

More entrants are still waiting for their refunds

by Craig Bradford of The Aylmer Express

Several entrants of the failed Essay House contest recently contacted the Aylmer Express either through its website or Facebook page asking for more information about the contest to win a house that closed on April 30.

Most said they wanted their \$100 entry fee back as soon as possible.

As of Monday, June 30, only one woman was known to have had a partial refund of her entry fee. She received \$78.93 by registered mail on June 11. The contest's Facebook page had said \$7 of each entry fee would be used to cover the cost of return money orders.

The Malahide home and property located at 50279 Talbot Line on the south side of the road between Aylmer and Summers Corners was the prize in an essay-writing contest that required 3,000 entries at \$100 each before a winner could be judged and announced. The entry fees had to be submitted by certified cheque or money order payable to Calvin and Diana Brydges, the owners of the property.

Last year the Brydges ran the first round of the contest offering to give their home to the author of the best essay on how winning the home would benefit the writer. The original contest generated 2,192 entries according to the Essay House Facebook page, short of its 3,000 minimum by the Aug. 31, 2013 deadline.

The contest's second round started on Oct. 1 and closed April 30 without a winner announced as it fell short of the 3,000 goal with reportedly under 1,100 entries.

After refusing to comment to a reporter for several months, Mr. Brydges answered some questions on Tuesday, June 24. Some of his comments were included in a story in the June 25 Aylmer Express.

Entries returned?

He said all entry fees would be returned minus the cost of sending them back either through the regular mail or by registered mail if someone requested expedited service in a "threatening" fashion.

John Brockett of Oakville said he was considering complaining to police if he didn't receive his \$100 Essay House contest entry fee soon.

In an email sent to the Express on Wednesday, June 25, Mr. Brockett stated the he had left a voicemail message at the This 'N' That telephone number the previous weekend "threatening full return of my entry (fee) by Thursday (June 26) or I'm calling the police."

Attempts to contact Mr. Brockett on Monday, June 30 by both telephone and email were unsuccessful.

Mr. Brockett called This 'N' That on June 2 and he said he spoke to Mr. Brydges.

It was his fourth attempt to reach the couple and he had previously spoken to a woman briefly.

"Bad press"

"He basically said it was being handled by their third party," Mr. Brockett said. "And because they were receiving bad press, the third party was handling all of the entry returns. Because I contacted him personally, he said he would have it expedited."

Mr. Brockett said he would contact the Brydges again soon if his entry fee wasn't returned.

"I consider this theft," he said.

Mr. Brockett first heard about the Essay House contest through television news coverage on CTV. He entered the first round and let his essay stand in the second.

Chris Hennessey of Ottawa entered the contest in the first round and let his submission stand for the second round.

He was sent a letter asking if he would let his entry stand for the second round sometime after the first round ended on Aug. 30, 2013.

He didn't respond to the letter and assumed that his entry was included in the second round when he didn't receive his money back.

He had sent his entry by money order but didn't keep his receipt.

Mr. Hennessey said he kept track of the contest's progress through the Essay House Facebook page.

He now wanted his entry fee back.

Where is my money?

"I will be sending a letter asking where my money is," he said, adding he planned on sending the letter by the end of the day on June 18.

Attempts to contact Mr. Hennessey on Monday were unsuccessful.

Calling himself a "beginner real estate investor," Mr. Hennessey didn't plan on moving to the Aylmer area if he had won the contest.

"I was looking to use this house as a flip project," he said.

If he won, he was going to do any necessary renovations to the home and property before selling it.

He would have then kept \$50,000 for himself of the proceeds of the sale and donate the rest to Aylmer area charities.

At the time he entered the contest, the Aylmer Family Splash Pad project was still in the works and its committee was raising money and he was going to donate to it.

He said his written submission was based on his plans for the property if he won.

Mr. Hennessey wasn't prepared to give up on getting his entry fee back.

"I like to put my trust in humans," he said. "It was a different way to sell their house. It was a great idea. But I have some doubts now. There has been so much negative feedback and that probably killed the contest. It is a little weird and I'm not sure what's going on. It's a little fishy for sure."

Mr. Hennessey found out about the Essay House through news coverage on CTV.

Veronika Despina of Brantford entered the Essay House contest in the first round and let her submission stand for the second round.

While she had no communication with the Brydges or their secret third party since the April 30 deadline passed, she previously tried to get in touch with them through the telephone number listed on the contest's Facebook page.

Aylmer visit

In July 2013, Mrs. Despina, her husband and a family friend drove to the Aylmer area to look at the Brydges' home.

When they arrived at the property, the Brydges weren't at home and they heard dogs barking from the garage.

Mrs. Despina said a neighbour must have told the Brydges about their visit.

"We got a cold, nasty comment on Facebook after the fact," she said, adding the comment described the visit as "snooping around" and showing up unannounced.

"If anyone was serious about the contest, wouldn't they be interested in seeing the house?" Mrs. Despina asked.

Mrs. Despina said it "wasn't realistic" for the Brydges to assume their property was worth \$300,000, equal to 3,000 essay entries at \$100 each.

"One hundred dollars is nothing if a person wins," she said, adding she had kept her receipt of the money order she sent with her entry.

She scanned the receipt and emailed it to the Express.

"I'll give them time to do some processing, but now it's past the middle of June," she said. "They've had ample time to at least send out a letter saying when the refunds would be coming."

"Can't take your money"

"They can't just take your money," Mrs. Despina said.

If she had won the contest, she had planned to renovate the home and sell it to “make a few bucks and have fun with it.”

Norma Miller of Unity, Saskatchewan said she entered the first round of the contest and let her submission remain for the second.

Mrs. Miller kept her money order receipt dated June 3, 2013.

Before entering the contest, Mrs. Miller contacted a local realtor about the Essay House.

She wanted to find out if the contest was legitimate, if the property had any liens against it, have its title checked and if the area was prone to flooding.

That agent said the property was worth about \$249,000, that it had been on the market “on and off” for three years, that if she won the contest Mrs. Miller would have “clear title” to it and there were no problems with flooding in the area.

“Wrong”

Mrs. Miller wasn’t concerned about losing her \$100 entry fee and wasn’t going to pursue getting it back.

“Yes, I could use it but it wasn’t like it was \$1,000,” she said. “One hundred dollars isn’t going to break the bank but if they have \$200,000 (in collected entry fees) of the money, that’s a problem and is wrong.”

Mrs. Miller found out about the Essay House contest through television news coverage on CTV.

In her essay, Mrs. Miller wrote what she had found out about the Aylmer area and stated if she won the contest, she would find a family in need who could “take care of the home and call it their own.”

She knew what it was like to struggle financially, Mrs. Miller explained.

Her first husband died in the early 1980s leaving her with two young children to care for and no home.

If she had won, Mrs. Miller would have sold the house for \$100,000 to a less fortunate family.

The Brydges announced via Facebook on Thursday, May 1 that the second round had ended without a winner.

“It is with regret that we inform everyone that our Essay/Story contest did not meet the required number of entries to facilitate the awarding of the house,” the Facebook post stated.

“The second round only had 1,083 entries,” the post continued. “For legal reasons, the contest could not have been extended or altered in any way. There will NOT be a third try at this.”

Later on May 1 the Facebook page was no longer accessible online. It is unclear how to contact the administrator of the contest with questions about how and when the entry fees would be returned.

Around the same time, the cell phone number associated with the contest also became unavailable.

At the time, the Aylmer Express tried to contact the Brydges but Mr. Brydges, who answered the This ‘N’ That telephone line, refused to answer any questions.

Subsequent attempts to speak to the couple had also been unsuccessful until June 24.

The couple had refused to comment about the contest in prior attempts by the Express over the past several months.

Taken down

A new post on the Facebook page before it was taken down, added shortly after midnight that day, stated that the second round had ended without a winner.

The Brydges’ lack of co-operation with the Aylmer Express left a number of unanswered questions including why the property at 50279 Talbot Line east of Aylmer was listed for sale on April 7, more than three weeks before the April 30 contest deadline for entries.

“Since the house could not be awarded to a winner in our contest, and we still have the desire to downsize, we have listed our house for sale at a very fair market value,” the May 1 Facebook post stated.

The property was listed for sale at \$239,900 by London's Royal LePage Triland Realty.

The Essay House Facebook page said the home was worth \$300,000.

On Tuesday, June 24 Mr. Brydges told the Express the \$300,000 included the cost of the couple "relocating."

"So it's still a bargain for someone," he said.

Around the same time as their home was listed, the couple also listed their thrift store building at 55 Talbot St. East for sale with another London realtor.

That building is listed at \$255,000, confirmed by an Oliver and Associates sales representative.

Mr. Brydges said after the downtown building was sold, he and his wife still planned to operate This 'N' That out of the same location and would lease or rent the space from the new owner.

The couple had previously told the Express that if the essay contest didn't generate 3,000 entries at \$100 each (for a total of \$300,000), they would likely move to Barrie and start another thrift store business there.

Still candidates

There were also questions surrounding the status of the couple's candidacies as each had filed nominations to run for Aylmer council positions in the Oct. 27 municipal election.

Mr. Brydges was still listed as a candidate for mayor and Mrs. Brydges as a councillor candidate as of Monday morning, June 30.

"I'm still running for town mayor and Diana is still running for town councillor," Mr. Brydges confirmed. "We're only two votes, but hopefully we can make a difference."

When asked where the entry fees were collected, Mr. Brydges responded, "That doesn't matter where they are."

"But I can tell you not one cent of interest was earned on this," he said. "It actually cost us money out of our pocket to do this."

Part 3 to be continued in next week's Express...