

Break the Silence, Step in To My Shoes event underscores reality of gender-based violence



The stark and tragic reality of gender-based violence was underscored locally this month as Yellow Brick House partnered with St. Andrew's College and St. Anne's School to host the annual Break the Silence, Step Into My Shoes event.

A yearly mission of Yellow Brick House, the Aurora-based shelter for women and children fleeing domestic violence, this year's event saw participants set out on foot through St. Andrew's picturesque campus to raise \$100,000 for the cause ? with every \$150 raised going towards providing one night of safety for a women or child fleeing a dire situation.

?It was an extremely successful event, and each year it gets better and better,? said Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of Yellow Brick House. ?We were thrilled to have St. Andrew's College students and St. Anne's School students help us organize and actually emcee the event and that was fantastic. Having students from both colleges co-emcee and co-coordinate and assist in the planning really speaks to how we all play a part in the solution to ending gender-based violence. We really took the opportunity with our event to not only raise awareness of the impact of domestic violence in our community but also put out a Call to Action.?

Herenda says that in this year alone there have been ?tragic numbers? in Ontario, with 55 women lost due to intimate partner violence in the first 44 weeks of 2023. This, she said, does not even include the number of children who have been murdered as well in domestic situations.

?This is not something that happens to a select group of people in particular communities ? it can happen to anyone anywhere and it impacts us all,? she said. ?We need all voices, all different age groups, and all different genders speaking about this issue because it impacts us all. Our Call to Action is fairly simple: we must invest in prevention programs. We must invest in education so we can start educating our youth and our community at large about healthier relationships, especially with youth, [that] these are what healthy relationships look like, these are what risk signs look like, and this is how you can escape dangerous situations and this is where you can get help. Changing the societal attitude, if you will, about violence against women and girls?we must, as a society, say no to that. If we're witnessing or suspicious about being abused, collectively, we must have the services available to assist families who are escaping the violent situation while simultaneously investing in prevention programs, educating our community that we don't want to have intimate partner violence as part of our societal norms.?

Over the last couple of years, more than 40 Ontario municipalities, including Aurora, have declared intimate partner violence an epidemic. But doing so is not enough, says Herenda. There has to be an ?actual investment? at all levels of government, including infrastructure to enable agencies like Yellow Brick House, to provide the services that are needed. Investment is also essential to offer prevention programs in schools, workplaces, and ?wherever people are gathering.?

?In 2024, we're looking forward to getting more details about an agreement that has been made between the Federal Government and the Province of Ontario with regards to the National Action Plan and the investment [that] the Federal Government is giving to the Province of Ontario to implement investment into infrastructure and prevention programs. More details to come with that.?

In the meantime, now is the perfect time to help with that investment as the Citrine Foundation has stepped up to foster a donation-matching program.

The Citrine Foundation was established in 2016 to support Canadian charities that serve children, women, healthcare, the arts, and more. Since its inception, it has distributed more than \$9.5 million to such organizations.

?We have a drive during the month of November for Women Abuse Prevention Month and during this month we are encouraging people to contribute to Yellow Brick House and double their impact. We have the Citrine Foundation who has contributed up to \$25,000 in matching donations,? says Herenda.

?We encourage people to really join us during this campaign and all the funds raised will be going towards our prevention program.?

For more information on Yellow Brick House and the services it offers the community, visit yellowbrickhouse.org.

If you are in crisis, call their 24-Hour Crisis Line toll free at 1-800-263-3247.

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