

Kerry's Place marks 45 years of helping families on the Autism spectrum



By Brock Weir

When Kerry's Place Autism Services first planted roots, they aimed to give a helping hand to families impacted by autism.

At the beginning, they had just a few handfuls of client families, but from these early days the need has only grown.

As they prepare to mark their 45th anniversary this fall, the Aurora-based organization has become one of the nation's largest service providers for families living with ASD.

"When you hear the number '45' it is quite significant," says Travis Ambing, Fundraising Manager for Kerry's Place. "This is a big year for us. We just finished our twenty-fifth annual golf classic, which was absolutely incredible, and now we're building up for our Annual General meeting, highlighting supportive individuals and their milestones, what's going on in their lives, and how Kerry's Place has been a partner in that growth. For us, it really is about highlighting the services and supports we provide and where we're going in the future."

Kerry's Place's 45th anniversary celebration and AGM will take place this Thursday, August 29, at the Sheraton Parkway Toronto North Hotel in Richmond Hill. Free to the public, the event will open with festivities from 6 to 7 p.m., with the business portion of the meeting from 7 p.m. onward.

"When you think back to 1974, there is such a large need for the services that we provide and that need is only getting larger," says Mr. Ambing. "For us at Kerry's Place, we need to be able to fill that void and what we really want to see is individuals diagnosed with ASD be fully supported and fully participating members of their community. That's what we're trying to drive home."

"Leading up to our fiftieth anniversary, I think we only want to grow from where we are. We want to continue the basics, our programs, and we want to be able to build off them and educate the wider community about what Autism is."

In addition to marking their milestone this week, members

and volunteers at Kerry's Place are working hard to spread the word about next month's Magna Hoedown, which will take place in Aurora September 13 & 14.

This year, Kerry's Place, in partnership with Autism Ontario, is one of Hoedown's 20 partner charities and, as such, will share in the proceeds from York Region's annual party, which regularly raises more than half-a-million dollars for community organizations.

"The Hoedown is one of the largest events in York Region and it is a cornerstone in the community," says Ambing. "For Kerry's place to be able to secure a spot as a beneficiary, it is absolutely beautiful. Proceeds will go to supporting incredible programs, evidence-based clinical practices, family and sibling support groups, educational workshops and things of that nature. For us, we're able to put the money where it is most needed. We're teaming up with Autism Ontario in raising funds and awareness.

"It was quite exciting that when I stepped into the role, Autism Ontario plays a large role in the realm of Autism within Ontario, obviously, but so does Kerry's Place. We're a support service organization, so it is quite natural for us to team up with them in supporting the community as a whole. For us, it is much nicer to be able to push one message to the community, one event to the community, merging together."

All funds allocated through the 2019 Hoedown will go directly to supporting individuals with ASD. One in 68 individuals are diagnosed with ASD and Mr. Ambing says that Kerry's Place is focusing on making people understand that point.

"All proceeds are staying within our Central Region," he says. "Some of the programs that will benefit are evidence-based clinical therapies, educational workshops around ASD, respite care and social groups, and even day and employment supports for individuals which, for us at Kerry's Place, is quite exciting," he says. "It allows us to direct the money to where it is most needed. We have been operating since 1974 and we serve over 8,000 individuals, over 250 are in our residential services, so there are two sides to it: our residential services and our community supports, which encompass life skills training. We have over 70 residences across Kerry's Place, in southern Ontario, and we keep on growing. It is quite exciting to be able to serve the community at large the way we do, and we're hoping to continue that growth.

"To receive this recognition [from Magna] in our milestone year is massive for us. Hoedown is going to be incredibly fun, yes, and for everyone attending it will be quite exciting, but for Kerry's Place, with that fun comes a particular outcome and that outcome is to bolster our supports and services for our community. Although we are going to have a great time bringing volunteers in to help support the event and really drive the community to come together and celebrate what Kerry's Place is doing and what Autism Ontario is doing and what Hoedown is doing in the area, it comes down to being able to provide supports like family and sibling support groups, respite care and social groups. We're incredibly grateful that we have been able to come on board for this second year in a row as a beneficiary of the Hoedown."