

In the aftermath of the Listowel arena collapse in 1959, support poured in from across the country. Photo courtesy of Listowel Banner

# LISTOWEL'S DARKEST DAY

THE ARENA COLLAPSE IN 1959 THAT TOOK THE LIVES OF EIGHT PEOPLE AND SHOOK THE COMMUNITY IS STILL VIVID TO THOSE WHO SURVIVED. **BY BEN FORREST**

*The coach and boys we lost that day  
That fateful day in fifty-nine  
For family, friends and all we pray  
To cherish their memories in our minds*

— Ross Werth, “Fifty-Nine”

At 9 a.m. on a damp, misty Saturday in February 1959, about 20 PeeWee hockey players took to the ice at Listowel Memorial Arena and began carving its surface with their skates. Steady rain added weight to a pile of snow on the arched roof, which had sheltered as many as 700 people for an ice carnival the night before.

Now, the place was nearly empty and relatively quiet. Norm Stirling, the Listowel hockey coach, put the players through drills to help him decide who would play in the Young Canada PeeWee Hockey Tournament in Goderich over Spring Break.

“It was just normal,” said Ross Werth, 72, one of the players hoping to make the team that day.

As Werth’s line came off the ice, he asked if he could grab a drink of water, which was out of character as he’d rarely asked for water before. Long before the days of water bottles on the bench, Werth rushed toward the door. Just as he began to exit the ice surface, he heard the “crack from hell,” as he later called it. Others who heard the noise said it was like the sound of a garage door banging shut. Under the weight of heavy snow, the arena’s exterior walls collapsed outward, and the roof fell onto the ice surface.

“I had my back to it when it fell,” Werth said. “I had nothing to look at until I turned around.”

He remembers falling to the ice and removing pieces of splintered wood from his legs. He moved over the debris toward the net to help Gerry McLeod, the team’s goaltender, and they exited the ice surface together and waited in a section of the arena that was still standing.

On the ice surface, seven of their teammates, including Werth’s best friend Jackie Rheubottom, as well as Ken McLeod, the town’s recreation director, were trapped under piles of fallen wooden beams, ice and snow.

Werth, 11 at the time, later found out they had died almost instantly. All of the players were between the ages of 10 and 12 and McLeod was just 37, a husband and father of four. Werth’s father, Ken came to pick him up and, when they got home, the youngster went to his bedroom and stayed there the rest of the day. No one came in to talk



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The municipality has announced plans to demolish Listowel Memorial Arena. Photo by Ben Forrest

about what had happened. He doesn't remember ever having a meaningful conversation about the incident with his parents in the years that followed.

"Back then, nobody talked about it," he said. "Today you'd have someone to talk to — to talk through it — but it was just something we didn't talk about. I didn't know my friend had died until — likely that night, or the next day."

*Let our hearts feel some content  
As the years repair the seams*

- Ross Werth, "Monuments"

### **Listowel's darkest day**

Most who remember February 28, 1959, think of it as Listowel's darkest day. The tragedy that claimed seven young hockey players and one young father made international headlines, not unlike the Humboldt Broncos bus crash in Saskatchewan in 2018. It was also painful for the survivors, and for decades they endured it in silence.

A reporter at *The Record* newspaper in Kitchener-Waterloo noted that 40 years after the tragedy, a plaque at the arena and stained glass windows at a local church were the only memorials. That changed in 1999, when Peter Leppard

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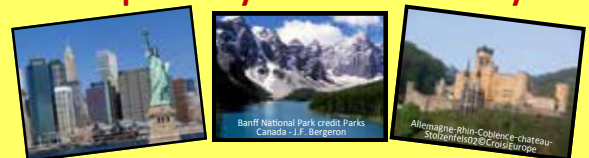
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Brenda and Ross Werth sit in the kitchen of their home in Wingham. Ross grew up in Listowel and is a survivor of the arena collapse. Photo by Ben Forrest

and Keith Bender organized an event to recognize the 40th anniversary of the tragedy.

The town installed a stone monument and memory garden outside the local library, and the names of every person who died that day — Jackie Rheubottom, Kenny Hymers, Jimmy Hastings, Keith Wight, Barry Smith, Ricky Kaufman, Bryan Seehaver and Ken McLeod — are etched into the monument’s jet-black surface.

A glass case in Listowel’s new recreation facility, the Steve Kerr Memorial Complex, has dozens of artifacts from the tragedy, including telegrams of condolence from then-Prime Minister John Diefenbaker and Conn Smythe of the Toronto Maple Leafs, who offered to pay for the funerals.

Inside the new arena, a banner bearing the names of those who died hangs on a wall overlooking the ice surface. But at the time it happened, the tragedy simply wasn’t discussed.

“People ate their grief,” Leppard told *The Record* in 2000. “It was just put away. I think all of us have long-lasting psychological effects.”

And so for years, Werth kept his feelings bottled up. He grew up and married Brenda, now his wife of 46 years. They moved to Wingham, where he managed a wholesale automotive business before retiring in 2013. They have two daughters and four grandchildren. They love to travel and cherish time spent with their family.

When he was 19, Werth began writing poetry. His verses were simple and accessible, drawing inspiration from Robert Frost and Leonard Cohen. He wrote for catharsis, and to mark significant life events, like the birth of his children, or to make Brenda smile. He wrote about their



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travels and his first new car, a shiny 1967 Chevrolet Camaro he still owns.

Along the way, Werth tried to articulate his thoughts about the tragedy, but the words never sounded right. Then, around the 40th anniversary, the verses finally began to flow.

*Friends we hardly got to know  
Who never got a chance to grow  
The sudden loss and tragedy  
Show just how fragile life can be*

— Ross Werth, “Fifty-Nine”

Several other poems about the tragedy followed. They were his way of processing it, but also a way of memorializing his friends. In 2017, Werth published the poems — along with many others about unrelated events — in a book-length collection called *59*.

“I always had the words,” said Werth, whose voice still

quivers when he speaks about the tragedy. “I just couldn’t put them together right and say what I wanted to say.

“And I don’t know. It just happened to come together.”

*I went to see my friends we lost  
And pray to God he’s kept them well*

— Ross Werth, “A Glance Behind”

In November 2019, the municipal council of North Perth voted unanimously to demolish Listowel Memorial Arena.

Their decision followed months of speculation and discussion, including a lengthy consultation process with local groups and with municipal staff.

Werth followed those discussions and was saddened by the outcome — although not surprised. His personal connection to the arena is still strong.



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by Ben Forrest



“I feel abandoned by this decision,” he said. “The wheels of progress rarely slow down or stop for anything as insignificant as feelings or memories. Once it is gone, next generations won’t know there was an arena on that site.”

This is a major concern among the generation of men and women who lived through Listowel’s darkest day, although there are reportedly plans to erect a memorial to the 1959 tragedy on the old arena grounds.

Werth hopes his poetry, and the efforts of other survivors and their families, will ensure the memory of those who died is never lost.

“When the day comes, year after year, people get farther away from it because the only people that relate to it personally are the people that are older,” Werth said. “So hopefully it’s passed down. Hopefully my book, if younger people read it... they won’t know what we went through, but they can appreciate more what happened that day.”

Tucked around and between poems about his children, about his grandkids, his parents, about Brenda and other people and things dear to him, there is an earnest attempt to work through his grief.

“I hope my book informs people a little bit,” said Werth. “At least they can take it as a stepping stone and go and ask someone or find out about that tragic day.

“If they are like me, they don’t talk about it unless they’re asked.” ■



IN REMEMBRANCE OF THOSE  
WHO LOST THEIR LIVES IN THE  
COLLAPSE OF LISTOWEL MEMORIAL ARENA  
FEBRUARY 28, 1959

Top left: A banner honouring those who died hangs in the new Steve Kerr Memorial Complex. Left: A stone memorial engraved with the names and images of all those who died in the arena collapse sits outside the town library building. Photos by Ben Forrest