

# Officials promote 'stay close to home' message

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He went on to discuss the virtual and online avenues that area tourism officials have been using during the reopening to promote the Niagara Region, both as an attractive and cost-wise destination, but also one that families would be comfortable with visiting and spending time during their stay.

Discussing a recent promo called, "Wide Open Spaces ... Now Open for Adventure," Percy said, "We wanted to show that we have wide open spaces (here) and that we have adventures that you can enjoy and put on your bucket list."

Percy said tourism officials have talked up the various preventative measures they are taking to promote a safe and enjoyable experi-

ence to visitors during their stays: "These are simplistic factors that each organization, each attraction or hotel or whatever, could do, along with what we are asking for the customer to. So we have all these safety materials on our website that we can share with others."

Thus far, Percy said the Destination Niagara USA approach is having an impact.

"Since the campaign has launched, from May 18 to June 18 and beyond up to this day, we've seen a 138% increase on our website, (thousands) in page views," he said. "It is huge, people are looking and they're researching. We are starting to see it."

Percy said Destination Niagara's staycation focus in the COVID-19

era is centered on New York state. "Typically we are selling Niagara Falls to the world. (But now) we are closer to home. New York is important to us; New Yorkers have been through this pandemic in a big way, and trust you understand the guidelines. So we are reaching out to them, with our reopen campaign to New York state, and urging them to travel to us as well."

Percy said, first and foremost in Destination Niagara's travel campaign, is the message the region is "safe, and that the health concerns are first and foremost at the top of our list."

Throughout the program, all attending tourism officials, including Gary Siddall of the Aquarium of Niagara, Anthony Vilardo of USA Niagara, Bob Emerson of Old Fort Niagara, Christopher Glynn of Maid of the Mist, and Frank Strangio of Wingate by Wyndham and Quality Inn, emphasized their focus on promoting a healthy environment and in providing the visitor the most comfortable environment during their stays.

"Since our late-June opening we have all been focused on social distancing," Glynn said. "We've made a number of adjustments" for visitors on all our boats.

Emerson reported Old Fort Niagara opened July 3 and thus far visitor response has been good. "It's a safe situation," Emerson said. "We've been working with

Destination Niagara and 'New York Forward.' I'm very pleased so far."

He said OFN's outdoor living history experiences have been adjusted to allow for improved social distancing and safety protocols, and the staff is effectively managing capacity in all buildings.

As to Falls accommodations, Strangio said the region's hotel industry has been and continues to battle back against the harsh economic impacts of quarantine.

"COVID has been devastating, and when you have to do essential things during a pandemic, travel really isn't at the top of your list," Strangio said, pointing to a 75% drop in hotel business year to date.

Regardless, "We have followed the right precautions; we reopened; we have made a plan."

He said the Wyndham and Quality Inn parent franchise has been working with the Falls hotel to promote a clean environment, as well as a healthy and safe experience for visitors. It's a concept Strangio has been sharing with other non-franchised hoteliers in the area.

"We've made a certain effort here to do this, to educate others. We have a message here, 'Niagara Falls is a safe place to come.' We offer acres and acres of social distancing, it's a beautiful place to come," he said. "But when you stay overnight you will be safe, and that's the message we need

to get out."

"Staycation" is a word basically unheard of a year ago. It has become common and is now widely accepted in many Americans' leisure planning for 2020. In fact, as the coronavirus continues to rage, extended travel has, for the most part, gone by the wayside.

Many are now opting for travel much closer to home - with one report by the American Hotel and Lodging Association finding only 44% of Americans are planning an overnight vacation or leisure travel in 2020, with 81% opting for day trips instead. And with the borders to both Canada and Mexico continuing in shutdown mode, and travel restrictions remaining in place to many overseas destinations, that staycation mindset is likely to remain popular for some time ahead.

"As we enter into phase four, we'd like to send a strong message out to the local community: If you've ever thought about a staycation, this is the year to do it!" Hochul said. "Bring them to places like Niagara Falls and explore, and treasure that time with your family. ... In so doing ... we are also supporting our great businesses that give this community their identity."

For more information on the wealth of staycation adventures in the Niagara Falls region, visit [www.niagarafallsusa.com](http://www.niagarafallsusa.com).

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**SHOP SMALL**

## NT students come to aid of bullied girl

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In a short ceremony held on the steps of the North Tonawanda City Hall, local officials presented the boys with honorary certificates from the city, as well as Distinguished Service Awards from the district attorney's office.

"It is not every day that we have somebody who goes to the assistance to help somebody else," said North Tonawanda Police Chief Thomas Krantz. "It's easier to just walk away and pretend it's not happening. Well, for these two young men that wasn't the case."

North Tonawanda Mayor Arthur Pappas also applauded the boys, not only for the bravery they displayed on the field that day, but for the humility and candor they've displayed since the incident.

"The answers and responses you've given to the media in the past, 'Well, we just did what we thought was right; we were just there.' ... I think that deserves a lot

of recognition, because you don't see a lot of that these days," Pappas said. "The reward here is not just media attention. ... You've gotten the respect of fellow students, the respect of adults, the respect of the police - that's a lot of accomplishment for two high school students. This accomplishment will go long into your lives, instead of just looking at a certificate. This will be in your minds forever, and it will be in the minds of that victim forever. So we're really a thankful community."

Elsewhere, Pappas added, "You both passed the test for being real human beings, showing empathy, sympathy and compassion for your fellow students, and your fellow people, by putting them in front of yourselves."

Niagara County District Attorney Caroline Wojtaszek described what it was like seeing the video for the first time, not only as a law enforcement official,

but as a mother.

"I started to watch this video and was sickened. Not only that children of this age would treat one another this way, but that it was going on in North Tonawanda - in my community," Wojtaszek said. "I watched, like everyone else, in horror, until these two young men stood up. And I just cried. Because I'm not only a district attorney, but I am a mother of three teenage children; and I look to the parents here, too, who frankly, deserve awards, as well, because I know how hard it is to raise teenage kids, and teenage boys nonetheless."

"We all hope and pray that our children would step up and do the right thing in a moment like this. That we have instilled in them the character and the integrity to make the right choice when the time comes ... They did the right thing when the time came. Everyday in the district attorney's office, along with members of law enforcement, we read horrible things and this was as horrible as they come, but on the flip side of that we see the best in humanity as well."

Shortly after the video made its way to social media, the victim's parents released a statement to the media in which they also praised Swan and Griskonis for their actions.

"As many stood and watched, only two courageous, outstanding young men stepped in to help, Anthony and Simon. These boys did not know our daughter, they just knew she was in trouble, and they took action. I can't think of where we might be today had they not stopped this heinous assault on our sweet child. This being said, we cannot find enough words to praise and thank not only Anthony and Simon, but their parents, for raising young men with such courage, love and just basic human decency."

"Thank you, Dawn and Joseph."

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