

Canadian city shows compassion



Gander, Newfoundland mayor, portrayed in **Come From Away**, reflects on city's 9/11 outpouring, will share story at Engeman



HEARTFELT: When 7,000 weary passengers arrived in Gander, Newfoundland (left) when American airspace was shut down after the terrorist attacks September 11, 2001, Claude Elliott (above) was the mayor who led the community response. He will be at the opening of **Come From Away** at the John W. Engeman Theater in Northport Village to share the story, which is portrayed in the Tony-Award winning musical. Passengers were offered accommodations in schools (left) and churches (bottom left) and residents delivered home-cooked meals each night to their guests to make sure they were well fed. So compelling was the outpouring of compassion that it was captured in the musical which has earned international acclaim.

-City of Gander photos

By David Ambro

When the critically acclaimed musical **Come From Away**—Tony Award-winning on Broadway—opens at the John W. Engeman Theater in Northport, Thursday, September 11, one of the lead characters on which the show is based will be in the audience.

Come From Away is about the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when American airspace was suddenly shut down, and 38 airliners were diverted to Gander International Airport in Gander, Newfoundland, where 7,000 passengers from 90 countries were stranded for seven days. With almost as many passengers as travelers in the small Canadian town, Gander Mayor Claude Elliott rallied his community to rise to the challenge, welcoming the weary travelers into their homes and making them comfortable until they could fly again.

Mayor Elliott, who will be portrayed in **Come From Away** at the Engeman Theater by veteran Broadway actor John Scherer, will be in Northport for opening night, along with Canadian Consulate General Tom Clark, the Canadian diplomat in New York City during the terrorist attacks. Before the show, they will address the audience. During an interview with **The Observer** Saturday, August 23, Mayor Elliott spoke about his visit to Northport next month, the impact the 9/11 terrorist attacks had on Gander, and his assessment of **Come From Away**, written by Irene Sankoff and David Hein.

"The show has been well-received all over the world. It is a story about kindness, generosity, and love, and I don't think you can go wrong when you do those three things to help people, even if they



are complete strangers," Mayor Elliott said. "On 9/11, we had 7,000 people show up in Gander. We didn't know any of them, we didn't know where any of them were from or anything about them. But we knew they were people, we knew that they needed help, they needed love and compassion, and the community certainly provided that."

Mayor Elliott first saw **Come From Away** on Broadway. He said it offers a message that should be embraced by humanity. "Watching it being portrayed in a play is certainly remarkable and is something that allows us to reach out to the world and show them that a little bit of kindness can go a long way," he said.

Mayor Elliott was the mayor of Gander for 21

years, appointed in 1996 after the incumbent resigned to take a role in the Canadian provincial government. He was elected to a four-year term in 1997 and re-elected four times until opting not to seek re-election in 2017. Using hockey lingo, he said it was time to "hang up my skates." He is now on the board of directors of a grocery co-op in Gander.

In retirement, Mayor Elliott plans to travel the world to openings of **Come From Away** and talk to audiences about the story, as he will in Northport. When **The Observer** contacted him for the interview on Saturday, he was in New Brunswick, Canada, to attend several performances of **Come From Away** there and speak before the show.

(Continued on page 10)



WELCOME MAT: Stranded passengers made the most of their days in Gander, walking on the shoreline (below) and going bowling (bottom right), among the activities they engaged in with the residents. They were all smiles when they were finally able to go home after seven days (above).
-City of Gander photos



Come From Away offers account

(Continued from page 3)
“Watching people portray you is certainly enlightening, and everyone I have seen in the role has done a fantastic job. I have no qualms or problems with the people who have played me. They are doing a good job, and as I always say, the most important thing is sharing the story,” he said.

As for telling the story about 7,000 passengers spending a week in Gander in a play, Mayor Elliott said the writers did a fantastic job. “They interviewed hundreds of people, and they had to take 12 stories from those

hundreds of people. I think that they captured what we were doing in Gander, they captured what the passengers were going through in Gander, and they captured personal stories.”

Mayor Elliott highlighted some of the personal stories in the show, including couple Kevin Tuerff and his boyfriend at the time, Kevin Jung, American Airlines pilot Beverly Bass, passengers Nick and Diane Marson, who met in Gander and married, Anna and Dennis O’Rourke, a couple whose son was an FDNY firefighter in New York

City during the terrorist attacks... “They captured the gist of everything that went on, but there are hundreds and hundreds of stories like that which have never been told that happened in Gander during those seven days.”

Engeman Theater co-owner and Executive Producer Richard Dolce said during a recent interview that the Engeman **Come From Away** cast began rehearsals Tuesday, August 26, at a studio in New York City. He said it was a very popular Broadway show, so when it became available, he grabbed the licensing for it, and September 11 seemed like a fitting day to open the show in Northport.

Mr. Dolce said the subject matter in **Come From Away** is very important, especially to the Long Island community, which was tragically impacted. “We are treating it with care,” he said. “The cast is obviously very aware and being very respectful to the events that happened, knowing that many families on Long Island were affected by it.”

Mr. Dolce said it is special to be hosting Mayor Elliott and Consulate General Clark at the opening. The Canadian Consulate reached

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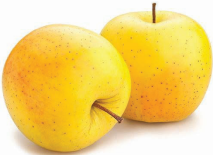
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out to the theater when they found out it was presenting **Come From Away**.

“It is an important event for Canadians as well, so they have been involved in the show when it was on Broadway and took it very personally. So when they heard it was going to be so close to the city, they reached out to us,” he said.

“At its heart, the story is about the resilience of the human spirit, which is what so many of our shows echo,” Mr. Dolce said. “This is a community in Newfoundland that took in almost double its population overnight, and everybody rallied together to take care of these people who were put in an incredibly challenging situation.”

Gander, according to Mayor Elliott, is in the center of Newfoundland and had a population of 9,300 people at the time of the 9/11 attacks. Mostly a government town, located at Gander International Airport is the Canadian Forces Base 9 Wing, 103 Search and Rescue unit, Forest Fire Protection Center, and Canadian Immigration Center.

Mayor Elliott said the town has an air traffic control center that employs 300 to 400 people and that Gander is a service center for about 50,000 to 60,000 people a year who come there to buy furniture and cars. “We are a diverse community, and the people here are diverse. They are from all parts of Newfoundland, Canada, and around the world. People move here, so we are not just one group of people

with everything in common. There is a diversity,” he said. “But the one thing we do all have in common is that everybody is prepared to help and show love and compassion, not only to their family and friends but to complete strangers, and that certainly came out in spades during 9/11, and it’s still here today. If the need be, we would be out to help.”

“The community is very loving and I was proud to be the mayor at that time,” Mayor Elliott said. “Everybody in the community played a role. It wasn’t just my role. It was everybody who made this happen. When the writers put this story together, I don’t think they could have done a much better job, no matter how hard they tried.”

When he travels to Northport, Mayor Elliott will stay at the Northport Hotel across Main Street from the Engeman Theater. He will attend the September 11 and September 12 shows of **Come From Away**.

“The message I want to leave with people with is that no matter who we vote for, no matter what church we go to, no matter what language we speak, we can show love and compassion to people even when we disagree with their beliefs,” Mayor Elliott said. “I don’t have to believe in what you do, you don’t have to believe in what I do, but in the end we should believe in love and compassion and help other people out in any way we can, even with differences of opinion,” Mayor Elliott concluded.

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