

# Lambden's *Legacy*

Andrew Lambden's name is well known in Guelph as a businessman, homebuilder, community booster and philanthropist. This is a story about the man, what makes him tick and why. And how, after 25 years in the homebuilding business, the development of NiMa Trails at Guelph Lake, which he will finally see take shape this year, is the one closest to his heart — his legacy project



**WHEN WE FIRST MEET** at his spacious downtown Guelph loft, Andrew Lambden is laid up. His leg is in a cast. His crutches are propped up in a corner, unused, since he prefers to hop. He is not comfortable with this scene; he is a man who likes to move.

“Biking mishap,” he says. Lambden says he and eight other men — all around 50, all prosperous, all thrill-seeking — were on their annual summer biking trip when he was injured while on the escarpment above Georgian Bay. Over the past 16 years, the friends have shred trails in places such as New Zealand, the Rockies and Italy. Each year there’s a new trail to explore.

Active, fit and limber, with a body closer to that of an 18-year-old than one about to turn 50, the founder of Guelph’s Terra View Homes has never had a gym membership. His fitness comes from “being outside, working and playing on the land and water.” Lambden fits all the clichés of a successful entrepreneur. He “took the bull by the horns” at a very young age, starting his first private enterprise, tapping trees for maple syrup, at age eight. He “lives life to the fullest” as he is on the road half the year, with a home in Hawaii. And “the world is his oyster,” as when he’s not biking, he’s on his sailboat named “Godspeed.” And so on.

All true, yet no one is ever that simple and Lambden certainly isn’t. For one, he is more comfortable with a beer at the Albion Hotel than a martini at Toronto’s Scaramouche. He’d ride a bike any day over driving a Lexus — in fact, he drives pickup trucks. Jeans and a fleece are his uniform. He has the same gang of pals he had when he was a kid. And he gets just as excited sharing his oyster than hoarding it all for himself. Lambden wants others to have the same fun he gets to have; he is equally interested in helping you find a way to uncover your own adventures as he is about recounting his own.

No matter the high life, no one is immune to life’s hardships, and Lambden and his



family had their own when tragedy struck on a February day in 2007. Nicholas Lambden, the 10-year-old boy who died after being hit in the head with a stray hockey puck at the rink in St. George’s Park, was Lambden’s son. Nine years later, Nick’s legacy lives on in many foundations, as well as the Market Square skating rink, to which the Lambdens and friends donated \$400,000. This May, Nick would have turned 20.

A mover, Lambden is also a maker. Deeply connected to the natural elements where he plays, the land is also where Lambden makes his living. Terra View Homes, which this year celebrates 25 years in business, garners builder awards nearly every year, many for sustainable and environmental initiatives. Terra View helped pioneer green homebuilding practices across Canada, building exclusively Energy Star homes since 2006, including the construction of Guelph’s Rotary Green Dream home, one of the first Platinum LEED certified homes in Canada at its time.

He’s equally concerned with the people for whom he builds. “We never build a garage that comes out further than a front porch. Neighbours need to know each other.”

Some developments, or villages in the

city, as Lambden likes to put it, include a community centre owned by homeowners. “This works as a catalyst to bring people out of their homes to interact with each other. A heart that creates a sense of belonging,” he says, stressing the necessity for diversity in the built form as well as in the population. “I don’t believe in building single-demographic developments. It isn’t right. Older people need babies; babies need older people.”

For Lambden, strong relationships are behind everything. His team of just under 20 staff, with longtime partner David Brix as designer, have mostly all been with the company since the early years, each playing a part in every step, from land acquisition to interior design. “We keep it all in-house — like a family,” which is how business all began for Lambden.

The name Terra View is a nod to his dad, David Lambden, a surveying consultant and former professor who dealt with land and water regulations. “Terra Net” is the name for a land registry database system that his dad helped create.

Andrew Lambden, born in California, spent his early childhood in New Zealand and Australia — hence his slight accent today — before moving to a country

property just outside Rockwood. In 1982, the Lambdens moved to a farmhouse near Guelph Lake, owned by the Grand River Conservation Authority, where his mother still lives today.

“I got my education around the dining room table when dad lectured. He spoke, we listened.” Lambden is, in fact, one credit short of a high school diploma as he was already a successful businessman at 17. The “we” is his mother, Elizabeth, a former obstetric nurse at Guelph General Hospital, plus his two older brothers, Rob and James. The rural boys, with time on their hands and lots of land to explore, started up a business selling firewood when the maple syrup venture didn’t profit. “We drank most of our product.”

The lads had forestry students to mark dead and dying trees in surrounding wood lots and they chopped and sold firewood, “delivered by tractors ’cause we were too young for driver’s licences.”

Andrew Lambden could spot opportunity anywhere. By the time he was 17, he had a dozen high school pals installing swimming

pools and patios for him at Aqua Scape, his first company. The young Lambden got very good at concrete finishing, charging \$750 for a pool bottom. “My personal best was three in one day.”

You can imagine the kind of money this represented for a high school boy, so the brothers needed to find somewhere to put it. They started buying and selling real estate. Lambden purchased his first property at just 18. Soon after, he and school pal Paul Gazzola launched a lending and brokerage company, incorporating in the late ’80s, still run by Gazzola today.

“This is where I really learned about money,” Lambden says.

But sitting around a filing cabinet just didn’t excite this mover. He needed to make things. In 1991, he took over a bunch of building lots from another pal and Terra View Homes was born. Seven years later, Terra View moved from building houses to developing land. “We didn’t want to just build structures, we wanted to influence the land plan. We want to do things right, ecologically, to make things beautiful and

design for wellness in the community.” This quest has landed Lambden on 40-some boards and committees over the course of his career. “Some weeks, it took up about half my work week.”

Twenty-five years have passed and thousands of homes have been built, with the most recent being Riverview at York and Wyndham streets. This spring, Guelph will see the development of two significant Terra View properties: Hart’s Village in the south end and NiMa Trails in the north, near Guelph Lake, just down the shore from where Lambden grew up. Both projects are dear to the builder’s heart, and both an absolute heartache to realize.

For Hart’s Village, it was the efforts to preserve the old farmhouse and barn. The barn couldn’t be saved, so Terra View had it carefully disassembled by Mennonite workers who have experience taking down heritage barns so that the materials could be reused in the redevelopment. Terra View even established new nesting structures for 32 barn swallows that



NiMa Trails, an upcoming development on 14.7 hectares near Guelph Lake, is only supporting one structure so far: a red-roofed barn. Terra View Homes has been using the building for community events.



had lived in the old Hart barn. This was readied two years ago, prior to spring so that the swallows had a home to return to after their long flight north.

NiMa, the property that is closest to what might be called Lambden’s legacy project, took nine years before it received all the necessary approvals. “Ni” stands for Nicholas and “Ma” for Madison, Andrew’s 22-year-old daughter.

No other project has been so difficult, so personal, so costly or required such physical labour as NiMa. After seemingly endless paperwork and hundreds of meetings in addition to 10 reapplications at the city, plus an appeal last summer to the Ontario Municipal Board, the land is finally



This is the orange Kubota tractor Andrew Lambden taught his son, Nick, to drive. The two of them pulled thousands of stones and weeds out of the earth before it was ready to seed.

shovel-ready.

The land for NiMa Trails at Guelph Lake lies where Woodlawn Road East ends. Beyond are sports fields, then 20 kilometres of zigzagging biking and hiking trails, then the blue of the lake. An ideal location, really: Highway 24 access, edge of town, yet within the city limits and all this nature. A new sign, “Coming 2016,” advertising the upcoming 334 units, sits next to a huge solar panel array. Terra View will be striving for the multi-residential community to be “net-zero ready,” with the capacity for each home to generate as much energy as it consumes. The goal is to make NiMa Trails one of the most environmentally sustainable developments in Canada.

So far, in 10 years, the 14.7-hectare property supports only one structure: a modern wood-clad barn with a red metal roof that Terra View has been using for community events. Once open, there will be a clubhouse. “The residents will determine what happens here — they will own it. A daycare, a gym, a dance school? This is social engineering,” says Lambden. “Everybody has to partake in a common investment in order for a community to flourish.”

In order to understand why this property near the lake matters so much to Lambden, and what’s been happening with it while awaiting approvals, he tells me he has to take me to the land. And when we meet to chat a month after our first meeting, Lambden has a surprise.

Lambden is out in the middle of a plowed wheat field sticking a key into the base of an enormous vertical lift. Whatever for, I wondered, until he points to the small, gated platform at the end of the long arm. “Surprise!” he says. “Hop on board.” Turns out, Lambden brought the Skyjack lift just for today, borrowed from his friends at Linamar — another example of the benefits of good relationships.

“You need some perspective,” Lambden says, jolting the lift skyward and launching into a story of nine years working the land. “This place was completely disregarded. There was just so much garbage and yard waste, from planters to sheds to old cars; things that are hard to dispose of. Essentially, 30 years of disregard.”

Lambden and Brix, plus Nick and Maddy and their friends, were personally picking up all the garbage but were soon overwhelmed. What began as an individual

effort spiralled into a huge co-operative effort between neighbours and private industry, eventually rolling into the Clean and Green Community Cleanup, which today is one of the City of Guelph’s largest annual cleanup events. Last year, more than 4,000 kilograms of garbage was removed from other neighbourhoods, green spaces and community parks by more than 850 volunteers.

“That’s Nick’s tractor,” Lambden says, pointing to the bright orange Kubota sitting out in the field. It looks like a tiny Tonka toy from the high vantage point of the Skyjack. “I taught Nick how to drive it. Together, we hauled out thousands and thousands of stones from the earth.” Plus, no end of invasive species including hundreds of buckthorns, which Terra View replaced with 1,500 native species, from dogwood to maples.

Lambden points to a tree nursery beside the barn. “Homeowners can come pick out a tree for their property when they move in. They need to make it their own. And over there will be the space for organic community gardens.” There are the piles of rocks, too, all to be reused in landscaping once the homes are constructed. “We’ve tried as much as humanly possible to take advantage of the existing resources.”

The summer and fall of 2006 was all about working and playing on the land for Lambden, daughter Madison and son Nick. In a few months, Nick would be gone. “We have great memories here. There were so many gifts the land brought.”

In the spring, Lambden returned as often as he could to pick rocks to help deal with his grief. “It was the physical act that helped.”

His business partner Brix says the Guelph Lake land has served as Lambden’s therapy since the loss of Nicholas. “He lost himself in working this 38 acres of land instead of losing himself in the sorrow of the family’s tragic loss,” Brix says. “His connection to every square foot of this land is intimate down to a small bridge over a creek, which he and Nicholas built the summer before his death.”

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It took nine years before the NiMa Trails property received all of the necessary approvals for development.

Even the boys who had been playing hockey with Nick that day in the park pitched in picking rocks, working alongside Lambden and helping operate the orange tractor.

It took two more years clearing the land before the soil was ready to seed. Back at Lambden's loft, he had shown me a small vase with shafts of wheat. "The first crop." He had made me feel it. Now I understand the significance.

The land has also brought other gifts. The Grand River Conservation Authority had helped with a rehabilitation plan for NiMa and that organization will receive a portion of the proceeds from home sales to put toward a new Guelph Lake Nature Centre.

While in waiting, the property also supplied more than 30 families who access the Guelph Food Bank with organic produce. Backyard Bounty, an urban farming social enterprise, saw the need to provide something other than canned goods, but this required a good chunk of

organic property to grow it. A section of Lambden's hay field fit the bill.

Lambden raises the lift higher into the sky, bringing the white shoreline of Guelph Lake into view. "In front will be a 65-unit multi-residential building. The top units will be able to see the lake!" There is a broad community-use trail that will wind around the stormwater management pond past single-dwelling homes, through an aspen forest to the Guelph Lake trails.

Lambden points to a green hill with cut stones placed in a crescent shape curving around a grass stage. "When we got the land, there was a natural depression at that spot from sand mining used for mortar to build buildings downtown." Georgia Simms, a Guelph dancer and friend to Lambden, had inspired the creation of an outdoor amphitheatre. Another stimulus for people to gather. Referred to as the Guelph Sand Pit Outdoor Theatre, the performance space has already seen community use with dance and music performances and weddings.

No performance will ever sound the same

as the one Lambden experienced in 2008 around the time the outdoor theatre was completed. He says the bulldozer operator called him at 5 a.m. on his cellphone. "He told me I had to come out to the land right away. That it was important." Lambden said when he arrived the man was on the stage with his harmonica as the sun came up. "He played 'Amazing Grace' for Nick. I cried."

A car pulls up the laneway to the NiMa property. Lambden grins as we watch two elderly people climb out, the second with quite a lot of difficulty. The first bounds up the hill toward us. It is Lambden's mother. The tall man with a cane is his dad and Lambden tells me of his plan to move dad home from Vancouver.

We lower the lift and share greetings all around. "I hope you don't think we're going up in that," his mom says.

As I pull out of the drive, I see the three figures ascending. The younger Lambden is gesturing toward the west end of the lake. I wonder if they are trying to make out their family home just down the shoreline. ●



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