

## **WITNESS STATEMENT OF VICKY CHEN**

### My Background

I am a physician residing in Burlington, Ontario. I work as a full-time pathologist at St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton with a joint appointment as a professor of Department of Pathology and Molecular Medicine at McMaster University. I became a Catholic some 45 years ago in Hong Kong and have been actively involved with the various musical, educational and spiritual activities of my parish Holy Rosary in Burlington since 1979. Out of a desire to learn more about my faith I have been studying for the Master of Theological Studies as a part-time student at St. Michael's College in Toronto since 1998. In 2004, I enrolled concurrently for the Diploma of Spiritual Direction offered by the Jesuits' Regis College. The Jesuits have been directly or indirectly giving me guidance since 2001.

### My Connection with the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph and My Concerns

My first exposure to this beautiful land was when I attended a weekend musicians' retreat in the early 90s organized for the Diocese of Hamilton by the Director of Liturgy Fr. Murray Kroetsch.

However, it was during a three-day Eastern Insight Meditation retreat in 1999 that I truly began to appreciate the sacredness of this green space. The retreat was organized by the Mindfulness Meditation Society and led by a Vipassana teacher Shinzen Young.

Apart from the twice a day guided meditation and once a day Dharma talk given by Shinzen, the days were spent in absolute silence broken only by the occasional lingering sound from the singing bowl. It was in the practice of the Vipassana, or Insight Meditation, also called Mindfulness Meditation, that I became acutely aware of the beauty and centering effect of silence. Not only was I able to be mindful of my bodily sensations, my breathing, but also my inner feelings. I became more aware also of external stimuli. The chirping of birds, buzzing of bees, rustling of leaves, the soft breezes, the fresh smell of the earth, the shimmering lights dancing through the tree tops all became so much more rich and clear to me. At the end of the retreat, we were invited to experience the nearby Aboriginal Sweat Lodge. Yes, the Ignatius Jesuit Centre is a sacred space. It has a psychic-spiritual dimension that transcends the boundary of religions.

I have returned to this land to make several 8-day retreats over the past 4-5 years. One of them was a directed group retreat. There I met people of different walks of Christian faith, with different professions and coming from as far as Asia. I was given not only the opportunity to pray in a quiet space but the privilege of being close to nature without interference from the surrounding hectic city. The memory of this sacred ground often brings me instant consolation. In silence I await the dawn, I watch the sunrise over the morning mist across the field, I walk the dew-covered grass, and I listen to the awakening of the birds. In silence, I am transfixed by the ever-changing scene of sunset, against the statue of Ignatius by the bell tower of the chapel. In silence I discern in my heart the false-self from my authentic self, and I am fully present to the Spirit of the land.

My heart blossoms with total gratitude even as I am writing this letter. I am thankful to the Jesuits who have maintained the grounds since 1913 for people from all walks of life and from anywhere in the world to come to pause and ponder. The location is so accessible yet so quiet. Zoning an adjacent area of 155,000 square feet for commercial purposes will no doubt destroy that tranquility and take away the freedom for all those who desire to make use of this natural Cathedral of God for reflection, recovery and rejuvenation. These are busy people, productive citizens with very active lives. From the retreat they return to work for their community with renewed vigour and spirit. I can speak with conviction because I am one of them. Noise pollution of this space is toxic and destructive to the spirit. Any contamination of this space is equivalent to taking away our right to 'respire' clean air and be a better citizen somewhere in this world.

Along the same vein, I am aware that Rev. Philip Shano as the director of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph at the time has signed a mitigation agreement with 6 & 7 Developments Ltd. dated December 6<sup>th</sup> 2001. This document drafted by Goodmans has indicated certain structural proposals which may address the concerns of physical impact on the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph. I would like to draw your attention to some details here.

The document has stated that Craig Chamberlain, the land manager of the Jesuit Centre has made it clear that it is very difficult to know whether lower light poles will be sufficient to prevent the effect of light coming through. I can assure you that even the row

of 6' white spruces will not do it. How do I know? I live in a residential area the equivalent of several large city blocks from a recently developed Power Centre initially with movie theatres and a 24 hour large grocery store. Later around them are constructed more large stores for furniture, kitchen and linen supply, office supply, chain bookstore and many medium and smaller stores and restaurants. I can see the light glowing over the sky across a fairly large patch of conservation green space.

As for the noise level, I am amazed that not using loud speaker can be considered respectful of the neighbourhood. It is outrageous and unacceptable! We are here talking about the expected normal noise level generated by mere traffic and people. In a quiet environment, noise travels far. You will know if you have been to camping in northern Ontario. I can hear conversations from other campsites across the lake. People coming to the Jesuit Centre seek quietude and nature, just like those camping in the wilderness. If you have not experienced this, then I ask you to remember the noise level that you can tolerate while trying to sleep. The noise level generated from an adjacent commercial zone is incompatible with the life of a spiritual centre.

Finally, the construction of big box businesses at the junction of Woodlawn and Woolwich cannot but cause traffic jam en route to north highway 6. The entrance to the Jesuit Centre is on north highway 6. There is no bypass there. I know the effect of this type of zoning. I find myself driving home changing from a more direct route bypassing the Power Centre. I have seen that road expanded and modified twice with turning lanes and lights in an attempt to improve the traffic. I have also witnessed the effect that Wal-

Mart has on the traffic of Upper James in Hamilton and Hwy 5 near Appleby in Burlington.

It is not possible for Rev. Shano and the community to anticipate the fine details of effect on having a strip of commercial zone adjacent to the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph. They have not lived through it. I have, and I am putting in writing that this signed document drafted by Goodmans cannot represent the opinions from the retreatants.

Furthermore, I often walk the nearby cemeteries of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre during my retreats or when I visit Guelph. Cemeteries are quiet and dignified places where the dead are laid to rest in peace. Walking a cemetery mindfully helps me link the present with the past and allows me to see the future in a different, and I believe, more proper perspective. No matter what age or state of health we are in, after today all of us are one day closer to that invariable end. So I have walked both the Woodlawn and the Marymount cemeteries a few times. I personally prefer Marymount because it is further away from the proximity of streets and stores. It is quieter and easier to sense the true Presence and to communicate with those who passed before us. The Jesuit cemetery is very special. I am connected to it in a dear and personal way. I have some teachers and friends buried there. Each time when I visit I am intensively aware of their presence, I remember their examples in life and I converse with them individually. We Christians believe in the communion of saints. There is no other place that I feel more connected with those gone before us than the solemn grounds of cemeteries. Come to think of it, I

have walked many cemeteries in different parts of the world since my teenage years, from small churchyards to the large military cemetery in Normandy, France. I do not recall too many of them situated right next to departmental stores, not even those in the overcrowded island of Hong Kong.

My reasons for objection to the re-zoning by-law

Here I will try to look at facts in a less subjective manner. I think it will be a bad move for the city to allow re-zoning of the northwest junction of Woodlawn Road and Woolwich Street for commercial purposes.

Firstly the location of Wal-Mart or any other big box business at the junction of the current highway 6 and what used to be the old highway 6, i.e. the north-south bound city artery, will further strain on the current heavily traveled Woodlawn Road and create a bottleneck effect for cars getting out of Guelph from the north end. When I talk to my friends and colleagues in the Hamilton Burlington region about this, a common concern is that of potential traffic jam when travelling to the cottage country. 25 years ago, highway 6 was a scenic route going through the quaint university town of Guelph. With urban development, the Hanon Highway was created. It became the new highway 6 parallel to the old one. We know the effect of Wal-Mart. We have one in Hamilton, and one in Burlington. I try to avoid driving through that segment of Upper James in Hamilton when I go to Lake Erie. So, locating any big box business at this junction will put the effort of your city's highway 6-bypass back to square one.

Secondly I believe that the solemnity of the cemeteries deserves our respect. May I suggest that the dead and their surviving loved ones also have human rights? Then some of you may say there are already a few stores nearby, so what's the big deal? Well, I will give you an analogy. Physicians do not wait for a small cancer to spread before trying to cut it out or at least contain it. So having some existing industrial stores such as Canadian Tire over the other corner does not justify putting in other bigger and busier business boxes.

Thirdly, along with technological advances and commercialism, our new understanding of cosmology and the vision of fostering an environmentally sustainable way of living will become the driving force behind our many communal decision-making processes for generations to come. The City of Guelph should be proud of itself for being a pioneer and leader in taking many initiatives in dealing with environmental issues. Though the north of Guelph does not seem to fall into the zones of the Ontario Greenbelt Plan, it is in the interest of any city planning that some protection of green space be kept for the quality of life of citizens.

Finally, you need an outsider like me to tell you that you have a national treasure and historic landmark right here in your backyard. I say this for two reasons.

The first reason is the Jesuit spirituality. For 500 years the Jesuits have carried the charism of their founder, Ignatius of Loyola, and guided numerous religious and lay people through the Ignatian spiritual exercises. Both Catholic and non-Catholic

Christians have reaped the benefit of this process. In the mid-1970s, the Jesuits here in Guelph pioneered the training of religious and lay spiritual directors for the spiritual exercises. In their accurate reading of the signs of modern time, the Jesuits have adapted the spiritual exercises to the changing needs of our society, viewing community as a corporate person, and incorporating ecological issues into spiritual reflection. The Society of Jesus truly exemplifies for us a sound incarnation of religious life in the world. I am grateful to be an incidental recipient of such enlightenment. It has changed my way of seeing the events of daily life. I am able to bear the progressive increase in workload with endurance, to face the lack of funding with creativity, and to live with the low general morale of chronic staff shortage with a new strength that simply could not have been acquired through money, power or even knowledge. I am no longer afraid to stand up and speak for what I believe is true. Consumerism is a stark contrast to the spirituality of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre. What big departmental stores stand for is ongoing bargains, buying and selling. They are symptoms of permanent dissatisfaction of modern day humans. What Jesuits teach is to work towards getting away from the slavery of attachments to progressive spiritual freedom, a freedom that allows us to follow a meaningful path, in the Christian context, to follow the will of God. With age comes wisdom, most of the time. Those of you who are over 50 here will agree that there has been a gradual shift of societal value towards buying and disposing goods. Unlike opium or heroin, the effect of consumerism is subtle, disguised and long-lasting. This attitude will affect the way our younger generations see things. Money becomes the only thing that speaks. Bigger is better. Soon you and I, the current wave of older generation will be just as disposable. Much more than the actual noise and activities, there is something very

incongruous about putting a big business box next to the Jesuit Retreat Centre. It is like allowing a casino to be opened adjacent to a university, or putting a stove in your sitting room.

The second reason that makes the Ignatius Jesuit Centre and its surroundings a unique treasure is the natural habitat, the trails and the wild lives. Silence is maintained on this property. For beyond Jesuit spirituality, beyond Catholicism, beyond any institutional religion is the spirituality through Nature. In Nature we encounter its Creator. Nature nurtures without discrimination. Anyone willing to follow its rhythm will be renewed. The Ignatius Jesuit Centre is not just a green zone, it is a patch of sacred oasis for nurturing of human spirit and for cultivating the mentality and practice of environmentally sustainable communal living. It is a landmark of hope. It serves as a symbol of that which is natural but vulnerable, of that which money cannot buy but is free for all, and of the invisible spiritual domain that governs all that is seen and tangible of the whole human being. It doesn't take much to see what big business stores and all its potential activities can do if they are allowed to move near this vicinity. The ecology of the oasis that has been there for years and for so many will be disturbed irreversibly.

For these two reasons, I consider the Ignatius Jesuit Centre and its surroundings which quietly provide the sacred space for many people who come from afar year after year, a national treasure and historic landmark. We have responsibility to protect it as we did with other national treasures and historic landmarks.

I therefore urge you to look beyond financial gain but to strive for the non-materialistic value, to look beyond the benefit of your city alone but to consider the common good of the 'global village' and finally to look beyond the present, but from the past into the future. I have confidence that you will make the decision with a listening-heart and a clear vision deserving of the trust from your people.