

Centre celebrates 40 years of serving York Region women

By Brock Weir

'We're calling this a cause for celebration,' says Catherine Madden, Executive Director of the Women's Centre of York Region, which celebrates its 40th anniversary in the community.

But, while the Women's Centre (WCYR) gears up for a celebratory open house on January 31, as well as a series of programs and initiatives to go on throughout their milestone year, the celebration is slightly tempered by the reality of the situation: in an ideal world there would be no use for the WCYR in the first place.

'The ideal would be to put ourselves out of business and nobody would need us, but I think we have to look at the positive side of things that if women need us, we're glad that we are able to be here and we have the support of the community and our funders to continue to deliver the work that we do.'

Founded 40 years ago by two women as J & J's Women's Counselling, the WCYR has its roots in offering free counselling to women in the community who felt they needed it and didn't have access to either the funds or the resources of getting that support elsewhere.

That philosophy remains at the core of what they do today, serving 'women who have identified the need and desire for positive change in their lives' through unique programming addressing a wide array of needs, at little or no cost, in a safe and inclusive environment.

Their mandate is to 'fully support each woman on her personal journey of discovery in order that she thrives fully' operating on an anti-oppressive, 'anti-racist framework.'

'Counselling has always been the foundational piece of what we do,' explains Ms. Madden, who joined the team as Executive Director two years ago. 'As the organization has grown, we have made sure that the programs and the services we have brought to the organization over the 40 years still are very complementary to each other. We don't just add a program for the sake of adding a program, it has to have logical sense in that trajectory that it has to move a woman forward and letting a woman pop in on that era or trajectory where she needs us versus where we determine she needs to be.'

According to Ms. Madden, York Region women seek out the Women's Centre for a variety of reasons. In many instances, it is a case of low income and providing women access to free services they might not otherwise be able to afford. They are also seeing more and more women coming in preparing to re-enter the workforce to support raising their children, or looking for work once their children are grown.

'It's a matter of looking at what their skills are and what their new career might be for them, so they can support themselves or support their family,' says Ms. Madden.

There are also life stresses, and it is here their life skills programs kick into high gear, consistently operating above capacity with virtually no advertising. These life skills run the gamut from boundary setting, to conflict management, and even money management.

'I think one of the things that sets us apart and has been there right from the beginning is the fact that we offer our services at no extra charge,' says Ms. Madden. 'We haven't moved at a fee for service or sliding scale model. We have been able to continue to keep our operational expenses at a level that meets the funding that we have and therefore continue to be able to offer those services at no charge.'

'From a funding perspective, we're strongly accountable back to our funders, which ranges anywhere from the Ontario Government right down to the Regional government in terms of meeting their targets and their objectives which are being driven through the community and through the statistics they create. If they are looking at things like mental health, we're accountable in terms of our feedback and our numbers and our commitment to the services.'

The WCYR kicks off their 40th anniversary with their January 31 open house, which Ms. Madden says will 'truly be a celebration' and a reminder to the community not only that they welcome volunteers, but they are always here to serve. In addition to new programs, which will be launched later this year, they are hoping to reach out to 'community champions to come to the table' to help them realise their \$100,000 fundraising goal.

'We're looking at a way that other folks can help us send an additional 40 women through our program in 2017 and 2018 which equates to about \$35,000,' says Ms. Madden. 'It is about \$850 per woman from our perspective to serve one client through the programs and services we provide. We are looking to take that 40 and turn it into another 40 and serve more women, but with the community support, rather than looking to find funders in the community because the funder dollars are always at a high

competition amongst all those other great community organizations that are serving women and men in the community. We have a little bit of an identity crisis. There are some people in the community who don't know we exist. When I tell people we're celebrating 40 years a lot of people stand back and say, 'Wow, I have never heard of the organization.' [Our clients] could be your sister, your mother, your wife, or your neighbour. You don't always know who needs the support of our organization. We're trying to do as much as we can from as little as we get.