



Malcolm Gladwell's *Elmira roots run deep*

The bestselling author and journalist credits Waterloo Region and his Elmira school teachers with shaping who he is today

BY NANCY SILCOX

With his distinctive bushy “mop,” Malcolm Gladwell doesn’t have any trouble being recognized when he comes home to Waterloo Region to visit family at least four times a year.

During an interview at a Waterloo coffee house, several restaurant patrons cast glances his way, doing a double-take before exiting the café. Some even came back inside to shake his hand.

One woman said she couldn’t wait to

PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS



Malcolm Gladwell grew up in Elmira and attended Park Manor Public School and Elmira District Secondary School. When news came that his high school principal was being transferred to another school, Gladwell and his friends organized a protest at the board of education offices in Kitchener. About 300 showed up.



PHOTOGRAPHY • JIM ROSS

tell her husband she had met Gladwell in downtown Waterloo. Graciously, Gladwell extended his hand and thanked the fan for her kind words.

"I don't get stopped by people in New York nearly as much as in Waterloo," he says chuckling.

After more than two decades living and working in New York City, the former Elmira resident says he relishes the big-city life.

"It's not just that there's everything at your fingertips," says the bestselling author. "But New York is such a fascinating mix of cultures, occupations and interests."

Not that the author of "The Tipping Point," "Blink," "Outliers," "What the Dog Saw," "David and Goliath" and The New Yorker magazine's star columnist has anything negative to say about his boyhood years.

"I loved Elmira and I had a very happy life growing up there. It was a very close-knit, warm, genuine community that nurtured me. It gave me the opportunity to question and to grow."

Born in Fareham, England, Gladwell moved with his family to Elmira in 1969. His father, Graham, a professional engineer, had taken a teaching position in the mathematics department of the University of Waterloo. His mother, Joyce, was a professional psychotherapist who later helped to establish the Woolwich Counselling Centre in Elmira.

When asked if the child Malcolm was

precocious, Joyce laughs. "Not as much as his older brother, Graham. But Malcolm was so funny; he'd come out with the funniest things and always got us all laughing."

Both of his parents were writers too. His father is the author of five books on mathematical theory and Joyce wrote "Brown Face, Big Master," a memoir of her childhood growing up in Jamaica. Lyrical and elegant, the book explores the forces that moulded her into the high-achieving adult she became.

Malcolm Gladwell calls his mother "my first writing mentor." He praises her style as "precise and simple" and says "clarity of expression is very important to her as it became to me."

At Park Manor Senior Public School in Elmira, Grade 7 teacher Jim de Bock also had a significant impact on the young Gladwell. He became his second mentor. "Jim de Bock encouraged me to follow my own ideas — not to be beholden to what the world thinks."

De Bock vividly remembers his exceptional student. "Malcolm's writing, at age 12, resembled a wonderfully designed garden minus the cumbersome weeds."

Elmira District Secondary School English teacher Bill Exley was right around the corner to pick up where de Bock had left off. If the elementary teacher was about developing imagination in writing, the high school mentor was all about developing discipline. "Bill Exley made me a writer," states Gladwell. "I wouldn't have gotten to where I got without him."

Academia was only part of the teenage Gladwell. A skilled — and feared — debater, during his graduating year, he was named one of the top 10 high school debaters in Ontario. With lifelong friends Bruce Headlam, now

"I loved Elmira and I had a very happy life growing up there. It was a very close-knit, warm, genuine community that nurtured me. It gave me the opportunity to question and to grow."

MALCOLM GLADWELL

Ear & Hearing Clinic

Helping you with all your hearing healthcare needs

20TH ANNIVERSARY

Trust your hearing to a Doctor of Audiology.

JULIANE SHANTZ
DOCTOR OF AUDIOLOGY

Kitchener 519-743-7000 • Elmira 519-669-4425
www.earandhearingclinic.com

Home Control | Motorized Blinds | Light Fixture Selection and Sales

Vh VERVE HOME

"Your lighting and home control specialists"

Nathan Parsons
Owner/Operator

Holly Parsons
Lead Designer

519-362-5598
info@verve-home.com
verve-home.com

a senior editor at the New York Times, and Terry Martin, a professor of history at Harvard University, the trio founded the satirical Elmira District Secondary School newspaper *Ad Hominem: a Journal of Slander and Critical Opinion*. “The rule was that every article had to attack someone personally,” says Gladwell with a grin.

To add even more spice to the mix, Gladwell and friends took a turn at “student radicalism.” The news that the high school’s popular principal, Roger Milliken, was being transferred to another school gave the trio an opportunity to flex their activist muscles.

“The three of us organized a protest at the board of education offices in Kitchener,” says Headlam. “We rented school buses to take about 300 of us there, and everybody carried protest signs.”

Headlam also brandished a bullhorn. With a chuckle, Gladwell remembers his friend’s battle cry. “As Bruce walked around the property, he’d be blaring, ‘You can run, Lynne, but you cannot hide!’” This was a reference to board chair Lynne Woolstencroft.

For his part, Gladwell toted a placard that challenged: “Hell no, Milliken WON’T go!”

It wasn’t very long before *The Record* showed up to take photos of the upstart country kids and their protest.

In reflecting on his friend’s high school activist pursuits, Headlam remembers “the lengths that Malcolm would go to to reduce his constant boredom.”

Fascinated by U.S. politics, Gladwell headed stateside after his graduation from the University of Toronto, where he studied history. He did an appren-

ticeship with a small, right-wing political magazine in Indiana, then moved up the journalistic hierarchy to reporter with the *Washington Post* newspaper.

In 1996, Gladwell switched home addresses from Washington to New York as *The New Yorker* magazine had hired the Elmira-raised Gladwell as a regular columnist.

The New Yorker gave the Canadian a wide berth in his choice of topics: from the science behind the “six degrees of separation” urban legends, to school shootings in the U.S.; from what humans can learn from dog trainer Cesar Millan, to the red blood cell count of Kenyan runners.

“Long-distance runners from Kenya are better because they carry higher levels of red blood cells,” reports Gladwell.

These findings proved fascinating to the longtime running enthusiast. During his tenure

at Elmira, Gladwell won the 1,500-metre title at the Ontario high school championships.

In 2000, Gladwell wrote his first book, “*The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.” He followed that with “*Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*” in 2005. “*Outliers: The Story of Success*” arrived on bookstore shelves in 2008. A collection of his *New Yorker* articles, “*What the Dog Saw*,” appeared in 2009 and “*David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*” was published in 2013.

All Gladwell-penned books have made the *New York Times* bestseller list. Meticulously researched but highly accessible, without the scent of highbrow academia, Gladwell’s social investigations appeal to both academics and fans of pop culture.

Gladwell has tackled such subjects as

intelligence tests, music fads, high-priced baseball players and North America’s love affair with caffeine.

In a sure test of cultural influence, a number of “Gladwell-isms” have crept into North American lexicon. In “*The Tipping Point*,” he defines “tipping point” as “that magic moment when an idea, trend or social behaviour crosses a threshold and spreads like wildfire.” Gladwell uses the runaway popularity of the Airwalk running shoe craze of the early 1990s and the growth of women’s book clubs after the 2002 movie “*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*” as powerful tipping points in North American culture.

And while Gladwell didn’t conjure up the theory of “the 10,000-hour rule,” the term became a popular buzzword after the

publication of Gladwell’s 2008 bestseller “*Outliers*.” Using the examples of such celebrities as The Beatles, Bill Gates and chess master Bobby Fischer, Gladwell notes that while all had natural inborn talent, they spent many years developing their gifts by hard work and practice — 10,000 hours, in fact.

“He’s a master at melding argumentation with descriptive narrative reporting,” says David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*. “Malcolm Gladwell has one of the finest minds I’ve ever seen in journalism.”

Terry Martin also comments on his old friend’s “grey cells.”

“Malcolm likes following various points of view and perspectives, never tying himself down to a particular issue. It gives him a lot more freedom. Growing up, he always liked the notion of being out of step.”

Fabulous finishes, amazing amenities & stunning park views in Uptown Waterloo

WE MAKE RENTING A BEAUTIFUL THING.

↑ ALSO AVAILABLE: FULLY FURNISHED SHORT-TERM EXECUTIVE SUITE RENTALS

CHOOSE FROM LUXURY RENTAL SUITES
IN THE COOPERAGE OR THE ONYX AT
THE BARREL YARDS COMMUNITY
519-883-8383 | BARRELYARDS.COM

OPEN HOUSE HOURS
MON-THURS 11-7PM
FRI 10-6PM
SAT 10-5PM
SUN 11-5PM

The Barrel Yards
experience life uptown

ARMOURED TOUCH

Transform Your Kitchen Into A Designer-Inspired Space In Less Than A Week

- Refinished cabinets using Luxury Solid Glaze
- Granite countertops/tiled backsplash
- Customized pullouts/islands/lighting and designer fixtures

AFFORDABLE LUXURY FOR EVERYDAY LIVING!

100 Sheldon Drive, unit 28, Cambridge ON | 519.620.0066 | www.armouredtouch.com