coupled with a lot of will. I know if it had of been me, the gutter would have fallen off because I would have been too heavy."

Gutter still intact, Landry managed to physically swing and arc his body upwards and into the broken bedroom window without assistance. The crowd of hundreds now gathered at the fire scene watched the amazing entry unfold, while thick, black smoke constantly rolled from the windows.



Firefighter Baz Landry with Nick McKenzie, the boy he rescued. July 13, 1979.

Landry wasn't wearing any breathing apparatus when he entered the second floor bedroom. Many years later, my late father told me instinct and training simply kicked in; he did not have a spare second to waste retrieving his air pack.

This is how Landry described what it was like inside the abyss of the upper floor. It is not verbatim. I am recounting what he told me the *one* time he talked about it. It was a private conversation I have chosen to reveal so you can understand and appreciate this crucial perspective from inside the burning home.

Once Landry landed inside and on the bedroom floor, he managed to avoid cuts from shards of glass from the window pane that had fallen inwards. He could not see the glass to avoid it. The room was completely and utterly black. It was so dense and dark inside he literally could not see his hands in front of his face.

Landry knew the baby was in his crib and that the crib was inside that room, not far from the window. My late father

crawled around the floor, on his stomach, moving his arms out in front of him in large, arching movements. He did this to protect himself from any unseen dangers, and, more importantly, to feel the legs of the baby's crib when his hands brushed up against them, which they eventually did.

Landry reached up and inside the crib and felt for the tiny child. He picked up the baby. He wrapped the infant in a blanket for protection from the black smoke. Then, staying very close to the floor, where any remaining oxygen would be, Landry tried to find the window. At some point, he gave the baby mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He did not yet know if it was a girl or a boy.

Meanwhile, several critical things were also happening with the other responding firefighters. "While all this is going on, there is another crew *in there* fighting it," Young says. "They were coming up the stairs. Ronnie Brown and Champ McIsaac were there." Like Landry, both Brown and McIsaac have since passed away.

The fact that this tireless crew eventually



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made it up the stairs is crucial for several key reasons: firstly, neighbours and family members had repeatedly tried to rescue the baby before firefighters arrived. They could not make it upstairs because of the thick smoke and intense heat. Secondly, the interior crew fought through desperate conditions and risked their own lives because they knew a baby was trapped on the second floor and that one of their own had gone inside. Thirdly, eyewitness accounts and interviews confirm: if one more minute had elapsed before Landry found the baby and made it to the window for air, they likely would have died in that bedroom.

The only way they escaped is because of the quick-thinking efforts of my father's peers who rushed for the ladder when they saw him start his ascent up the trellis. Retired firefighter Les Power, who is now 87 years old, also played a critical role in the child's rescue, once the ladder was in position.

Once Young and Zwicker brought the ladder around the back of the home, Zwicker dropped the foot of the ladder down. Young hoisted it up into place. It was leaning up against the house and under the window. "He (Zwicker) knew where it was to go, where to place it. When I pushed it up, it wasn't even up against the building and Les Power was already going up it!" recalls Young.

Power says he rushed the ladder thinking someone needed assistance. Two people did need help, desperately. "I poked my head inside the room and had to pull it right out again because it was so bad. I couldn't see a thing."

Inside the room, what he could not see was Landry making his way to the window, giving the baby mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Power perched atop the ladder "for about a minute" before he saw two hands reach out from the black smoke. He could not see who they were attached to or the person's face. "They handed me a bundle. I didn't know what it was. I got down the ladder as fast as possible because I didn't want to waste time," says Power, confirming he is the firefighter who carried the baby, Nicholas (Nick) McKenzie, down to safety.

When Power got down to the ground carrying Nick McKenzie it was only then he took a second to look inside the blanket to see what was wrapped up. "It was a bundle of joy!" the firefighter emotionally recounts, of his initial reaction to discovering he had just carried a baby down to safety, "Death was at its door. The blanket over its face saved it from the smoke. I was in heaven when I opened that blanket," Power says, "There was not a sound coming from the blanket. When I opened the bundle up, its eyes were wide open and it had come to. When I touched it, the baby started to cry."





Power, Zwicker and Young are the Halifax firefighters who gave my father and Nick McKenzie their way out of the inferno. Without the ladder in place, the outcome would, most certainly, have been tragic. "Everyone agrees, *one more minute* in the black smoke and it would have been too late," concludes Zwicker.

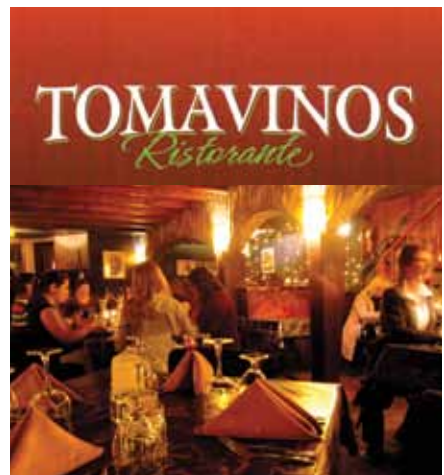
While McKenzie is safely outside in Power's arms, Champ McIsaac, Ronnie (Brownie) Brown and crew were inside the burning home, selflessly trying to access the upper floor because they believed the baby was still up there. They all made it out safely; the firefighters eventually put out the blaze.

Landry went on to receive many prestigious accolades for his incredible entry, rescue and selfless act of bravery, including a Medal of Bravery from the Canadian Government, at Rideau Hall. As of April 2013, Basil Landry is the only Halifax firefighter to ever receive one. Our family is extremely proud of him and his legacy. However, my late father always gave credit to his peers and was quoted in ensuing media reports as saying "...you go to a fire as a team." |||

The McKenzie family's incredible perspective of the day's events will be revealed in the concluding installment of this series, coming later this year.

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The prodigy builder

THE NOVA SCOTIA YOUTH ORCHESTRA'S SUCCESS IS A CULMINATION OF PURE TALENT, PRACTICE AND A MUSIC DIRECTOR WHO INSPIRES

BY RYAN VAN HORNE

Despite his small stature, Dinuk Wijeratne wields immeasurable power. He's the music director of the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra (NSYO), and when he wields his baton, it's a magic wand that controls every facet of the music played by the 66-member ensemble.

There's a mystical symbiosis between Wijeratne and the music, as this tiny dynamo injects it with spirit while also feeding off its energy. Horn player Shannon Lauriston of Dartmouth describes it as "infinite circle."

"That circle exists with a conductor who is enthusiastic and gives all the energy and passion he has," says Lauriston. "The orchestra will give that back in the music and they feed each other." In a November performance of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Wijeratne conducted a tour de force by the orchestra and the King's Chorus and Boys Choir.

Percussionist Tom Peters of Fredericton says working with Dinuk has changed his perception of a conductor. "I saw a

conductor as an actual artist, as opposed to a leader," he says. "He's an exceptional leader, too, but when you watch him... there's an unexplainable beauty to his conducting." Peters, a music student at Acadia University, says the NSYO wouldn't play half as well without the visual reference Wijeratne provides. "Dinuk is the visual embodiment of how he wants the music to sound," he adds. "You just see it and you know exactly what to do."

In retrospect, Wijeratne called the November performance at Saint Mary's University one of his favourite concerts with the NSYO in his seven years as music director. "*Carmina*, in particular, goes down in my memory as some of the most professional playing I'd ever seen from young musicians," Wijeratne says.

The reasons for the high degree of proficiency and élan from this ensemble are simple. Wijeratne says he treats them like professionals and they respond accordingly. He sets high standards, but is precise, kind and fair. Violinist Sarah

McCabe says there is "an absolute connection between Dinuk and every player of the Orchestra." They trust Wijeratne implicitly and see how much effort he invests into the sound, but also how emotionally attached he is to them—and not just as musicians. "He really cares about us as people," McCabe says.

Andrew Son, 13, is one of the youngest performers in the NSYO. The violinist says he likes Wijeratne's sense of humour, but more importantly, Son has learned this most important lesson: "You can't be perfect if you don't practice perfect," he says.

Bill Lord, president of the NSYO board of directors, says the NSYO has had some fantastic music directors in its 36-year history, but none with sublime talents as diverse as Wijeratne's. The music director's "incredible ability and professionalism" allows him to accomplish the vital role of inspiring passion in the musicians.

Anybody who auditions for the NSYO is talented, but many have not played in an ensemble before. The stunning aspect of



Dinuk Wijeratne.

PHOTO: DEVAAN INGRAHAM

Launch pad

When Sarah McCabe was looking at universities, she learned Acadia University didn't have a full orchestra. The violinist from Bowmanville, Ontario, had been playing in orchestras for six years and knew she had to continue. "There was just no way I could be happy somewhere without playing in an orchestra," she says.

She was delighted to learn about the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra, and it played a big part in her decision to head east. Although she has to travel twice a week for rehearsals, it's worth it, says the 20-year-old. "There is some kind of magic to what we do," she says. "Everybody really cares about each other and that shows when we play."

Music Director Dinuk Wijeratne says the

NSYO boasts tremendous talent. "We are easily one of the best youth orchestras in Canada," he says, stressing that it doesn't adjust his expectations with them; he uses the same standards when he's playing in concert halls around the world.

Horn player Shannon Lauriston is in her second year with the NSYO. She joined because she's always loved orchestral music. "I'm sort of just drawn to playing all the great work that I heard my parents playing when I was young," Lauriston says.

She adds that the NSYO is a fantastic learning experience for young musicians. "We all really value this experience because we get to work with this world-class musician who does it because he wants to, and that makes us feel really special," she says.

Andrew Son, 13, is a newcomer to the Orchestra. He joined because he was intrigued by playing with others, rather than as a soloist. "I saw how collaborating with each other could be so fun, so I decided to audition," says Son, a violinist from Halifax.

Bill Lord, president of the NSYO board of directors says Wijeratne's high standards are helping the kids learn what the possibilities are. The NSYO commissioned more pieces than any other youth orchestra and more than some major orchestras, Lord says. "The pieces, while they are not beyond a young orchestra, will challenge them," he says. "What they learn is that they can achieve more than they ever thought they could."

Wijeratne's work, especially this year, is that there was a 50 per cent turnover in the ensemble. It's a challenge to weld this group together, Lord says, and he recalls a pep talk Wijeratne gave them after the Orchestra was picked. "He said, 'if you want to be a truly good orchestra member, you have to have passion and you have to have discipline,'" Lord says. Wijeratne inspires both, and that forged the ensemble so well that it moved some people to tears during its performance of *Carmina Burana*, Lord adds.

The emerging maestro's origins explain his love for music. Wijeratne was born in Sri Lanka but moved to Dubai when he was three years-old. His father, Ranjit, was an engineer and wanted to take advantage of the Persian Gulf country's burgeoning economy. When he was nine, Wijeratne started studying piano but didn't truly enjoy it for the first three years.

When he was 12, however, his life changed. "I remember very clearly hearing Mozart's music for the first time," Wijeratne says. "I always say that it was my first spiritual experience."

As his love for music grew, it spurred him to study the history and listen to as much of it as he could. He would spend all of his pocket money on compact discs. When that wasn't enough to satiate his voracious appetite, he would delve into his parents' eclectic collection of music. Without many live concerts to attend, he would pop in a CD, put the headphones on and immerse himself. He says he didn't have the opportunity to see live music that many young people in North America have.

"If you have more of a hunger for something and you're being denied something, it makes you a little bit more eager," he says, explaining his thirst for song. After graduating from high school, Wijeratne studied music at the Royal Northern College in Manchester. He eventually moved to the United States, where he did post-graduate studies at the Juilliard and Mannes College of Music in New York.

Now 34, Wijeratne has performed at Carnegie Hall twice and famous concert halls around the world. The tuba-playing elephant in the room is that someone with his resume and talent could set down roots anywhere and make it big, but he chose

Halifax and loves it here.

How that happened can be attributed to a delightful bit of serendipity. His mother, Vino, had chosen to move to Nova Scotia on the advice of family friends. At the same time, Wijeratne was completing school in Manchester and landed a job as conductor-in-residence with Symphony Nova Scotia. That's how this province came to be the home base for one of North America's emerging musical talents with collaborators and performances around the globe. "I spend most of my time writing," says Wijeratne, who uses the office in his Bedford home to do most of his composing, which is what he likes best.

"When I wake up in the morning, I think about what I can create," he says. In Halifax, he's close to major centres in Canada and the U.S., and fairly close to Europe. "Whether I'll always be in Halifax, I'm not sure," Wijeratne says. "But I definitely want to keep a foot here at all times. A big part of my heart is now here with the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra." 🇨🇦

In concert

The NSYO will be performing its *April Finale Concert* in Halifax later this month.


Time: April 28, 7 p.m.


Location: Saint Andrew's United Church


The concert will include 2012-2013 Concerto Competition winner Julia Tufts, along with works by composers Lucas Oickle and Derek Charke.

To learn more, visit novascotiayouthorchestra.com

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