

Welcoming Arms expands embrace setting a place for Welcome Table



By Brock Weir

As a non-profit charity extending its embrace to people in need across our community, the name Welcoming Arms is evocative of exactly what they do ? but going forward, they have expanded their embrace much wider.

Founded in 2006 through the efforts of six community churches, the volunteers of Welcoming Arms pool their resources ? and the donations of kind local partners ? to meet the needs of low income families in Town and provide them with financial assistance and advice to make ends meet.

Also helping to make ends meet is Welcome Table, the volunteer-run program at Trinity Anglican Church, which provides a weekly nutritious hot meal for Aurorans struggling with financial hardship.

For years, the two organizations have been united by ideals but separated by a parking lot ? Welcoming Arms operates out of Trinity's Rectory ? but now they have joined forces under the umbrella of Welcoming Arms to meet the growing needs of struggling Aurorans.

?Welcome Table is a highly successful program on its own, but it is difficult to raise money to sustain the program because it was within a church setting; people were uncomfortable donating to a church,? says Julie Cruickshank of Welcoming Arms. ?So, moving it to Welcoming Arms allows it to be part of a charitable organization and people can get a tax receipt from Welcoming Arms instead of a church. That was part [of why we united], but the other part of it is there is such synchronicity between what both of us do that it as a natural fit.?

Welcome Table leader Joy Marshall echoes this statement, adding there is an added bonus in joining Welcoming Arms ? Ms. Cruickshank's role as a paid oversight director.

?For me, it makes sense when you get this big,? says Ms. Marshall. ?Welcome Table is 14 years old and, to me, it is time to roll it in to a more streamlined organization with set policy, governance, and a Board of Directors ? and really in more of the community. At Welcoming Arms, it is six churches instead of one.?

According to Ms. Marshall, the day to day operations of Welcome Table will not be impacted. The major impact will be behind the scenes. They will now report to a Board of Directors who are able to give ?better advice than just one person making it up on the fly,? she says, with Ms. Cruickshank adding it will help them better serve the low-income and disadvantaged in Aurora by better connecting those who come to Welcome Table with the community referrals Welcoming Arms can offer.

?Welcome Table has been working off a shoestring budget for so many years and it would be so nice to expand their budget,? says Ms. Cruickshank. ?They do a phenomenal job with the budget they have, but we can help provide more nutritious food and greater quantities of it.?

And this expansion and connectivity is needed now more than ever.

According to Ms. Marshall, there once was a time when Welcome Table would serve between 12 and 15 local children with their families at one sitting. At their most recent meal, however, out of 100 guests there were 27 children.

?It is huge,? says Ms. Marshall. ?[On Wednesday] a mum arrived and she said she is saving a place because she has a friend coming and several of her friends arrived and all together they had eight children between them.?

Youth might be an exploding demographic at Welcome Table, but the same can't be said of Welcoming Arms; on the contrary, over at the Rectory, seniors are the fastest growing demographic, according to Ms. Cruickshank, particularly those who are depending on ODSP to make ends meet.

With this new partnership, there will be more resources to go around and this fall there will be even more resources to go around as Welcoming Arms has been selected as one of 20 community organizations to share in the proceeds from this year's Wild, Wild West Hoedown, hosted by Magna International.

Proceeds will go to help keeping the doors open at Welcome Table while Welcome Arms will use their allocation of the pie slice to help support Martha's Table, the meal program run out of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, which came under the Welcoming Arms umbrella as well last year.

?As a small charity, this is a big deal,? says Ms. Cruickshank of being selected for Hoedown. ?This is a big chunk of money for us to be running our programs and we love the idea of communities helping community. That is what we want to foster: the whole concept of being able to be supported by our community.?