As the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing embarks on a grand three-year celebration for the 125th anniversary of our organization, I remember my recent trip to Baddeck in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada. Auspiciously, a year into my tenure as CEO of this association, I was invited there by the Bell family to a most historic occasion. It was a celebration of Mabel Hubbard Bell, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell’s wife and partner, a woman ahead of her time, a special influence in Cape Breton in general and more specifically a woman dedicated to empowering women when this was not common practice.
VOLTA VOICES
Gaelic for “beautiful” mountain was declared a Canadian heritage property, located on the estate, overlooking Bras d’Or Lake.

It is perfectly lovely here with the archipelago of islands and steep hillsides sloping down to the water.

Mabel and Alec’s fathers urged them to explore Cape Breton as a summer spot in New England but were not inspired. Both Mabel and Alec sought a “simple, free and unconventional life,” far from the cares of the nation’s capital.

For several years they had considered fashionable summer spots in New England but had not been inspired. Both Mabel and Alec’s fathers urged them to explore Cape Breton and Newfoundland. Mabel’s father Gardiner Hubbard had long invested in the Caledonian coal mines in Glace Bay. And Alec’s father Melville had spent four summers as a youth in Newfoundland.

In late August 1885, Dr. Bell and his family set off on a sentimental journey to St. John, Newfoundland. Ironically the steamer they travelled on ran aground just off the coast, so they were brought to Baddeck. As their vessel entered the Bras d’Or lakes, Alec and Mabel and their little girls “gazed upon the little white lighthouses along the shoreline, punctuated by a dark backdrop of spruce, fir and pine,” as described by their biographer Charlotte Gray. For Dr. Bell, the labyrinth of inlets reminded him of the lochs of Scotland. “It is perfectly lovely here,” Mabel wrote her mother, “with the archipelago of islands and steep hillsides sloping down into the water.”

That first summer they rented a four-room cottage known as Crescent Grove just outside of Baddeck. It was from here that they had a perfect view of the peninsula across the water called Red Head. They decided to explore it. “Fancy driving over the crest of a mountain, the highest for many miles,” Mabel wrote to her mother, “and seeing the land stretched out on every side of you like a map.”

Baddeck is on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, and the home Dr. Bell built there is revered for its breathtaking views. They called it Beinn Bhreagh, Gaelic for “beautiful mountain.” The landscape is close to paradise. The juxtaposition of the green mountains between the sparkling cobalt blue waters and azure sky, made it obvious why both Mabel and Alec fell in love with the place. By 1887 Alec was so enthralled, he announced to Mabel that he would like to be buried atop Red Head.

They began to plan construction of Beinn Bhreagh in 1892. “The new house was to be in the very centre of the property [where] the mountain and trees shut out all cold winds while the sun’s rays had full play from sunrise to sunset,” according to Mabel.

At Beinn Bhreagh, the Bells could be themselves. For Alec the solitude and natural splendor also gave him a new lease on life; they would stimulate the kind of frenzy of invention he had enjoyed during the 1870s. The beauty of the site inspired Dr. Bell in his many experiments and inventions, which continued throughout his life and included explorations into global warming, energy conservation, solar heating, saltwater distillation and flight. Like Alec, Mabel was in love not just with its scenic grandeur, but she was inspired to take initiatives that would benefit those in the Scottish-settled community of Baddeck they’d came to admire.

Mabel gave Alec stability and a safe haven in which he could pursue his obsessions. He would write, smoke and think until 3 or 4 a.m., rise at 10 or 11, and then spend the afternoon and evening with work and family.

The family divided their time between Washington and Beinn Bhreagh where Dr. Bell died on Aug. 2, 1922. Mabel died six months later, and they are both buried atop Beinn Bhreagh mountain on the estate, overlooking Bras d’Or Lake. The property is still a refuge for their descendants. I had the privilege of sitting on the bench where the couple would sit for hours gazing on the beauty of their home. Behind me, I could see the simple stone marking their graves.

On July 31, 2015, Beinn Bhreagh was declared a Canadian heritage property, and I had the great honor of being invited to be part of the celebration. Sara Grosvenor, the youngest great-granddaughter of Alec and Mabel Bell, is a member of the AG Bell Board of Directors, and she spoke on behalf of the family at this celebratory event.

Sara is dedicated to preserving her great-grandparents’ contributions and achievements and celebrating their lives. By acknowledging the importance of Beinn Bhreagh to global and local history, and by recognizing the beauty of this site, this building helps to preserve Alec and Mabel Bell’s legacy. Sara encouraged participants in the celebration to “not only appreciate what our ancestors have done, but also to live in the present and to do the best you can - it’s not just frozen in time, it’s thinking of the future and inspiring others.”

Someone once told me that I should work to be remembered for the good I did in my lifetime, for the love I shared with family, friends and mankind. Legacies are remarkable things, and the more remarkable we are in how we serve others, the greater legacy we leave behind. Dr. Bell’s legacy lives on in many ways, through his home, through his descendants who are committed to keeping his vision alive and through the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.