

The poor man's Banff Centre

A former school on the Island serves as a unique artists' retreat at city's edge

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Writer Claudia Dey discovered both an obscure Toronto arts colony and her future husband in a single March blizzard.

She caught the ferry to Hanlon's Point, on the Toronto islands, then hopped a van to a low-slung set of buildings near the water at Gibraltar Point.

Caretaker Jimmy Jones showed her around. Dey was researching the life of celebrated Toronto poet Gwendolyn MacEwen, for a play that was to become *The Gwendolyn Poems*.

"Jimmy showed me the tiny, tiny room where Gwendolyn would have eaten her lunch and smoked her cigarettes," the playwright recalled of that stormy day.

"We were finishing the tour and this very, very tall man wearing a fur hat came in and we met briefly," she said. "When I got off the island, I literally called my mum from a payphone and said, 'I just met my husband.'"

Dey also discovered Artscape Gibraltar Point.

Few people knew of the centre then. Few know of it even now – news of it spreads almost exclusively by word of mouth among artists.

The place began in 1908 as an elementary school for island children and was added to in the 1940s and 1950s. Poet MacEwen worked there as a librarian before her death in 1987.

In the late 1990s, the building was to be demolished. Instead, a grassroots movement saved it and in 1999 the city awarded a 20-year lease to Toronto Artscape, a non-profit group that manages artists' work and living spaces.

Renovations turned the school into a kind of poor man's Banff School of Fine Arts.

"The building has a warm, inviting feel to it," Artscape publicist Liz Kohn says of the former classrooms and dorms, serving now as studios for painting, sculpting, writing and dancing.

"It's a down-home kind of place."

Dey's research trip in the blizzard came in 2001, a year after the centre opened.

The tall man in the fur hat turned out to be Don Kerr, a music producer and drummer/cellist for singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith.

A variety of musicians, artists and sculptors rent former school portables at the centre, and Kerr was recording that day at the Gas Station studio run by Dale Morningstar.

Dey and Kerr didn't get to know each other right away. Instead, the writer returned later that year as part of an international residency program.

"I remember skinny dipping on an October night and returning to a bonfire and various Dionysian indulgences, which the island certainly lends itself to," she says.

Afterward, Dey returned on and off, at one point working as a janitor and at others to rent writing space short term as part of the Artscape Lodge program.

She was writing a novel, published this spring by Coach House Books as *Stunt*, that is set in Parkdale, the Guild Inn and the Toronto Islands.

"Lake churning white beneath, the islanders descend the ferry by bicycle," one passage reads. "They pull carts behind them filled with groceries and children and various supplies ... One boy eats ice cream from a carton with a toothbrush."

For Dey, writing the book at the arts centre proved magical.

"I remember walking with aged horses in the mornings and falling asleep to stilt walkers at night," she says. "It really is that kind of place, where a parade of children will stream by your window."

Dey and Kerr were married on Ward's Island in 2005, with Jimmy Jones, Dale Morningstar and various other islanders and artists in attendance. They take their young son swimming at Gibraltar Point.

Long-term tenants at Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts throw an open house every September. Artists wishing to apply to the Artscape Lodge program can surf torontoartscape.on.ca, call 416-392-1030 or write to bookings@torontoartscape.on.ca

THE GIBRALTAR CANON

Other works from Artscape Gibraltar Point:

- *The Stone of Folly*, an animated short film by sculptor Alastair Dickson and producer-director Jesse Rosensweet. It won the 2002 Cannes Film Festival's Prix du Jury.
- *Destination Unknown*, by musicians Ron Sexsmith and Don Kerr, earned a Juno nomination in 2005. The video for the song "Listen" is also set at Gibraltar Point (youtube.com/watch?v=s-nYpzP7ZGY).
- *Zero Gravity*, a collection by Toronto short-story writer Sharon English, made the 2007 Giller Prize long list. English directs the Innis College Writing Centre at the University of Toronto.
- *The Language of Nature*, a solo exhibition by Montreal photographer Susan Coolen at Ottawa's Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa last February. It included work created at Gibraltar Point.
- *Havana Mirage*, a solo exhibition at Toronto's Corkin Gallery last winter by emerging Cuban artist Ramon Serrano, included paintings from Gibraltar Point. Serrano's work can be found at New York's Museum of Modern Art and Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia.

– *John Goddard*