

Kerry's Place has sweet way of spreading awareness on World Autism Day



The more knowledge we have to recognize people's differences, the more we realise how similar we really are, according to Thomas Luxemburger.

People with autism, for instance, might have a disability, but they are people first, he says. They have the same wants, needs and desires as everyone else does, although they might express it in a different way. They have things they are good at, things they are not so good at, but if people are able to see their talents, it can create a world of good.

This was a view Mr. Luxemburger and other members of Kerry's Place Autism Services were trying to share, by sharing a few pieces of candy outside their Aurora headquarters to mark World Autism Day last Thursday. Kerry's Place staff, clients and volunteers were joined by Mayor Geoff Dawe to participate in a new spin on the 'Twizzler Challenge', leaving licorice-holding participants to snap their candies in half, passing the other half to their neighbours, symbolically spreading awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

April is Autism Awareness Month and for Mr. Luxemburger, who has worked with Kerry's Place for three years both on the residential and, more recently, on the community support side, this is an important opportunity to challenge misconceptions around the disorder.

'Initially, it was a difficult decision to make,' he says of moving out of his career as a teacher and dedicating his time to the non-profit. 'When I was teaching individuals, it was in a group-based format, whereas this is more individualized. What I love about what I do every day is I see a difference. I make a difference every day. I see the change in the individual based on their needs.'

'One of the ways I support the individual is a person looking for work, a person looking to apply to school, and looking to be more independent in their own home or their own community. The difference I make is being able to [help make] those changes to the person day-to-day.'

Following his transition from the school system to Kerry's Place, he says he quickly realised he made the right choice. Three weeks into his full-time employment, he was helping a person struggling to find a full-time job. He suggested his client first work as a volunteer to gain the experience needed to transition into a steady, permanent job. The client, however, was at a loss on how to secure a volunteer opportunity.

'Once I gave him some support on how to find some volunteer positions and gave him some opportunities to look into, within a few weeks they were able to find a volunteer position and they are currently working full-time somewhere, which is awesome.'

Kerry's Place Autism Services marked its 40th anniversary last year. For Chief Operating Officer Jim Preston, this milestone was an opportunity to reflect on how far they have come and how far they still have to go over and beyond the next 40 years.

'The one thing that is constantly changing are the numbers and they are increasing significantly,' said Mr. Preston, noting Kerry's

Place currently supports 9,000 families across Ontario. ?We have a fairly broad continuum of supports in York Region [but] the problem we continually run into is there isn't enough depth in that continuum that the more people that come along the services start to get spread out and drawn on more heavily.

?What is obvious is there is an awful lot going on in the area of research to try and understand what causes autism and unfortunately while there is a lot going on, we are not a whole lot farther along in understanding that. Better diagnosis is an issue that is certainly increasing, the continuum of the spectrum itself has changed somewhat but the bottom line is the numbers are increasing substantially and that is across Canada.?