

Max DelSignore: Northern New York Community Podcast, stories from the heart of our community.

Hi folks and welcome to another episode of the Northern New York Community Podcast. I'm your host, Max DelSignore. I can promise you that you've tuned in to another great interview and conversation, this one with Becky Van de Water. Anyone who is familiar with St. Lawrence County, and especially community projects in the villages of Canton and Cranberry Lake, should be familiar with the Van de Water name. Becky has come in and has been kind enough to reflect on a life well lived in St. Lawrence County, memories and philanthropy shared with her influential husband, Peter, and how his unfortunate passing has helped shaped her philanthropy and life today. Becky, thanks so much for coming on and doing this podcast. We are very lucky to have you hear.

Becky Van de Water: Well thank you.

Max DelSignore: St. Lawrence County is such a meaningful place for you, deep history goes back to your family and more specifically, your uncle, we'll talk about in a second. You enrolled at St. Lawrence and eventually met your husband there. Raised three great children while mostly living in Canton at the time, and you have a nice second home in Cranberry Lake, so how do you describe this lifelong love for Northern New York?

Becky: Well I think coming to St. Lawrence was the beginning for me. It was a small town, which was where I was brought up. It just suited me. It was a wonderful liberal arts college, but mainly it was because I met Peter.

Max DelSignore: Your family roots, though with St. Lawrence, they go back quite a ways.

Becky: Oh yes, they do.

Max DelSignore: Tell me a little bit about the lineage there.

Becky: My mother graduated from St. Lawrence (University), 1932. My two uncles graduated from St. Lawrence in 1930 and I think, 28 or 29. Then I have nieces and nephews. I have, even my own children, even though we lived in Canton, they were, because Peter was vice president for student affairs at that time, they said, "We really love St. Lawrence, but we need to get away." They did. Two went to Middlebury, one went to University of Vermont, but they, all three of them had some connection with St. Lawrence, either they went to a semester abroad, or a January semester as well as just being there. They loved St. Lawrence. They met people there, but it was great.

Max DelSignore: As a young girl, was there ever any thought of attending a different university or college, or were the family ties still pretty strong?

Becky: My first choice was Dickinson College, where Marilyn Splete went to college, but I got on the wait list, and so I got to St. Lawrence instead, and of course that's made all the difference to me.

Max DelSignore: Tell me about meeting Peter.

Becky: Oh, well we met at an open house. He's Beta Theta Pi. I was a Tridelt. We met, and we found out that we had a lot in common. We both grew up in little tiny towns in New York state, not Canton but, you know. Mainly, we fell in love, and that was the main thing.

Max DelSignore: How did you know, or did you know, when you first met Peter, "This is the person I'm going to marry and have a family with."

Becky: Yes.

Max DelSignore: Was it an instance, was it a glance, was it a first time out? What do you remember?

Becky: It was the first time I saw him, and I said, "Oh, I would like to meet him," and so I did. I often say in one of my memoirs, I say to the family, "I want you to know that two years difference in our age, I am just grateful that some other woman hadn't captured him by then." I got him instead.

Max DelSignore: Well it obviously, to have three great kids and the life that you've led, especially with the majority of it being Canton, New York, so being St. Lawrence graduates, the university kind of brings you back.

Becky: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Max DelSignore: Peter obviously had a really successful career in education, in higher education. During that time, that you were living in Canton, you both found outlets to really re-invest in the community in ways, volunteers at your church, other area organizations. You sold Christmas trees.

Becky: Yes.

Max DelSignore: Raised sheep, started a bed and breakfast, just ... If you could explain a little bit of those business ventures, let's say, or investments in the community, why did you decide to do some of the things that you did?

Becky: Well, Peter had been headmaster of Vermont Academy in the 80s, and then we decided we really wanted to come back to Canton because we had rented our house that we had built in 1976, the stone house, which I don't think you've seen. I don't know.

Max DelSignore: I don't think so.

Becky: We decided we wanted to do a bed and breakfast, and we also wanted a maple syrup operation. We had that. We had the Christmas trees, and then also Peter was involved with, as an adjunct at St. Lawrence, teaching in the education department, also started the outdoor program, all of these things, as well as doing the community things that he had time, to do some of those things. We had enough money to make it, not a whole lot, but we made \$15,000.00 doing bed and breakfast. Is that very much?

Max DelSignore: Well it made you happy though because eventually you felt it was important and it was meaningful to you. Was it difficult to balance all these things that you were investing your time in and you had the three kids, what was that experience like in trying to juggle all these great things?

Becky: I think that Peter and I really felt very comfortable raising the kids. We knew it was the same kind of way that we were brought up. We just did everything we needed to do, and the kids really learned a lot, I think, from Peter especially. I think they still do. No, I think the balance, we worked it out. The trick was, of course, getting enough money for college for the kids. I got a masters in counseling, from St. Lawrence. I was employed as an employment counselor for four years, and raised enough money for their college, and then at Vermont Academy, I worked as an admissions counselor for a couple years, so it was ... We made enough.

Max DelSignore: What were some of those important values that you shared with your children?

Becky: Philanthropy.

Max DelSignore: First and foremost, huh?

Becky: Which means, to me, community service. It's interesting that both Tom and Katherine, and their spouses, both have spent time in Habitat for Humanity in Georgia, at different times in their lives. One year, one Christmas I remember, they all said, "Instead of gifts, would you please think about giving to this organization or this organization in our names?" We did. I think we still gave them a little gift, but no, I think all three of them are very much caring about where they are, their community, and of course I have two children who live nearby, and one in Saratoga Springs, but she's also very interested in philanthropy. Money has a lot to do with it, you know?

Max DelSignore: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Becky: You have to have money to raise your family. You have to have the money to send them to college. That's, you have a balance. Is there a balance?

Max DelSignore: There is balance. I think it's an important conversation to have. It sounds like you and Peter struck a really good balance in making that work.

Becky: We did.

Max DelSignore: Investing in the things that you thought were really important in a community. Of course, everything that you spent your time in or financial resources in, whether it was the church, historical society, hospital, Grass River Heritage is something that Peter helped start in Canton as well. He seemed to be really at the center of a lot of progressive community efforts. As his wife, where do you feel like those desires came from, that drive to really start something new or move something forward?

Becky: Well I think it had a lot to do with the fact that we loved Canton, and we loved the community. We loved the chance to get to know other people, that's part of church too, you know, as well as the community. I mean not that both of them go together.

Max DelSignore: Yes, they do.

Becky: He always was that way, and he kind of helped me to become that way.

Max DelSignore: Becky, elaborate on that a little bit more, about Peter's influence on you in being able to give back, or learn to give back a little bit more over time.

Becky: Well, because of the things that he accomplished, starting the Grass River Heritage Park, doing ... Well, he started the Citizens to Save the Adirondack Park. He had an organization before the Adirondack Park was actually set up, to stop this rich kind of corporation that wanted lots of condos in the middle of the Adirondacks, and he stopped that. Low altitude flights, we don't have low altitude flights from the Air Force anymore, and he was very much involved in the community of Canton, itself. The Canton Initiative, he started that, and trying to improve downtown Canton, which he did, but of course the thing that's sad is that things have changed in fifteen or twenty years. We have too much traffic coming through. There's not as much, how should I say, people tend to buy online or they tend to go to Wal-Mart instead, but he was ... I believed in him. I believed in what he had to say, so I tried to, and I am now, trying to do what he would want me to do. I'm still trying to save money for the kids.

Max DelSignore: What was it like to enjoy these various forms of philanthropy and doing it all together? How meaningful was that to you?

Becky: Well, I think in the community everybody got to know Peter, and me too, but mostly Peter, and all the awards that he was given for various things that he did, Canton College too, as well as St. Lawrence, and downtown in Canton. It made me realize that it's a wonderful way to live your life, to think about your small area, which of course for me, it was a small area. For you maybe, Watertown might be a big area, I don't know, but to know people and to feel as if you're helping. I feel, for instance, the church and community program that we have in

Canton, all of our churches are involved with it, and it's a thrift shop as well as a food bank. I help do that, usually for snowbirds when they go away, but it's just amazing to me to see what the people in the north country need, food, clothing, money.

It makes you realize sometimes because you live in a college town, a lot of your friends are either professors or somebody, and they have enough money to live comfortably, but the people you don't get to know are the others. All of our children went to Canton school, and they had friends who were in the poor area, and I think they learned very quickly what they could do help, maybe, but I mean they couldn't at that point, but still, realizing that our lives are not suburban, wealthy kind of thing. That's why I'm very glad that we had our children and we raised them in Canton rather than New York City.

Max DelSignore: Mm-hmm (affirmative), gave them a different view of life.

Becky: Very much.

Max DelSignore: To go back quickly to Peter's accomplishments and things he had been a part of, he had certainly, direct impact on the Northern New York Community Foundation. Being the first representative from St. Lawrence County to serve on our board in an organization that, at that time, had lasted 75, 80 years. What can you recall about Peter's experience serving the community in that role, and being a foundation board member?

Becky: Well I think he enjoyed getting to know so many of the people on the board. He really liked Alex and Rande, and felt that they were doing wonderful things in the north country, and of course he was very excited when it was decided that St. Lawrence County was going to be part of your charity gifts too. Well, he was on the board of so many places, I can't even tell you all of them. It became very important to him to have you and the whole organization care about the north country.

Max DelSignore: Peter battled a rare blood disease, amyloidosis, for three years before passing in 2014 at the age of 77. You have said that you feel Peter wants you to continue on with you giving back in thoughtful and meaningful ways. In these last three years, what has philanthropy meant to you?

Becky: Well, I think I've been more generous than Peter ever thought I would be. My idea of spending the rest of my life is to not spend money on myself, but to think about giving away, but also saving money. I like to do both. I think Peter's legacy has given me the idea that yes, what is the most important? Of course your legacy, you asked me that question one time about, what about the legacy going down? Well, do you know that St. Lawrence started a little, well first year program, they have a first year program, and they named, I just found this out this Fall, that they named one of the colleges, Van De Water College.

Max DelSignore: Oh, that's exciting.

Becky: Yes.

Max DelSignore: That's great.

Becky: Yes, because he was, of course, very environmental, the interest as well as everything. Then, of course, Grass River Heritage, and he has his Van De Water Trail. We have three scholarships at St. Lawrence, one in my parents' name, one in Peter's parents' name, and one in his name. Do you know that the Spleets, that you just interviewed, the reason they have their spot at Cranberry Lake is because we gave a lot to St. Lawrence, and over a period of time, because of tax things or whatever, we couldn't give \$100,000.00 at one time, but then they decided to buy the lot. They built that wonderful, I guess you can call it a camp or a house.

Max DelSignore: Good, well and Alan and Peter were fraternity brothers?

Becky: Yes, and Alan and I were in the same class, yeah, but no, and of course Marilyn went to Dickinson.

Max DelSignore: Can you share, Becky, one of your most gratifying memories of giving back at a local level?

Becky: Well, I was very excited about thinking that you were doing to set up the Van De Water Fund. That brought tears to my eyes when you said that's what you wanted to do. Certainly, I think anything that we do to help the whole north country is just very special to me. I'm a Hospice volunteer, and I feel like sometimes I say to myself, "Do I have to go see that patient? That patient's getting near the end," but nonetheless I feel that at least I'm helping a little bit there, and well, because I was on the board of United Helpers, and the Canton Free Library, and the church. I'm still very involved with the church and I'm on the welcoming committee. Would you like to come to church?

Max DelSignore: I think you'd be a great greeter, Becky. I'm sure you're one of the best they have.

Becky: No. It's made my life a very happy life really, despite the fact that I don't have Peter with me, is of course, I've told you before, his spirit is here. I hope I'm saying the things that he would want me to say.

Max DelSignore: I hope so too. I'm sure he's very proud of all that you've done, certainly. To go back to a question we talked about before, with your children and grandchildren, I know in a previous visit we talked about you being able to see some of the values and some of the characteristics and traits that Peter had in your children. Not just your children, rather but your grandchildren as well.

Becky: Right.

Max DelSignore: Can you just share a couple of those characteristics or values that your grandchildren have that bring you so much joy today?

Becky: Sure. Well, all six of them are handsome, smart, nice. They do care very much about the environment and life here on this planet, and many of them, all four are involved with environmental things, both in terms of their job, as well as their college, and maybe even one being a nurse practitioner at some point. I don't know. Whether it was Peter's genes that did it, or whether it's his, I think his influence. What was amazing to me was that we were so lucky to have children early, and our children have children early in their lives, because it gave Peter, well of course he didn't know at the time, that he was going to get this blood disease, but to have Peter influence them so much, in so many ways. I think they all want to pass on what he was like, and what he cared about.

Max DelSignore: Question, thinking about the youth and this younger generation, what do you think is important for us to do, not just the community foundation, but just as a community as a whole, to inspire this next generation to give the way you and Peter have?

Becky: Oh, if they could get involved in community service in some way, church or any organization, Habitat for Humanity would be one, but I think community service is really important, and certainly at some point when they find that they do have enough money to give to others. Right now none of them are, they've all had college degrees or one is a sophomore in college, but none of them, we don't have a wealthy family at all, except that I did receive some money from my parents, and as an only child I was the only one who got it, whatever. My parents were very philanthropic as well. That's why I want to make sure that there's enough money for each one of them to be able to be philanthropic, but you can't give money if you don't have money. You have to have enough to survive yourself.

There's one essay that Peter wrote about your life. "Is there any need," he said, "To have a mansion? Why, have that? Why have a fancy car that just uses a lot of gas mileage? Why fly all over the world?" Of course, we did do some of that, but because of the gas, you know, the fossil fuels that are used by the airplane. "Let's lead a simple life. Why not think about other people and not just think about yourself?" I think all six of them have gotten that message, whether they'll follow it, I don't know for sure.

Max DelSignore: I'm sure they've done a nice job. To go back to Peter's knack for passages, he wrote a number of essays and columns for the St. Lawrence Plaindealer for many, many years, so when he did have free time, he did like to write.

Becky: Yep.

Max DelSignore: One of the passages, we've talked about this before, but I'd love to get this in as part of the conversation, was his reflection on being remembered and what that meant to him, so I'm going to read this passage, and then I'd like to have you just explain what you think he was trying to convey.

Becky: Okay.

Max DelSignore: "I think there are only three ways we'll be remembered. The first is through our children and their lives. I'm confident that our three are good people, good parents and good citizens. The second is by what we leave behind physically. Things don't last forever, but when we built our stone house, we modeled it after the French stone houses of Hudson Valley some three hundred years old. The third is memories others have of us. We hope that they are good and lasting." What does that entry mean to you?

Becky: The entry, you mean something lasting more than just remembering people? Ah, sure, artwork, handwork, having things named after you. How about a cemetery stones? He mentioned that, that I wanted to be remembered in three places, and he's in three places too. No, I think we all have to realize that at some point, we just will blend in, and certainly our children and grandchildren will go on. I'm not too worried about it all, just to do the best you can while you're here. That's what he did. He did the best ever.

Max DelSignore: Well you certainly both did. Thinking about the legacy that both of you would leave behind, everything that you've done in this community, what is your hope, in your words? What is your hope that the legacy for Peter and Becky Van De Water, what would that be?

Becky: Well, Van De Water Fund in north ... Maybe even Van De Water College, the first year program. The fact that we did build two houses, and I don't know that we'll have a plaque of Van De Water on them, but ... The work that he did at St. Lawrence, people don't really forget those things. What I have done, I've done a little bit, but mostly I just like to entertain you with soup and homemade bread.

Max DelSignore: Some of the finest I've ever had, Becky. It's very true. Between the volunteerism and the charitable giving that both of you have demonstrated, I think a lot of folks can certainly see that and say, "Here is a family that wanted to make this community better, found ways to do it in whatever fashion that fit best for them," but also I think it was a great example for others to lead, and continue to follow that example that you've set.

Becky: I hope so.

Max DelSignore: You're continuing to champion the cause, even after Peter's passing, so ...

Becky: Yeah, well that's my purpose in life right now, is to pass on is legacy and to make people read his book of essays, and of course I would like even more. He wrote



a couple of other books, one on St. Lawrence University. You may not know that, and of course his Christmas stories he put together for the family, and I usually don't ... I think I sent you a little few things that he had to say about life. We just feel, I say I, we feel that we've done our part. We just certainly will continue. I'll certainly continue to do it, but I want to save money for the children.

Max DelSignore: Well, and you're certainly doing so, but you're, the giving that you've shown certainly after Peter leaving us so soon, has really been, I think, inspirational, not only for those of us who know you well, know the family well, but others that remember Peter's example and everything that he's done, and will continue to do so.

Becky: Yep.

Max DelSignore: We're so grateful that you took some time to come in on the podcast, to share and reflect a little bit, not just on what Peter has done, but everything that you continue to do because it is meaningful, and it is making a big difference.

Becky: You know, there's just one thing I want to say.

Max DelSignore: Sure.

Becky: That is, Robert Frost is one of my favorite poets, and he wrote a poem called, The Road Not Taken, and two roads diverged in a yellow wood. One had a little more grass than the other. He said, "So I'm taking the one less traveled," and he said, "Through the ages, I'm going to find out that in fact, that was the best possible thing that I could have done," and that's the way I feel about, and I think Peter did too, that instead of going to a lot of different places, that we stayed where we did, and we're happy that the road we took.

Max DelSignore: It's been a good destination that you've gone through.

Becky: Yeah, good destination, yeah.

Max DelSignore: Here's hoping others will also take the road less traveled, and be courageous enough to, again, follow the example that you've led or follow the path that you've blazed in community service and philanthropy in this area.

Becky: My maiden name is Blaisdell.

Max DelSignore: Oh, that's right.

Becky: Yeah.

Max DelSignore: What perfect timing for that. Well Becky, thank you for coming on the podcast.

Becky: You're welcome.

Max DelSignore: Taking the time to share your story as well.

Becky: You're welcome. It was, made it easy. I didn't even have to look down and see what else I had to say.

Max DelSignore: No notes needed for this interview.

Becky: Okay.

Max DelSignore: As we wrap up, I want to thank our supporters of the podcast, WPBS and the Northern New York Community Foundation. Every interview is easily accessible and always free, whether it's online or on your mobile device. Find us on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play, or other podcast platforms when you search for the Northern New York Community Podcast. Check out our podcast website, which also features interview highlights, photo galleries and much more. Just go to [www.nnypodcast.com](http://www.nnypodcast.com). Thanks again for listening to our interview with Becky Van De Water, and we will catch you next time on the Northern New York Community Podcast.

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