

?Horrendous and growing? waitlists face adults with intellectual challenges



By Brock Weir

Since its inception, Community Living has envisioned a society where people who have intellectual disabilities have equal rights, respect, acceptance, a sense of self-worth and ultimately belong ? and it is a vision that is being celebrated this month in Ontario. In fact, this past Monday, May 8, was Community Living Day here in Aurora and members of Community Living Aurora-Newmarket ? staff and clients alike ? and local dignitaries gathered at Town Hall to raise the flag in celebration. Those in attendance on Monday were relatively quiet about the work they do in the community ? but that is about to change as the organization prepares to launch a new \$5 million Capital Campaign in the next few weeks to meet the rapidly rising needs in a growing community.

The Happy Hearts Capital Campaign is set to launch at the end of this month. In the works for the last 18 months, the three year campaign will see Community Living Aurora-Newmarket's headquarters in Newmarket renovated to triple its capacity, including the addition of evening and weekend day support hours, and steer pilot projects on home supports.

?Our biggest issue is population growth in York Region,? says Ruth Groves, Fundraising Director for Community Living. ?This organization started back in 1954 and it was very grassroots. It was parents who got together and wanted a better life and better choices for their children. Back then, the solutions were institutionalization or very segregated schooling, sometimes completely separate buildings.?

Nowadays, there is an underlying philosophy of inclusiveness and integration across the spectrum, but that often only goes so far. Once individuals with intellectual challenges integrated within the school system reach the age of 21, there is no longer a place for them and, consequently, they are unable to access all the supports that are offered at school.

?The day you turn 21 you're pretty much on your own if you have a developmental or intellectual disability,? explains Ms. Groves. ?Currently in York Region, the wait list for day support programming is 2,000 people. That means probably eight to 10 years for some of those people to get the kind of programming that we offer. I think everyone knows the biggest need in the developmental disabilities sector in York Region is fast growth. The wait list for the type of service Community Living offers is horrendous and growing.?

In locations across both municipalities, the organization runs day support programming which ranges from employment programs to culinary training supports, music and arts programs, and a variety of other supports available to clients before they age out of the school system at the age of 21. Most of the day supports, however, take place at their Newmarket headquarters and without the resources to expand into their lower level which was, until quite recently, home to Habitat for Humanity's Re-Store, they are currently running at capacity.

?We have been in the quiet stage of going after the ?leadership' or larger gifts, and there has been a ton of work in the last 18 months on putting together a capital plan and a capital campaign cabinet and we have some great volunteers,? says Ms. Groves. ?We have been bringing people in, having tours and showing them our facilities and how everyone has been making do but as [Executive Director Colleen Zakoor] says we don't just want to ?make do' anymore. We want the community to come into us and we want to be able to go out into the community. That is the whole goal of community living: it is about inclusion, it is about communities, and it is about all the abilities we have here. It is a wonderful place and I learn every day from the people we serve and support.

?Before coming here a year ago I only knew about Community Living peripherally, knowing that it was about folks being looked after, but when I came in and started working here and getting to know the wonderful people we support and serve, as well as their

families, I see how much it is about abilities as opposed to the disability and the wonderful opportunities, learning, respect and dignity that is offered here. The staff do an incredible job with not a lot.

?What I can see is the population we support and serve, the funding is very, very low and there are so many wonderful people, who given the right supports, being in the right atmosphere and being offered the services that we offer can flourish.?