

Seniors' Centre breaks down barriers by breaking down 'walls'?

By Brock Weir

It was a lively discussion over the phone as five local residents – men and women – debated the true origin of the telephone.

Alexander Graham Bell invented the device that has helped connect billions of people around the world. Not so fast, said others, the man truly responsible for the telephone is still being disputed.

The matter went unsettled at the end of the conversation, but one thing was clear: the phone still serves to connect. But these five provided it can do something even more potent: break down barriers.

The five women and men were Thursday's participants in Tip Top Trivia, a friendly phone competition hosted by the Aurora Seniors' Centre as part of their Seniors' Centre Without Walls program.

The Seniors' Centre Without Walls (SCWW) program is a free, interactive telephone-based initiative that connects seniors 55-and-over, as well as persons with disabilities, who find it difficult to leave the home for extended periods of time, including trips to the Aurora Seniors' Centre.

Through the use of group telephone calls, organizers say SCWW provides "a rich lineup of brain-stimulating activities" as well as a "space to create meaningful friendships and connections to the community."

The Aurora Seniors' Centre was inspired to spearhead the SCWW by an initiative run by The Good Companions, a seniors' centre in Ottawa.

Introduced to the program through a webinar, Karie Papillon, Adult Program Coordinator for the Aurora Seniors' Centre, and her colleague Andrew Bailey, immediately saw the benefits just such an initiative could bring to the local community.

"Some of the data coming out of what they are doing with the program is astronomical," says Ms. Papillon. "In Ottawa, the average participant who takes part in these calls actually lives on less than \$15,000 a year. Most of them have health

[challenges]

or disabilities that keep them stranded at home, and 88 per cent of them say it has increased their socialization in life and decreased their isolation. The number that is most staggering to me is that it actually decreases ER visits by 50 per cent. With the state of our healthcare budget and our healthcare today, that is a huge number.

?We were sitting in this webinar and Andrew turned to me and said, 'We can do this,' and it just rolled from there. We brainstormed how to do it back in July and it took us until March of this year to actually start the calls and get it off the ground.?

Helping to get the program off the ground was an important grant from the Federal Government's New Horizons for Seniors Program, support from the Town, as well as an assist from The Good Companions.

?The Good Companions put together almost a Seniors' Centre Without Walls in a box,? says Ms. Papillon. ?It came with ideas we could use, different strategies, and a lot of the programming content we started out with we stole flat out from The Good Companions with their cheerful permission.

?I have been at the Seniors' Centre for 10 years and all of us at the Centre knows someone who just can't come in anymore. It is really sad; these are active, vital people who, for some reason or another, such as transportation, or they can't walk, or they're sick, they're now losing their base of friends. We want this to be a stop-gap measure for those people who can't quite come in anymore, or even those who can only come in once a week.?

One such participant in Thursday afternoon's Tip Top Trivia challenge is usually only able to come into the Seniors' Centre on Wednesdays and Fridays, but thanks to the SCWW initiative, she's able to participate in programming four days a week.

Another participant started out just as a participant, calling in to take part in the variety of activities offered by the SCWW, but so positive was her experience that she's now gearing up to lead a tele-activity of her own for fellow Aurora seniors.

?We are looking to expand this as big as we can,? says Mr. Bailey.

?The numbers of participants per call is one of our [measurables],? adds Ms. Papillon. ?We started off with one or two a week and we had seven last Thursday, five this Thursday and we're

pleased with that amount of growth in less than a month. Penny is stepping up to help us lead some calls and is now a volunteer in the program which shows us growth and excitement. With any luck, we'll have a big enough demand to have up to three calls a week starting in September.?

For more information on how to be part of this demand, or want to point someone in the direction of the Seniors' Centre Without Walls program, call 905-727-3123 x3614 or email scww@aurora.ca. SCWW is open to all individuals 55+ living in Aurora, all adults with physical disabilities living in Aurora, and participation is not limited to Seniors' Centre members. Volunteers are also welcome.