

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SARA-JO PIPHER

I am connected with Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Toronto but, because I cannot get into Toronto every week to go to church, I often seek communion elsewhere and closer to home.

The Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph (IJCG) is a big part of that experience. While being in a community of people is important to me, being in solitude and in nature is equally important to the way I live my spirituality. One of the ways I truly connect with my innermost being is by being on the land, in nature. This experience is greatly enhanced by an environment that is quiet and that is respectful of the earth and of the space – literal and metaphorical space – required for emotional, mental, physical and spiritual growth.

My background involves training in expressive arts therapy (ISIS, Toronto). While I do not currently work in this field for my income, I have a profound appreciation for the way space, quiet, and the natural world can bring healing and growth. I have seen this in myself, in friends, and in clients with whom I have worked as part of my training. Literal places of quiet spaciousness (not just emotional spaciousness) help so much with inner processes. When these places of quiet are in nature, they offer profound opportunities for healing and insight.

As far as my own journey goes, the experience of wanting to be with and on the land, close to the earth, was the impetus for my taking a leave of absence from my job at the

University of Toronto to spend some time working and living with the Ignatius Farm Community at the IJCG (1999-2001). Following that time, I also chose to be a full-time volunteer with the Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) at the IJCG in August 2003.

When I worked with the CSA, I worked 11-12 hours/day, 5 days/week with the other interns. I witnessed the beauty of the land in a different way than I had before – seeing how much work, care, attention, and sweat it took to grow vegetables organically – without chemicals. I saw families with children come to the farm weekly for an experience of “the farm” – an experience in nature, an experience of a small-scale, local, organic farm – to pick their own vegetables or flowers. Several people cycled each week to the farm to pick up their vegetables. When I moved to Guelph, I became a CSA member and was one of the ones cycling to the farm every other week to pick up my vegetables. The CSA has been growing the past few years. However, if a major commercial development came in almost next door, the noise of activity of this shopping complex would definitely impact the working environment for the interns, and the environment for the 100+ CSA members who come to the farm weekly, seeking to have a peaceful, learning experience of the farm. It would definitely impact the ability of people to cycle to the farm with ease. It is busy enough on Woolwich while on a bike with Canadian Tire there and cars and trucks moving quickly along Woolwich Road to turn left along Woodlawn Road. I cannot fathom how traffic will increase with people driving to a major commercial development almost next door to the IJCG.

I myself do not own a car and, while I can occasionally borrow my partner's, he requires the use of his vehicle for his livelihood. The IJCG is within easy cycling and reasonable walking distance from downtown Guelph. When I moved to Guelph 2½ years ago from Toronto, one of my criteria of a home location was to be within cycling and/or walking distance of the IJCG. There was no place of any significant quiet and nature that I could get to in Toronto in the same way. The IJCG is truly unique in this regard. Within a fifteen-minute cycle of downtown Guelph, I can be on over 600 acres of beautiful wetland, woodland, and certified organic farmland where I have seen deer, coyote, rabbit, many varieties of birds, and turtles, where I can walk and meditate in nature.

I often go to the IJCG now for quiet time in the natural world – something I choose regularly as part of my spiritual practice, as one of my ways of meditating. If I am troubled by something or am trying to work something out for myself, I often go into nature and, because the IJCG is the most accessible option, I often go there. In my Christian meditation practice, quiet and “slowing things down” is essential for becoming aware of what is going on in the inside, for having “eyes to see” what is going on beneath the surface of the motion of my life. In my worldview, if we as a people run faster and faster, consuming more and more, paying less and less attention to our emotions and what's provoking them, we will lose our ability to live and act out of awareness, out of self-knowledge, out of compassion. Places and spaces that embody and foster quiet, that respect the natural world must be protected. This is not just about the ability to go within a particular boundary or property line; it's about protecting the *spirit* of that place.

Auditory and visual intrusions from around the IJCG lands will greatly impede my ability to really focus and meditate quietly and with ease. I have read the December 6, 2001 letter to Philip Shano, S.J. of the IJCG. While the Jesuits may have found this agreement with 6 & 7 Developments acceptable, I cannot as someone who regularly walks and meditates on the IJCG land. Twenty-two shade trees and the absence of loud-speakers say nothing about trucks coming and going (enough to supply a 155,000 sq. ft. shopping complex!), say nothing about the constant motion of traffic and people, say nothing about inevitable car stereos blaring, say nothing about the visual intrusions of all this activity.

I have made several retreats at the hermitages on the property. I know what it's like to slow down because of intentionally "coming away" from hustle and bustle. I walk more slowly; I am much more sensitive to what is around me – my senses are heightened; my life falls to a deeper place where I am more inward, contemplative, thoughtful. The quiet and spacious nature facilitates that. It would be *much* harder to come to that place with a major commercial development almost next door. Walking is always a big part of my retreat experience. This walking takes me through diverse wetland, woodland, farmland and along trails that are quite near the south side of the IJCG property. In southern Ontario, we have few enough places of wilderness where we can wander and not hear traffic and other noise pollution, and sight intrusions of concrete and human-made things. To place a major commercial development almost next door to these lands would impact many facets of this land that is so unique and would impede my retreat experience, my meditation and prayer experience, and my ability to wander freely on the land in quiet.