

The Canada Tree Documentary Proposal

(working title)

Roma Dingwell and Kent Martin

“Just as a forest is created out of infinite diversity, so is our country, Canada. Complex and beautiful, powerful in its unity, together the land and the people make our nation.” - Tyler Aspin





On a warm day in the summer of 2025 in barn near Murray River, Prince Edward Island two skilled craftsmen, the brothers Vaden and Victor Somers, are working on the restoration of sections of a monumental sculpture called the Canada Tree. It was created by a young artist Tyler Aspin 27 years ago. Thirty five feet tall and weighing four tons, it was first exhibited at the Museum of Civilization in the nation's Capital. Then it toured Canada thrilling thousands. Aside from a few exhibitions it has remained in pieces in storage. Many feel the time has come for this inspirational work to find a permanent home along with the vast collection of letters and artifacts which were contributed to the original project by men, women and children from across the land.



This is a story which needs telling. A documentary film about an artist, his creation, and its importance to posterity.



The Story of Tyler Aspin Sculptor of the Canada Tree

Tyler Lane Stoshnof Aspin was born Sept 01, 1969, in Charlottetown PEI, Prince Edward Island, Epekwitk “cradle on the waves” where he lived exclusively from birth to 17 years of age.

Most of his years were spent on the family farm the “Foc’sle’ (where the crew slept on the ship) in the community of Pinette, where he lived with his parents, older brother and younger sister.

As a youth, there were daily chores such as feeding the livestock and mucking out the barns. During the summer months those chores extended to multiple hours of cutting, blocking and splitting wood from any of the 60 acres of woodland behind the farm. Wood was a big part of Tyler’s youth.



The family farm extended to the waterfront on the Gascoigne Cove and it was there Tyler developed his passion for water sports such as canoeing, and sailing.



Gascoigne Cove

During his teen years, during the summer months, Tyler welcomed the opportunity to explore new experiences, and, for three seasons, he was employed in the Surf Shop at the Stanhope by the Sea Resort on the North Shore of PEI where he managed the Surf Shop and taught windsurfing. Tyler was a big draw to the windsurfing sport and his profile on the board led him to represent PEI and compete in the 1989 Canada Games

Island Landscape



After Graduation from Montague High School, with family encouragement, Tyler ventured to the Canadian Arctic and worked on the supply vessel “Cecilia Degagnes” on which he spent 3 ½ months as an onboard stevedore, supplying such outposts as Eureka, Arctic Bay and Resolute.

Tyler’s next adventure took him to Europe which had him working then on the world’s largest privately owned topsail schooners. “The Jessica” was elegant and there was MUCH wood for which the crew were in charge of maintaining the varnish and wood/ teak on the Jessica.

Knowing where his passions lay Tyler applied to and was accepted to study Fine Arts at the reputable Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he graduated with honours.

Tyler was asked to become an Artist in Residence at the Acacia Gallery in Gagetown, on the Saint John River. There he sculpted 14 pieces, all of which had some sort of connection /concentration with the origin and history hidden within the grains and fibres of wood. The most prominent and influential of these was a 200-year-old Victorian bay door and window, it was the entire house face that Tyler discovered when out on a bike ride. He had it transported to the grounds of the Acacia Gallery, and one week later it was stripped, sanded, oiled and ready for display.

Tyler’s first public showing of “one of my favourite pieces of history” was called: “A New Look, with a Good View”



About August 1995, the inspiration for **The Canada Tree** originated. Tyler was commissioned by his neighbour Roy Falls to create a sculpture from a 20-year-old fallen willow tree. One month later, a 3.5-meter sculpture of a tree was created from the wood and placed in the same spot where the original willow tree stood. The sculpture was called the “Tree from Willow Falls”.

I built it back into a tree with my interpretation and (the property owner’s) story. What came from that tree was the conception of the Canada Tree.

–Tyler Aspin



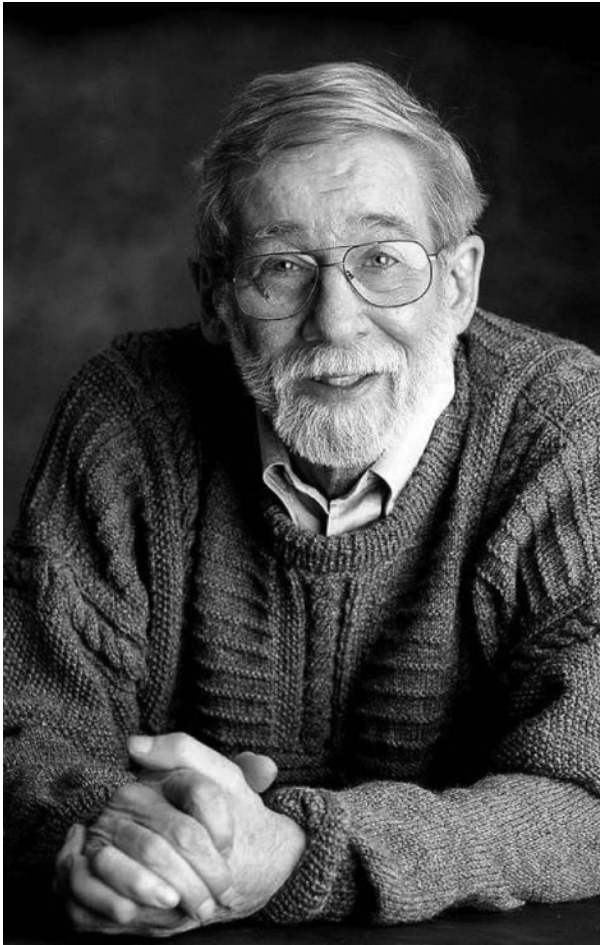
Tyler's passion for sculpture and his ability to utilize the history and spirit of materials inspired his vision for The Canada Tree. Tyler came back to Prince Edward Island to meet with Terry Graff, Curator of the Confederation Centre of the Arts, and was invited to be Artist in Residence to develop his Canada Tree project. The goal was to collect pieces of wood from every Province and Territory in Canada.

Tyler was interested as he said in: *"The story around each piece of wood will express the lives of the people who shared in its connection to the land and soil"*

Tyler had plans to set out across Canada on a 3-month trip to collect wood/ artifacts that would be incorporated into a 35-foot sculpture of a tree that would be constructed at the Confederation Centre.

"Everyone has a keepsake that represents something. So, we're asking people, can you give it up and tell us why it has meaning to you?"





It was an interview on September 27, 1996, with Peter Gzowski of CBC Radio Morning Side that generated a national profile and interest in **The Canada Tree Project**. Gzowski himself donated the first artifact, a toy mallet he used as a gavel to silence guests on his radio show when they were becoming a tad unruly. Immediately after the show, Tyler received 50 phone calls in a perfect succession of time zones through each province and territory. People were donating pieces of wood and telling him stories. So, the artifact collection had begun.

Tyler's mission captivated the nation's interest, and he was also featured on programmes such as CTV's the Dini Petti Show, CBC Midday with Valerie Pringle and Wayne Ronstad of On the Road Again.

"I was going to come and visit each of those individuals personally, I phoned them all up and spent time on the phone from that day on where I would just be listening to stories, – that was from February 1997 – till June 1997, it was the trip that I took collecting those pieces of wood that were first ascertained on the Peter Gzowski Show."

– Tyler Aspin

During these three months he would do a smudge with sweetgrass and hit the road where he met many Canadians. The tour resulted in more than 600 artifacts being collected and given to Aspin which in turn would be inlaid into **The Canada Tree**. Others would be displayed in cabinets.

Premier Pat Binns, then the Premier of Prince Edward Island was enthused by the project, he then in turn contacted all Provincial and Territory Premiers to ask them for wood from the provincial tree from their respective provinces and territories. They all obliged promptly and the result was that the body of **The Canada Tree** was made strong with wood from coast to coast to coast.



Each element of **The Canada Tree** is as diverse as the making up of the Canadian population.

"I wanted to show that the diversity of trees and wood in our country is the same as the diversity of the people of Canada. I'm really not thinking of this as keeping the country together as much as I want to bring pieces of the country together for my sculpture "

Tyler Aspin

In June 1997, Tyler returned to his home province of Prince Edward Island as Artist in Residence at the Confederation Centre of the Arts, in Charlottetown. He began to build **The Canada Tree** from the root base of a 250-year-old PEI Red Oak Tree that needed to be taken down near Royalty Oak, West Royalty. While under construction in the Courtyard of the Confederation Centre, no security was required.

Tyler asked the skateboarders hanging around the "Confed' Centre" to keep an eye on things at night and they did. This is yet one of many examples of Tyler's power of engagement.

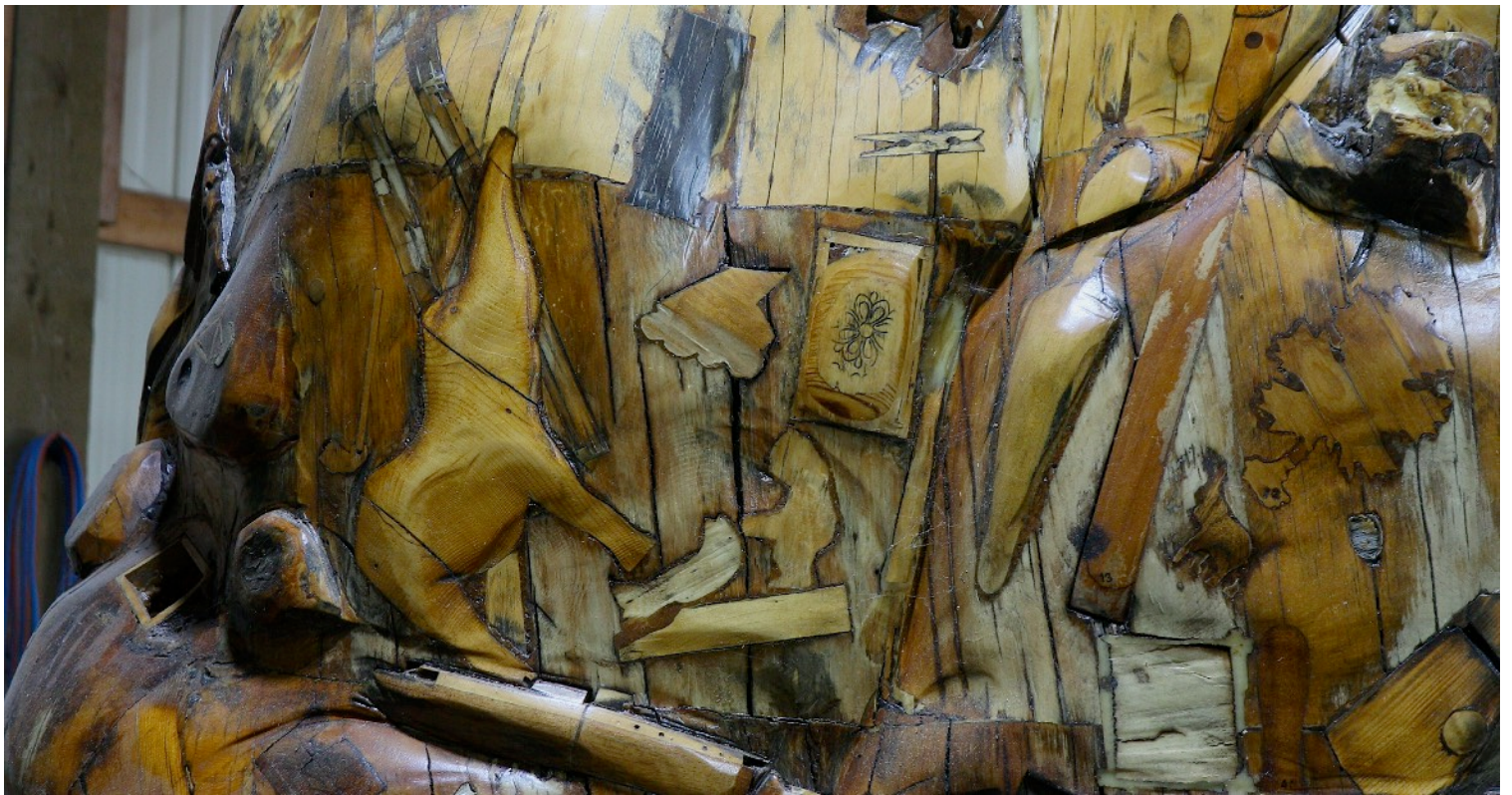
The Canada Tree was a magnet for locals and visitors alike. Throughout the summer, it was estimated that over 30,000 visitors came to see the creation of **The Canada Tree**. That summer Tyler and his Canada Tree Project received local and national media coverage including an interview with Wayne Ronstad host of CBC show On The Road Again.

On December 10, 1997, **The Canada Tree** in 5 Pieces was moved on a flatbed to Ottawa to prepare for the premier exhibit in the spring of 1998 at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec.

Aspin spent the winter of 1998 working on the sculpture in an airport hangar provided by the Department of National Defence and the Uplands Airport Authority. The Launch of **The Canada Tree** exhibit was held at the Museum of Civilization on Monday, June 29, 1998. Following that, for the next 3 years, The Canada Tree was exhibited and stories were collected in Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, London, Niagara on the Lake, and Charlottetown.



Artifacts incorporated into the Tree



Then Tyler died in 2001 in an instant in the outdoor sauna of his Quebec cabin.
The coroner later determined he'd been struck by lightning.



Tree in a Farm Field at Pinette



Linda Aspin - Tyler's Mother

It was unbelievably hard. But Tyler had quite a life. He was a pretty exceptional person. He was a genius in his own right as an artist and he had a big view of everything.

The Documentary Film Treatment

This documentary film will be based upon three interwoven themes. First, the life story of Tyler Aspin beginning with growing up on Prince Edward Island as told by his friends and his family, his mother Linda, his brother Jason and his sister Meigan.

Second, a recounting of his development as a visionary artist as examined by his friends, mentors and collaborators notably the artists and writers Terry Graff, Dan Steeves, Amy Stewart, Lenny Gallant, Kevin McNeil, Dr. Ian Newbould, Ted McInnes, Basile Papavangelou, Vaden Somers and the cabinet maker and wood artisan Richard Blais who made the cabinets for Artifacts.

Third, a view of the importance of forest and trees to the history of Canada. This overview will include the contribution of so many who donated their precious artifacts made from wood to the project. Voices will be heard from the letters of children, farmers, indigenous elders, fishers, workers, immigrants, politicians and celebrities who added their memories in creating a work of art.



This story is richly supported by archival footage and sound from radio and television programs and the personal photographs of family and friends. Plus there are the letters of all of those who wrote to Tyler. There is the Tree itself and all the artifacts, not to mention the beauty of the magical landscape and trees of Epekwitk which will frame the film.

The production will be shot in colour 4K and be approximately 90 min. with shorter versions possible. A French version will also be made.

Contact: Roma Dingwell
romadingwell@gmail.com

902-452-8553

Kent Martin was born on Prince Edward island and his life as a photographer and filmmaker began there. In his early days as a freelancer on the Island he directed four documentary films for the National Film Board, *Moses Coady*, *Empty Harbours Empty Dreams*, *Miller Brittain* and *In Love and Anger: Milton Acorn*. He was then hired by the NFB to work out of Montreal HQ and then a decade later moved to Halifax to head up NFB filmmaking for Atlantic Canada.



In his time Kent Martin has produced, directed, photographed and/or edited over 100 films on a range of subjects. They have played in film festivals all over the world from Melbourne, TIFF, Hot Docs, Berlin and Sundance and they have been broadcast on the world's major networks, CBC, CTV, PBS, Arte, ZDF, BBC, ITV, Netflix and Prime. His productions have garnered twenty Canadian Film Awards (Gemini and Genies), two *Canada Awards* and he has been nominated six times for the prestigious *Donald Brittain Award* for documentary filmmaking. The feature documentary *Westray* was short listed for an Academy

Award. His first book of photography, *Peggy's Cove Barrens: Rocks, Life, Sea and Sky* was published in September of 2021. More information about Kent and the films he has worked on can be found at: www.unceasingplay.ca

Roma Dingwell

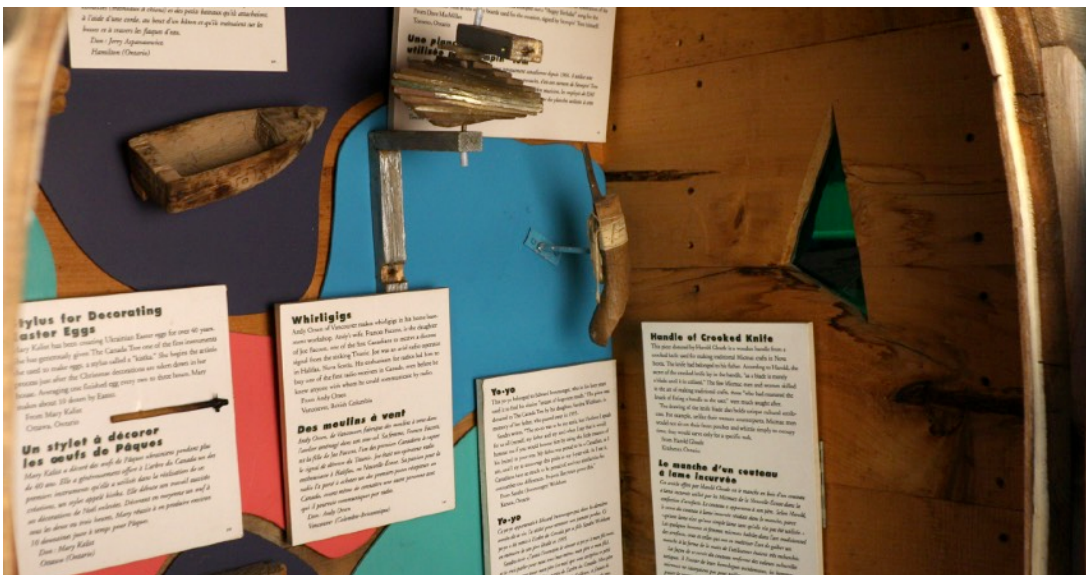
A true Maritimer, Roma has lived in all three provinces and presently spends much of her time where her roots run deep on Prince Edward Island. Roma brings over 30 years of experience in the Arts, Health and Event Management Sectors, complemented by her work and dedication to the various Boards of Directors on which she has served. She thrives at the opportunity and enjoys the collaborative dynamics of working strategically with volunteers, donors, senior decision makers, staff and board members. Some of the organizations she has worked with that have shaped her ongoing commitment to community are: The Hospital for Sick Kids, Pier 21, Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Hope Blooms, Devour Food Film Fest, The Chester Playhouse, and the PEI Arts Guild.



Roma's curiosity and strong interpersonal skills are utilized to inspire, coach and motivate internal team members and public partners. Together with the Aspin family, Roma has had the opportunity to do a deep dive into the world of Tyler Aspin and to research and pull together wide ranging material about how he was motivated to create the sculpture

known to all as the Canada Tree.

Cabinets for the Artifacts designed and crafted by Richard Blais



On the Road with the Tree





Other Tyler Aspin
Artwork

Blue at Sea



Tyler as Tree



Polar Bear