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The Magic of Carnival

My earliest memory of the Vernon Winter Carnival took place on a bitterly cold winter evening. Bundled in our coats and mittens, hot chocolate in hands, my family and I walked into Polson Park. It was dark and we could see our breath as we exhaled. We were there to see the hot air balloon glow. Standing at the base of these massive balloons, looking up at their colorful fabrics glowing against the night sky was a vision I haven't forgotten. My mom and I each picked our favorite one. Mine was always the rainbow balloon. This became our tradition throughout the years, to pick our favorite balloon. In the following days, each time we were out we would scan the sky looking for our favorite balloon flying overhead. After wandering through the park we found our way to the ice castle. I recall turning the corner and being starstruck by the view of the queen and princess Silver Star. I begged my mom to wait in line to take pictures with them. My 4 year old self came prepared, and wore my plastic Cinderella tiara so I could match the royalty. Like many girls my age, this was the highlight of the carnival. The Silver Star queen and princess always made the carnival even more enchanting.

In the 62 years that our beloved carnival has been around, it has evolved and grown. However, it has always kept its core goal of creating magic, and fun for families. From the Snow Sculpture competition to the Chili Cook-off, each staple activity is a family favorite. Of course, the event known to kick off the week of festivities is the parade. This is when town businesses and organizations show off the floats that they feel represent them, or our community, the best. My friends and I would sneak through the crowds of people to get up to the front. This would ensure that we would get a prime spot to catch the candy being tossed from the passing floats. Seeing all the dancers, singers, and performers throughout the parade was entertaining. So many volunteers, and individuals assembled together to create a wonderful performance.

The true magic of the Vernon Winter Carnival is in its ability to truly build community connections. While the events are fun and a welcome escape during long cold winters, the long lasting impact of this tradition is that it gives roots and connections to residents of Vernon. The significant number of volunteers and donors are a testament to this. The carnival brings out people of all ages to take part in events, to participate in planning, setting up and fundraising. It is this kind of community involvement that truly creates connection and a sense of belonging for individuals. This sense of community is what has inspired generation after generation of Vernon

families to keep the carnival going. It is a tradition that brings people together, which is something we all need now more than ever.

My years growing up admiring the Vernon Winter Carnival princesses inspired me to reach a similar goal myself. Last year I decided to compete in the Miss Teenage Canada pageant. A pageant is something that would not have even been on my radar had I not seen these princesses achieve their goals year after year before me. I was successful in winning the regional title of Miss Teenage Okanagan, and was invited to be a national delegate in Toronto. This past year I have been honored to volunteer and fundraise throughout Vernon and the Okanagan to support local charities. I have built relationships with local businesses, and have been overwhelmed with the support I received from this amazing community. I learned that the journey to achieve a goal like this is not taken alone. It requires a community. This is the foundation that the Vernon Winter Carnival has built. It has inspired me to become an active participant in our community, and the residents of Vernon to come together and support each other through good times and bad. This year, I will be wearing my crown and sash while I participate at the O'Keefe Ranch Blue Light Special event. It feels incredible to be the one taking photos with little ones who are just beginning to experience the magic of the Vernon Winter Carnival.

The impact of this event reaches far beyond a couple of weeks in February. It creates connections and social responsibility for current residents, and generations to come. I am grateful for the impact the carnival has had in my life, and look forward to being able to give back to this wonderful community it has created. This legacy of generosity is the true magic of the Vernon Winter Carnival.