

ISLE MADAME - Lieutenant Governor's Community Spirit Award Nomination

Brief History of Isle Madame

Isle Madame is located on the southeastern coast of Cape Breton Island, about 129 square kilometres in size, with a population of just over 3,000. Records suggest that the first settlement dates back to the early 1700, and it is widely held that Isle Madame was named after the second wife of France's Louis XIV.

Historically, it was the rich fishing grounds off the coast of Cape Breton that brought French, English, Basque, and Irish settlers to Isle Madame. Though the area has benefitted from newcomers to the area, Isle Madame has maintained its historical roots. A designated French culture region, a large proportion of residents speak both French and English, and Richmond County has been designated a protected Acadian constituency in the provincial legislature.

Not only did fish bring our first settlers to the area, but fishing also remained a mainstay of the economy until the latter part of the 20th century. The downturn in the fishery in the early 1990s put Isle Madame's economic survival in jeopardy, while at the same time, providing an opportunity for change and self-renewal.

Development Isle Madame Association: From Collapse to Opportunity

Until the early 1990s, Isle Madame was largely a group of small communities functioning independently of each other. Communities like Little Anse, Petit de Grat, Arichat, Rocky Bay, D'Escousse, West Arichat, and Janvrin's Island existed separately, most with their own schools, churches, and community centres. The collapse of the ground fishery required a rethink of how Isle Madame's communities functioned. Alone, each was in jeopardy. Together, much more was possible.

In 1995, Development Isle Madame Association (DIMA) was formed. Community economic development was the name of the game, and DIMA was the engine driver. Their goal was to introduce protocols that would drive long-term growth to offset losses due to the downturn in the fishery and set Isle Madame on a path of self-renewal that would help insulate the island from future economic challenges.

Some 30 years after the ground fishery collapse, the island boasts a vibrant economy. To quote DIMA: "Isle Madame prides itself as a community of strength, resilience and innovation, turning a corner from a resource-based economy to a knowledge and service-based economy with significant business advantages."

A Vibrant Business Community

Several businesses continue to revolve around the fishery, with an emphasis on species other than just the ground fish that brought settlers to Isle Madame.

Clearwater Seafood, Premium Seafood, and Petit de Grat Packers all support local fishermen who continue to make their living on the waters that surround our island. Samson Enterprises helped turn fishing boats to pleasure craft, then emerged as a powerhouse in boatbuilding and manufacturing. Their company also boasts a 150-ton marine Travelift, marine storage, and maintenance facility.

Those businesses have been joined, though, by other ventures that have been able to harness the work ethic that comes from our ancestors who risked their lives on the sea. Breton Fabrication, as an example, provides welding, fabrication, sandblasting, painting, power washing, marine repair, installation around Isle Madame and beyond. This successful company, made up of young people from the area, has expanded into the much-needed arena of building affordable homes during the one of the most significant housing crises our province has faced in its history.

While all companies bring employment and services to the area, Appleseed Energy does all that and at the same time is helping to unleash the potential of solar energy in Northeastern Nova Scotia. Appleseed specializes in both grid-tied solar systems and off-grid living and illustrates the impact this entrepreneurial spirit has had on both long-time residents and newcomers to the area.

Among DIMA's early objectives was to promote an entrepreneurial spirit. Their successes can be found in the small businesses that have shot up in recent years, along with some who have flourished since DIMA began. Businesses like Marchand's Welding and Fabrication, Route 19 Electrical, Oceanview Drafting, Samson Plumbing and Heating, and Peter Covin Contracting have emerged strong and resilient, and help employ many people on Isle Madame.

Welcoming Those from Away

DIMA also set out to help residents see what we often took for granted: Isle Madame's beauty and culture. The tourism industry flourished over the last few decades, and many properties now welcome guests from across the province, country, and globe.

The Groundswell, originally apartments and a general store, now boasts live music and fine dining year-round, and offers kayak, bike, and canoe rentals. The Clairestone is a newly renovated gem found in the village of Arichat. Once a motel, the building has been transformed into a boutique hotel, surrounded by natural beauty. Guests are immersed in culture here and can find everything from "Things to do on Isle Madame" to "Claire's Mustard Pickles Recipe" on their website.

As smaller venues like Caper Cottages and It's a Shore Thing continue to open, Isle Madame's welcome mat grows larger. Sweeping vistas, look-offs, gardens, and provincial picnic parks offer much for visitors to see and do, including Pondville

Beach with its kilometre-long sandy beach, backed by gentle sand dunes, large lagoon, and salt marsh.

Several local businesses, some around for generations, support both tourism and small village life alike. Shamrock Store in D'Escousse is the epitome of what an old-fashioned general store should be – a place where you can buy hunting licenses and milk, Tylenol and fishing lures, bread and BINGO markers.

The Island Nest, Corner Bridge Store, and Shirley's Spudwagon (whose opening always heralds the beginning of summer) all welcome locals and visitors alike to come together and enjoy good food and good times. *La Goélette à Pépé* in Arichat blends both service and history with its rich coffee selection and love of history. The exquisite replica of their grandfather's schooner (the English translation of the café's name) that serves as its counter space showcases a passion for the past.

Telile

From the outset, communication was a priority for DIMA. Telile was the association's communication brainchild meant to unite a community as it forged a new path in the face of adversity. As Silver Donald Cameron, one of the founding members of DIMA, put it, "You can't participate if you don't know what is going on. You can't have real community, and you can't have real democracy, if you don't have communications. Telile's role is to make sure that people here do know what's going on and do know how they can participate. That's what Telile is about."

As they celebrate their 30th anniversary this year, Telile continues to focus on their mission statement: "To support and grow the economic, social, spiritual, and cultural development of our people through communications. We produce programming for use on our community channel and for exchange or sale to individuals, groups, or other organizations, including other broadcast outlets." There is no doubt that Telile has been one of DIMA's resounding successes.

Volunteers as the Backbone of Community

For a small island off an island in the eastern most part of Nova Scotia, Isle Madame has much to be proud of! The community's ability to find a path forward following the collapse of its principle economic driver should not be downplayed. Where other communities struggled to survive, Isle Madame didn't just survive, it flourished.

Much of the success can be attributed to our residents' fierce work ethic and community spirit. It is human nature for those with a shared vision to find opportunities to work together toward common goals, and community halls represent the beacon for individuals linked by a sense of commitment to their community. That community spirit spurs residents to devote countless hours, so the last vestige of

their small villages not only survive but flourish. Where schools and churches have all but disappeared from the landscape in most small villages, community halls have remained, in some cases for well over 50 years. These halls represent a testament to volunteers who found ways to keep them open during the most difficult times.

Community Halls

Little Anse - Samson's Cove Social Action Centre: Like most villages on the island, Little Anse once had its own school. This centre now stands where the school was located before it was destroyed by fire in the 1960s. Incorporated in 1967, their goal is to connect the community, while celebrating their Acadian heritage and ties to the fishing industry and the sea.

The Social Action Centre also houses a Lighthouse Interpretive Centre which helps fulfill their vision of preserving history to share with residents, distant relatives, and visitors. The Social Action Centre hosts parties, darts, dances, holiday events, and a vibrant *Party in the Cove* each summer, where residents and visitors alike come together for food, music, and family fun.

Volunteers at the Social Action Centre work together proudly, *“de notre volonté de donner un coup de main, de l'exposition d'interprétation du phare, à notre Fête dans les Anses, et tout ce qu'il y a entre les deux.”* (by lending a helping hand, from the lighthouse interpretation exhibition, to our *Party in the Cove* and everything in between.)

St. Joseph's Parish Hall: St. Joseph's Parish Hall in Petit de Grat was built in 1960 to help with parish expenses and community development. In the early years, the hall had a gardener, a hall and church janitor, and a parish secretary. Although the organisational structure has changed, and the work now done entirely by volunteers, the mandate of community gatherings has remained.

For over 60 years, St. Joseph's Parish Hall has been a gathering place for the community. Well-known local musicians played their first performances on the stage of the hall. Many social events bring people together to experience moments of joy. It also gathers the community in times of need – holding spaces for families after funerals or for benefits for those experiencing challenges. St. Joseph's Parish Hall has helped develop local leaders, served as an economic support, and has built lasting relationships. (When Alexa McDonough and Ed Broadbent came to honour Charlie Joe Gallant in 1982, they did so at the St Joseph's Parish Hall.) For many years it was, and it still is, a backbone of the community.

La Picasse, Centre Culturelle et Communautaire: *“La Picasse” est un nom symbolique pour le Centre qui sert d'ancrage à la survie du français et à la culture acadienne dans la communauté.* (“La Picasse” is a symbolic name for the Centre which serves as an **anchor** for the survival of French and Acadian culture in the community.)

La Picasse is located in Petit de Grat and opened their doors in 1997. *La Picasse* offers services, cultural, educational, touristic, and artistic programming for the Acadian community. This organization seeks to gather, engage, and express itself in hopes of facilitating the preservation and promotion of the French language and Acadian culture, all while respecting other languages and cultures. *La Picasse* promotes the flourishing of the French language and the vitality of the Acadian community, and also offers services, meeting spaces, banquets, and rental spaces (e.g., library, CSAP offices, and *l'Université Sainte-Anne* classes).

Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 150: The Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 150 originated in 1956 in Petit de Grat. The original building burned in 1964, and a new building was built in 1965 on the site where it stands today. Their mandate is to support veterans of the CAF, RCMP, and their families. Branch 150 hosts Veterans' Days each month as well as programs to support the well-being of veterans (e.g., picnic table builds, mending on the fly, etc.).

Branch 150, Isle Madame is very active in the community. Their hall hosts weddings, birthday parties, BINGO, cribbage leagues, Tarabish tournaments, pool competitions, and dances. Residents of the area and visitors alike can find themselves well fed during the Legion's monthly breakfast and fish fry. If music is your passion, the monthly jam session should not be missed.

Like many halls and community centres, the Branch 150, Isle Madame became a warming centre where residents can find some warmth during severe weather events and the like. With support from the Red Cross, the Legion is also on track to become an emergency centre able to accommodate residents for short periods should disaster require that they leave their homes.

Our Lady of Assumption Parish Hall: Like many parish halls, Our Lady of Assumption (OLA) Hall in Arichat serves to support the nearby church. The parish of *Notre Dame de L'Assomption/Our Lady of Assumption* was founded in the late 1700s and is the oldest parish in the diocese. The first church was built in 1786, replaced by the present church in 1837, making it the oldest Catholic church in Canada.

OLA parish also boasts a long-time commitment to education. Catholic schools in Arichat opened as early as 1824 for boys and 1836 for girls, with a private school in Lochside being established with support from the St. John's Anglican Church around the same time. So important were the church and education in the area, that St. Francis Xavier University opened in Arichat when it was founded in 1853, before moving to the Archdiocese of Antigonish in 1855.

Today, the OLA hall sits near the historic church, and continues to support both the church and the surrounding communities. When the Hearts of Isle Madame

Disability Society was founded several years ago, they began using the OLA Hall for many of its social events and fundraisers, as does the St. Anne's Community and Nursing Care Centre. Whether the hall is hosting AGMs, serving as a fundraising venue, or operating as a comforting station or polling location, it continues to fulfil its mandate of serving the church and community.

Isle Madame New Horizons Senior Citizens' Club: The Isle Madame New Horizon Senior Citizens Club was incorporated in October 1988. Their mandate is to promote good fellowship among our members and all senior citizens in the community. They started with 40 members meeting at the Acadiaville Community Centre. In 1990 the deed for the property was handed over to the club from the province, and the main building was constructed in 1994 with extensions added over the years. Today, membership exceeds 400.

The New Horizon's Club hosts 45 and cribbage card games, BINGO, jam sessions, and meals. They also host yoga classes and other programs delivered by the municipality. Because their mandate is to support seniors, they offer workshops related to the health and well-being of seniors. They promote exercise and mental health by offering games where the seniors can exercise and keep their minds sharp. In addition to being an EMO warming centre, the New Horizon's Club is also where local residents vote in municipal, provincial, and federal elections.

Janvrin's Island Community Centre: Janvrin's Island was deeded to John Janvrin in 1794. It is near rich fishing grounds and became a vibrant fishing post through the 19th century. By the late 1800s, residents set out to build a school to ensure their children could get an education without having to leave the area. The last of a series of one-room schoolhouses was built in 1965 but closed in 1979 as the population dwindled. The community bought the building, and it has continued to serve them well as their community centre.

The hall is the epitome of a community centre, in that all members of the community share a feeling of ownership for the facility. There is no cost to rent the hall, and it serves as the focal point for conversations among residents and between residents and those from outside who want to consult or report to the community.

Though in a period of rebuilding, this centre was the birthplace of "Janvrin's Fest", a community festival that started in 1989 as a one-day event with a parade of locals and fun events for families in the area. The festival grew over the next several years to include an outdoor dance, pancake breakfast, boat parade, and rowboat and log sawing contests. The festival served as a blueprint to other communities about how to grow or begin festivals in their own communities.

Acadiaville Community Centre: In the mid-1800s, a convent sat on the site currently occupied by the Acadiaville Community Centre, which then became a

school. Eventually taken over by the government, it burned in 1911. The community rebuilt, and education resumed on that site until 1953 when a new school was built nearby. The building was run by the Knights of Columbus in 1977 until the community took it over in 2007, renaming it the Acadiaville Community Centre.

Like most halls, they host card plays, benefits, dances, and community gatherings. If washer toss is your jam, this is the place to be. Acadiaville also houses the local Feed Nova Scotia Food Bank in its basement, cementing it as a place where the community can go in times of crisis. Their Spring Fling, which is celebrated around Easter, includes a breakfast for community members where they can get together and welcome spring after a long winter. Acadiaville also hosts an annual Motorcycle Poker Run, where enthusiasts can enjoy the beautiful scenery that Isle Madame has to offer, compete for some prizes, and enjoy a barbeque and refreshments with good company.

Rocky Bay Irish Club: This hall sits on a large piece of property that includes a ball field and basketball court near the site where an older hall once stood. Rocky Bay is known for its rich Irish heritage, and the “orange and green” can be found throughout the community. The Irish Club is the informal home of the Isle Madame Garden Club, and the official home of Anne’s Memorial Garden – a place for people to heal, relax, and reflect in the spirit of Celtic traditions that celebrate the Irish culture in the area.

The Irish Club is also home to the “Shamrock Players” – a group of actors and playwrights who perform at dinner theatres throughout the year. Wildly popular, they serve as significant fundraisers, and in the spirit of cooperation, the group donates their performances to various groups – and even other halls – either in this venue or another.

D’Escousse Civic Improvement Society: Like other halls, this building stands on the site of a former school. When a more modern school was built nearby, a group of residents formed the Civic Improvement Society, and took over the hall in the late 1950s. Volunteers have always been the lifeblood of halls, and D’Escousse was no exception. One volunteer, Susan Murphy, was so committed to the hall, that she refused to take vacation or even visit family for fear of not doing her civic duty at her beloved hall. One weekend in 1990, her neighbours convinced her to take a short vacation to visit family. The hall burned to the ground while she was gone!

Undaunted, the hall rebuilt, and the new building opened in 1992. It is the biggest hall on the island, and as such, can serve as a venue for much larger and diverse types of events. The hall hosts flea markets, yard sales, Celtic Colour concerts, fundraisers, and Memorial Events (e.g., the recent Tyson Bowen Benefit in aid of Real Canadian Recreation Society).

The D'Escousse Civic Improvement Society's commitment to youth and education can be seen through the D'Escousse Bursary Fund. Once the Society was on solid financial footing, they invested a significant amount of money into a Bursary Fund. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the fund was able to draw on the interest of that investment, and each graduate from the area ever since has been awarded up to \$1000 to help defray the costs of post-secondary study.

Community Halls and Chasing Aces

While the halls' contributions were significant, bridging the gap between communities remained a challenge. As churches and schools closed, villages clung to their community halls. It was clear something had to change.

And then there were aces.

Led by D'Escousse, all 10 halls found a way to harness the fundraising potential of a new lottery: Chase the Ace. Supported by volunteers from each organization, the event moved between halls. Music played. Bars were opened. Ticket sales soared. When one ace went, a new game began.

The goal was to raise funds for the halls, and by all accounts it was a resounding success. From 2016 to 2022, four rounds of Chase the Ace were completed, with prizes ranging from \$17,000 to \$158,000 for the lucky ace-pickers. Tens of thousands of dollars went to each hall, and donations to the both the St. Anne's Centre and Strait Richmond Hospital followed. The financial impact of this endeavour, though, was only one part of the story. "Coming together" proved to be invaluable.

While lucky winners found the ace, volunteers from each hall found themselves working with volunteers from other organizations. Though challenging at times, a shift occurred. Community groups stopped competing and found ways to work alongside, and sometimes with, each other. If the Legion's breakfast was on the first Sunday of the month, D'Escousse held theirs on the second. People talked, shared ideas, and found opportunities to share the load and the wealth.

The spirit of cooperation that the Chase the Ace brought the community has been profound. Though DIMA may not have had a direct hand in bringing the halls together, it's clear the approach of "together we are better" has had a lasting impact on how folks from Isle Madame see themselves – more than the sum of their parts.

A Testament to Isle Madame's Community Spirit

Building on unique strengths within community: Isle Madame's history is one of resilience in the face of adversity. When faced with the collapse of the fishery, their

principle economic driver, members of the community were quick to answer the call. They identified the strengths Isle Madame residents had from working in the fishery in this part of the world. A fierce work ethic, a willingness to take on big projects, a sense of community, an entrepreneurial spirit. Each of these attributes have been harnessed to ensure the community would live on and not just survive but prosper.

Including a high degree of participation in community projects: Community halls are the lifeblood of each small village, and the sheer volume of volunteers it takes to keep each of them afloat is extraordinary. Even more impressive is the range and variety of these projects. While the halls serve as an icon in the community, they rally volunteers in other organizations that draw additional volunteers that make up the lifeblood of a vibrant community.

The St. John Centre for the Arts is currently competing in the *#nextgreatsave* event to continue the restoration efforts as it transforms itself from a church to centre for the arts. The Angel's Fund Society is made up of volunteers whose mandate is to support patients who face life altering illnesses. Sports teams, ATV Riders Associations, various yacht clubs, all supported by volunteers, and each of those finds a home for themselves in the community halls across the island where they can meet and fundraise.

Inclusive and encouraging diversity: History and culture matter on Isle Madame, but diversity is not just welcome, it is supported. Isle Madame sponsored a family from Vietnam in the 1970s and Syrians following the humanitarian crisis over the last decade. Their commitment to adults with disabilities is significant as well. One of DIMA's first community economic development projects was meant to recognize the respect residents have always had for those with disabilities with an emphasis on keeping them in their community. The Isle Madame Small Options Society and the Hearts of Isle Madame are a testament to what inclusivity can mean in a small area.

Promoting community pride: If you want to see what community pride looks like, spend a summer on Isle Madame. Festivals that celebrate culture and pride of place fill up social calendars through July and August. None of these can happen without an army of volunteers who do so to remember our past and celebrate our future. As we transition to a community that is more than a collection of small villages, we can finally see ourselves as others have seen us: breathtaking, rugged, and peaceful.

That's not to say that each moment is quiet and serene. If you find yourself at a Red Caps game in Petit de Grat on a warm Sunday afternoon, prepare yourself for fierce competition as teams vie for the coveted Richmond Amateur Baseball Association's top prize. The Red Caps have been playing ball in Petit de Grat since 1947 and won the National Oldtimers Championships in 2022! Spectators know that Roy Boudreau and Barry Marchand smile down proudly as each batter crosses the plate.

Creating an enduring community: Where schools, churches, post offices, fish plants, and ship building operations closed, community halls have found a way for the island to remain vibrant and viable. We share our joyous and saddest moments together in these buildings, and the impact that has on our sense of community cannot be overstated. We are more together than we were apart, and the halls run by these organizations allow that sense of community, its very spirit, to live on.

Lundrigan Lane Light Up

A story about Isle Madame's community spirit would not be complete without mention of Lundrigan Lane's Christmas Light Up. What started as a playful competition between neighbours around who could put up the most vivid light display turned into an annual event that draws residents and visitors from across the county and beyond. As more blow moulds arrived, extension cords added, and the footprint increased, Lundrigan Lane now transforms itself each winter from a lazy cul-de-sac to a Christmas light show that could double as an airport landing strip.

As the buzz grew about the Lane's largesse, more and more people travelled to see the display. Those responsible for the lights – who describe themselves as a just a bunch of neighbours with an unhealthy amount of Christmas spirit(s) – decided that there was a fundraising opportunity in their midst. They slapped up a donation box and collected funds for the Hearts of Isle Madame Disability Society, raising more than \$1,400. A different group has received the benefits each year, including the Recreation Fund for Residents of St. Anne's Centre, Strait Richmond Healthcare Foundation, and Stella Maris Parish's Social Justice Fund. This year, the Angel Fund received more than \$8,700 from the Lundrigan Lane gang.

The Lights are a microcosm of what the halls, and the island as a whole, have come to be about: family and friends coming together to support other organizations in the area who in turn support those in need, while at the same time enjoying all that living on our small island has to offer.

