

Camp space particularly needed for adults living with autism: Society

By Brock Weir

Autism doesn't simply stop when one reaches the age of 18, and that is a particular challenge faced every day by families with members living on the Autism spectrum, and those on hand to provide social services.

That is the message of the Autism Society of Ontario ? York Region Chapter, who joined forces with ?Aspie Comic? Michael McCreary in Aurora last week, to help provide for the future of older adults facing these daily challenges.

The night of comedy, which was held last Wednesday at the Aurora Cultural Centre, benefited the Chapter's camp programs, and was a fitting way to cap their programming series designed around Autism Awareness Month.

According to Heidi Hitchmough, Chapter President, these camps are often the only options for families looking to provide productive opportunities for their children living on the autism spectrum.

?Without our camp they would not have anywhere else to go,? says Ms. Hitchmough. ?Some of them have higher needs and each of our campers receives a one-on-one person for the entire week they are there. They get to go out into the community, and get to do the wonderful, great things that others might take for granted. We do trips to the Toronto Zoo, to Centre Island, to Wild Water Kingdom. Twice a week they go swimming, they get to go out to a restaurant once a week, and we have sensory play for them. It is a very busy and fun-filled week that we are proud to be able to offer to all of our campers.?

The Autism Society of Ontario ? York Region Chapter runs their camp programs throughout the summer. On average, they serve 48 campers per week from all over York Region and South Simcoe, 20 per cent of whom come from Aurora.

Campers are subsidized heavily by the Society as these 48 individual campers collectively translate to 70 staff members, including support workers, to make that happen.

Year over year, they are experiencing an upward trend in their adult populations. Ms. Hitchmough says it is typically easier to find adequate spaces for younger kids in municipal programs who can be integrated into community programs with one-on-one supports.

?For our older guys, we can't really integrate them into a basketball camp with 14 year olds who really are there to play basketball,? she says. ?It just becomes more difficult. As they get older, teens and adults have to have programs and that is what we are very pleased to be able to offer.?

This summer's camp programs served clients ranging in age from four to 32, but these camps are just one component of the services they offer to the community. They offer monthly support groups and social events throughout the year for the whole family including special movie nights where they rent out a theatre and turn down the volume and bump up the lights, so those with sensory challenges can enjoy the show.

?When you are in an environment with all other families, we all get that,? says Ms. Hitchmough. ?We have all been there and done that. It is a very safe, accepting environment.?

For more information, contact the Chapter at 905-780-1590.