



Fran Doyle takes a break while painting her fence. She began painting her fence with recognizable characters from movies, books and TV shows in an effort to cheer up passersby.

## GATEWAY FROM GLUM

With paint brush in hand and visions of comic and cartoon characters, grandmother turns fence into little slice of Transcona fun

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**F**RAN Doyle has lived in the same, grey-stucco bungalow at the southwest corner of Kildare Avenue East and Wayoata Street, deep in the heart of Transcona, for close to 50 years.

She and her late husband Jim, who died in February, nine days shy of his 69th birthday, purchased the tidily kept abode in 1973, two years after the high school sweethearts tied the knot at age 18.

Doyle never worked outside the home while their children, two sons and a daughter, were growing up. It wasn't all preparing lunches, assisting with homework and dropping the kids off at soccer practice, mind you. The Louis Riel Collegiate grad always reserved time to feed her creative side, whether it was by drawing portraits of family and friends, turning out stained glass designs or teaching herself intarsia, a type of three-dimensional wood craft.

The grandmother of seven, who presently holds down a part-time job

at a neighbourhood Safeway, was also responsible for all-things-painting. Her husband didn't know one end of a paint brush from the other, she says with a chuckle, so it fell to her to ensure everything looked shipshape, inside and out.

Doyle was staining the boards of a 20-metre-long cedar fence that runs along the east side of the property five years ago when a lightbulb went on in her head. Directly in front of the house — you'll know it by the blue-and-gold, "For the W" banner in a dining room window — is a well-used bus stop. Two blocks to the south lies Wayoata Elementary School. What she had been noticing over and over again was how glum everybody appeared, be it adults exiting Transit Tom at the end of a long workday, or wee ones on their way to class, first thing in the morning.

Perhaps she could turn all those frowns upside down, she thought, by painting something cheerful, a pick-me-up of sorts, on the fence boards?

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Doyle fills in a character from the popular children's film Toy Story.

'The way I understand it, the fence was originally intended to be for the little ones, but before too long, adults were getting as much of a kick out of it as the kids'

— Transcona neighbour Neil Thiessen



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Doyle began painting her fence with pop culture characters about five years ago — including Eeyore, the pessimistic burro from A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh books.



Doyle keeps her weather-resistant acrylic paint and other supplies in an old pram.

BECAUSE she'd long gotten a kick out of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, she chose the mischievous six-year-old and his acerbic, stuffed tiger as her subjects. She downloaded blown-up images of the duo off the internet, then carefully traced them onto a set of two-metre-tall planks with carbon paper.

Using weather-resistant acrylic paint, she made them appear precisely the way they did on the funny pages, before adding the quote, "There's never enough time to do all the nothing you want." That line, penned by Bill Watterson, the award-winning strip's creator, was a nod to the multiple occasions she'd asked a passing grade schooler what they had done at school that day, only to be met with, "Nothing."

The brightly painted rendering was supposed to be a one-off. That all changed the moment she included the inscription, "Dedicated to Son #2," another Calvin and Hobbes nut. As soon as they spotted the inscription, her other offspring openly wondered: what were they, chopped liver?

Eeyore, the pessimistic burro from A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh books, came second, for her daughter. She added Star Wars character Yoda for her eldest son the following summer, by which time her handiwork was starting to become a bit of a thing, in that neck of the woods.

Neil Thiessen lives a few blocks from Doyle's place. He had always greeted her warmly, whenever he was out for a stroll, but it wasn't until her fence project that they began chatting at length.

One afternoon, he snapped a few pictures of her latest work, which depicted Charlie Brown and the rest of the Peanuts gang. With her permission, he posted the shots on a social media site wholly dedicated to goings-on in and around Transcona, or "God's Country," as it's known, east of Lagimodiere Boulevard.

Faster than you can say "Hi Neighbour, Sam," scores of people were leaving online comments along the lines of, "Beautiful work," "Absolutely wonderful..." and "Makes the world a happier place."

That was, when they weren't driving, biking or walking by, to get a peek, themselves.

"The way I understand it, the fence was originally intended to be for the little ones, but before



From left: Lizzie, 8, Michelle, 8, Sarah and Tori, 10, members of the tight-knit community, watch Doyle work.

too long, adults were getting as much of a kick out of it as the kids," Thiessen says, agreeing with the assertion most six-year-olds wouldn't even recognize Inspector Clouseau, a more recent addition, or, for that matter, the rose-coloured feline Doyle has him eyeballing.

"I deliver for the local Chicken Delight and Fran's place is on my busiest route," he continues, adding that, to his knowledge, the sprawling presentation has never suffered a lick of vandalism, as everybody respects it too much. "Every time I go by, I slow down a bit, to say hi if Fran is outside, but mainly, to see what's she's been up to lately."

About that: Last August, Doyle, who has been averaging two new images per summer, posted a message on a Facebook group titled Transcona Proud, asking fellow members what they'd like her to illustrate next. The votes are in and, heeding the majority's advice, she is presently launching into a mural wholly devoted to the Toy Story franchise. Buzz is, she's trying to figure out a way to install a doorbell-type contraption that, when pressed, will play a few snippets of the song You've Got a Friend in Me, from the beloved film series' initial entry.

"For that to happen, I'll need to wire up a speaker of some sort. I'm consulting with one of my sons, to see if he has any bright ideas," she says with a wink.

As for the two blank panels that will remain once all that is completed, one is earmarked for Looney Tunes stars such as Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd — "Pay attention to me, boy," she says, breaking into her best Foghorn Leghorn impersonation — while a shorter end piece, located on a section of the fence that butts up to the garage, is reserved for an illustration more personal in nature.

Two weeks before her husband, who had a pre-existing health condition, tested positive for



The fence also features an array of whimsical signs.

COVID-19, they were telling one another how they'd "made it," she says, seated steps away from a backyard, above-ground pool, well-used by her grandchildren.

"After he passed, our daughter said I should really do something on the fence for him. So because he was really into physics and stuff, I'm probably going to paint Einstein, which should be a bit of a head-scratcher for the kids, right?"

Past that, Doyle hasn't considered how she'll spend her spare time, once she runs out of room, for good. There will always be touch-ups, of course. Then again, her flair with a brush and can of paint might just be in demand, elsewhere in the tight-knit community.

"I love this so much, I am considering doing it to my fence, which also borders a school," a person recently commented on Facebook.

Doyle's response?

"I think that's a great idea. If you need help, let me know."

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Doyle's colourful fence is covered in characters from Dr. Seuss and Pink Panther.

