

Cartwright Building set for new life as community health care hub



By Brock Weir

For decades, the Cartwright Building near Yonge Street and Edward Street was home to the venerable company Canada Law Book. Now, four years after the sale of the company, the building is on the cusp of becoming a community health hub.

‘I think we got used to being the only child, but now the siblings are moving in,’ says Christina Bisanz, CEO of CHATS (Community and Home Assistance for Seniors).

After nearly two years of CHATS having plenty of elbow room in the 102,000 square foot office and warehouse space, they will soon be welcoming the Alzheimer Society of York Region and York Support Services Network, as they move the majority of their operations into this building to create a new model of a healthcare campus.

Following the sale of Canada Law Book from Ian Cartwright to Thompson-Reuters in 2010, his Cartwright Group explored various options for their expansive Aurora headquarters, according to Cartwright Group president Kent Milford. Mr. Cartwright, a retired Ontario Provincial Court Judge and philanthropist, has always had the interests of the community at heart, says Mr. Milford, and this presented a unique opportunity.

‘We came to the conclusion that what would be the best for all concerned was to attempt to divide and lease the building, but do it with a slant,’ he says. ‘We thought this space would be well-suited to not-for-profit organizations. CHATS was the first on the scene and they definitely reinforced the concept that we had.’

The decision to make the building available targeted specifically towards non-profit groups came at a very opportune time for CHATS. After 13 years in their Wellington Street West headquarters, they had simply outgrown their space and their lease was coming up.

According to Ms. Bisanz, the group has to have administrative space, space for adult day programs, service coordinators, their call centres, as well as space for clients to come and utilize their services.

‘We really despaired of finding anything that matched our space requirements, our accessibility requirements and our cost requirements,’ says Ms. Bisanz. ‘We had almost given up and were considering renewing when the sign went up on the lawn.’

‘As soon as we posted it for lease, Christina was there like a dirty shirt!’ adds Mr. Milford with a laugh.

Bisanz' situation was not unique. York Support Services Network (YSSN), which provides crisis response for those dealing with serious mental illness and developmental disability, was also outgrowing its current space. Executive Director Marie Lauzier says she had been interested in exploring sharing space with other non-profits eight years ago with four other partners, but could never find the just the right space which wouldn't need millions of dollars in renovations.

"I finally moved in to where I was when we realised it wasn't going to happen," she says. "We were never going to find a building that was big enough. We were never going to find the money for renovations. I just thought rather than renew our lease and still struggle with [our staff and clients] in different places, we just started looking. The price was amazing, the space was great, the building was accessible, and many of the folks that use our services can come to us by transit half a block away."

Current leases held by the Alzheimer Society of York Region in Newmarket expire this year. The organization, which provides day programs, respite programs, and education for individuals and families living with dementia had also outgrown their current digs and challenged their real estate agent to "think outside the box" when it came to finding a solution.

Due to some cross-over in both services and clients with CHATS, they became aware of the Cartwright opportunity through Ms. Bisanz and with this connection, they can now expand their services.

"It allows us to do three things with our programming," says Loren Freid, Executive Director of the Alzheimer Society of York Region. "We can upgrade, expand and diversify our programming by just being here. It provides some greater comforts for staff being here and there is a great opportunity for us in being here and working with like-minded organizations with this health care campus."

Now, Aurora will be the nerve centre for the Alzheimer Society, CHATS, and most of the YSSN.

Extensive work still needs to be done within the building to make way for the organizations, but all partners hope their doors will be open by the end of June with a community celebration which will show off and showcase all the companies which will call the redubbed "Cartwright Centre" home.

In the meantime, however, CHATS still has the run of the place. Since they moved in, they now have space for training programs for volunteers and drivers, who provide much-needed travel opportunities for seniors to and from appointments.

The new building will provide the Alzheimer Society with the ability to provide services to a much larger group of clients in their cognitively impaired day programs by at least 15 per cent at the outset, with room to grow, says Mr. Freid. Programming will also be diversified in the creation of a sensory room to provide much needed stimulation to clients, as well as an outdoor sensory garden which will give clients a place to "use their senses to a greater degree and another place where clients can go to address anxiety issues."

A therapeutic garden is also in the works for CHATS' side of the building, using a federal New Horizons grant to integrate gardening into their therapy programs, fostering an overall program of health and wellness and, of course, to enjoy the sun.

As work continues in the building to make everything ready for summer occupancy, Mr. Milford says that while they wanted to fill the building with non-profits, they also had an eye on business in wanting a return on their investment.

"We definitely wanted to give something back to the community, but the concept was we felt we needed one tenant that was for profit," he says. "We found a fourth tenant in Hunter Engineering, which is new to Aurora. They are very happy as well to be associated with this type of venture. They wish to be a part of the community, they want Aurora to know they are here and supporting Aurora and they are pleased their needs mesh with ours."

Adds Ms. Bisanz: "Moving in here as the first tenant was not necessarily the easiest thing because there were a lot of unknowns. [When we moved in] we found ourselves in this zoning issue and we didn't know whether we would be able to stay here. We have

just had tremendous support to enable us to move in. Now that the siblings are moving in, we have to share, but I think the sharing is what we all look forward to doing.?