

41 years on, a proud daughter celebrates a lasting family legacy



By Brock Weir

It's rare the occasions when Kay O'Neil's sister Kerry makes eye contact but, when she does, she makes it count.

Recently, the sisters were sitting at the table of Kerry's Orangeville residence when she locked eyes on Kay, leaned in and said, "Kay, I am happy."

Those four small words packed a punch and after they parted, tears streamed down her face the entire ride home.

"At first we felt guilty and the guilt is gone," Kay recalls. "What a relief."

You might not know the full story of Kerry O'Neil, but you probably recognize her name even if you don't know it. She is the Kerry behind the Aurora-based Kerry's Place Autism Services and her elder sister Kay is here to tell her story.

Kay was on hand for the annual Volunteer Appreciation Day for Kerry's Place, held at Town Park on Sunday in conjunction with Art in the Park.

As she looked out over the sea of volunteers, clients and artists assembled for the occasion, which marks the service organization founded 41 years ago, Kay was awestruck.

Things have come a long way in the subsequent four decades, but now Kay is on a mission to shed light on the foundations of Kerry's Place with her new book "The Birth of Kerry's Place: Canada's First Treatment Centre for Persons with Autism."

"I just wanted to document the history for my own family as it's part of our family history," she says. "Then I realised while I was doing the history that all of the founding members of Kerry's Place weren't mentioned collectively anywhere. I wanted to honour the original staff of Kerry's Place and how hard they worked integrating the clients into the community."

Kerry's Place has its foundations in Clarksburg, ON, on the O'Neil family farm.

For years, their mother and father had been trying to find out what was wrong with their youngest daughter, but were at a loss at where to find answers.

"They knew she was different, but they knew she wasn't 'mentally retarded' and they knew that it wasn't poor parenting," says Kay. "They went from place to place, from doctor to doctor, trying to find answers and she wasn't diagnosed until she was 17. A few others had been diagnosed by that time, but they were a lot younger than Kerry and they all lived in Toronto."

?When she was diagnosed, mum and dad were put in touch with a group of parents and they were all told to institutionalize their children and they weren't going to accept that at all. They wanted a better life for their children. [The other parents] saw Kerry wasn't being institutionalized and she was doing well on the farm, so they got this idea that maybe it would be a nice setting for their children.?

Their father set to work building an addition onto the farm house, while the group approached the Ontario Government, got the resources to undertake feasibility studies to get the staffing in place and ultimately Ministry approval. Thus, Kerry's Place was born.

From there, it expanded to multiple residences, each bearing the names of the children of the founding families but as the original Kerry's Place reached international renown, they came together under that original banner.

?Never in their lifetime did the founding members think it would grow the way it did,? says Kay. ?They were just hoping that they would open the farm, be able to help their own children and secure the program, and some others along the way, and hopefully there would be a cause identified and a cure. Everyone is very humbled it has grown as it has and I really felt it was important the audience knew about those people as a group and the contribution they made to society. I am proud it is named after my sister. It is quite a legacy for my children, my grandchildren, my nieces and nephews.

?Not having a need for Kerry's Place [41 years from now] would be the ideal, but it would be nice to see more needs met. The waiting list is so long. I just wish they could find a cause. It would be wonderful if Kerry's Place wasn't needed 10 years from now let alone 40 years from now. But the right people came together at the right time.?

Ms. O'Neil's book is available now for \$20 and is available by emailing the author at koneil2010@hotmail.com.