

Support Services come under one roof at new Cartwright Community Centre



By Brock Weir

CHATS had a lot of elbow room when they moved into the Cartwright Building on Edward Street two years ago. But, with three new roomies in the form of the Alzheimer Society of York Region, York Region Support Services Network, and the Canadian hub of Hunter Engineering, all groups are firing on all cylinders working closer together.

Officials from the four organizations, as well as former Ontario Judge Ian Cartwright, the building owner, came together last week to formally cut the ribbon on the newly re-named Cartwright Community Centre. For Mr. Cartwright, who operated Canada Law Book out of the building until its sale to Thompson Reuters, although his name is on the building, it is not the operative word in that title.

‘Think about it ? saying someone is giving back means he has ripped off the community,’ Mr. Cartwright laughed, noting he would rather it simply be called the Community Centre. ‘The other thing that really bothers me is this whole business about naming rights. If you plaster your name on a building that is strictly nouveau riche.’

Evidently, however, that is not a view shared by the four groups now sharing the over 100,000 square feet of the Centre.

The transition of the building from the home of Canada Law Book to a community hub for all of York Region began with Christina Bisanz, executive director of CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors). Before moving to their new digs, they were in a less-than-ideal office on Wellington Street. Knowing they needed a place that was not only updated but accessible to their clients, Ms. Bisanz began a search. Several leads proved fruitless but when the sign went up on Edward Street advertising available space, Ms. Bisanz was literally the first person through the door.

It ticked all the boxes and they moved in last April.

‘It was kind of fun as we were rambling around this whole building and playing nicky-nicky-nine-doors when we got bored, but we kept in mind we wanted to attract other like-minded organizations so that we could also have an opportunity to integrate, communicate, and coordinate in areas where we have common service delivery and common client interest,’ said Ms. Bisanz. ‘I went into our sector and started talking to my colleagues and trying to convince them that they really needed to move and they really needed to move in this building.’

One of the first community groups to share the vision was York Support Services Network (YSSN). In fact, the YSSN had been looking for the previous five years on sharing space with other like-minded groups, but they just couldn't make it a reality. Everything aligned when they were approached with the possibilities of Cartwright.

“We looked at so many buildings and every one that was the right one fell through,” Marie Lauzier of the YSSN explained. “It all came together very quickly and we are very excited to be here. We are excited about our neighbours and we’re excited about the possibility of partnering.”

Loren Freid was also enthusiastic about the prospect of coming on board with this plan and has already seen the benefits of collaboration with the Alzheimer Society of York Region. Before the move, they were stuck in office space behind a Home Hardware store in Newmarket, a “dire” situation.

“This gives us a great opportunity to provide a unique community healthcare service hub between three very complementary organizations and we’re all excited for that opportunity,” he said. “Our organization [works] to improve the quality of life for people with Alzheimer’s and dementias and their families and it is a greater challenge to do this going forward. We know in Ontario, over the next 10 years, there will be more people over the age of 65 than there will be under the age of 15. We are becoming an older population. Alzheimer’s is not a regular part of aging, but aging is a regular determinant of Alzheimer’s.”

“Our patients are much more relaxed and calmer than they were in the other location. The opportunities for service enhancement are terrific. We are very grateful to Ian Cartwright. It is a challenge to build a construction from scratch for three community organizations who all have our own particular needs. You did it flawlessly and you did it with great sensitivity, and we are very grateful for the kind of support you have provided to us.”

For local politicians on hand for last week’s grand opening, the Cartwright Community Centre not only offers an opportunity to the clients who use these services, but an ideal model of collaboration going forward.

“It is a great opportunity to centre three pretty important groups in an area where they can get a lot of synergies by sharing, even if it is nothing more than moral support,” said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. “They are all fulfilling different mandates, but they all have a very general area they try to do which is support those in need in our community.”

Added Councillor Wendy Gaertner: “For anyone who needs assistance, whether they are seniors, have accessibility issues, or are in need of social services, to be able to come to one place and not have to run around [and experience transit challenges] this is fabulous.”