

Community Living excited about providing a ?link? and a return to home



By Brock Weir

Chuck Currie couldn't hide his excitement as he looked at the shovels outside the beige-sided building on Wednesday morning. It might look a bit sterile, a bit industrial, but for Chuck ? and, indeed, many others living in Aurora and Newmarket ? it is very much ?home.?

Chuck was one of dozens of clients, officials and dignitaries who gathered outside the shuttered home base of Community Living Central York to formally break ground on a new, renovated, and expanded facility in Newmarket that will serve the needs of hundreds of local adults living with intellectual challenges in Central York.

?I want to get this rebuilt,? said Chuck, who has been participating in Community Living day programs at temporary digs on Harry Walker Parkway in Newmarket. ?The place we're in right now is a big place, but I want to move back here. I like this place a lot. This is our home!?

The renovation and expansion is part of a \$5 million vision established by Community Living four years ago, based on the themes of ?inspiring possibilities? and building ?a community where everyone belongs.?

?We knew in order to truly live those statements, we needed to find a way for more people to access our programs, so began this four year journey,? said Board member Karen Richards at last week's ceremony.

It has been a long journey to get to this point, and the campaign to raise the \$5 million, which is now 70 per cent complete, continues under the leadership of campaign co-chairs Catherine Callaghan and Aurora's 2017 Citizen of the Year Peter Van Schaik.

?Our journey has been rewarding on so many unexpected levels that we were delighted,? said Ms. Callaghan. ?We reached out to the mayors of all the communities we are providing services and each and every one of them said, 'yes, they would help.' We reached out to many other individuals in the community of influence and each and every time they said they would help. It has been so rewarding.

?We have committed to finishing this campaign by the end of the year, reaching our \$5 million and I know we can do it. We have the support and love of all of the people touched in this community we offer our services.?

The bean counting is being left up to the campaign committee; the day to day operators, program facilitators and clients are focused on the services they currently provide, and how much more they can actually do once their doors ? shiny and new ? are re-opened on Oak Street.

?This is amazing, and this is what life is about: it is about making dreams happen and opportunities for people that wouldn't otherwise happen,? said Colleen Zakoor, Executive Director of Community Living Central York. ?When people with intellectual disabilities graduate from high school, they don't have the same access to education, their friends all leave, whereas other folks go to university or college and are friends for life. Then there is the part of the home and where other people live. It is about a friend, a job and a home.

?This [program and our expansion] is giving people access. We're going to expand services, address a waiting list and make life happen. It is so exciting, I can't believe it. This is really about making dreams come true. This project is why I'm here. You go through the bumps, the peaks, the valleys, but you know what? It is a community where everyone is involved.?

Although Ms. Zakoor estimates there are over 2,000 people in the area currently on the wait list for the types of programs Community Living provides in Central York, the upcoming expansion will allow a minimum of a further 200 people, at the very least, to take part in their services and allow them to stay open evenings and weekends, expand education and career programs, as well as services that focus on life-long learning and social aspects.

'The word 'hub' is over-used, but this is a 'link' to our community,' she said.

This is very much a sentiment shared by Daniel Collins, a self-advocate, who has been working with Community Living Central York since 2013.

'A self advocate is someone who speaks up for someone who has a hard time speaking for themselves,' he explained of his role. 'I have no problem standing up for people who have a hard time and I just don't let them get pushed around. It is an important role because everyone should have a voice. It is not fair that these special needs clients can't speak up for themselves and that is why it is important to have someone sort of advocate for them, speak up, and tell people what they need, and to back off and let them live their lives.'

'This expansion is exciting because it is just going to be a whole new building when it is done; it is going to be bigger and more spacious for people in wheelchairs, people who need changing, we're going to have handicap capable washrooms, and it is just going to be very beautiful.'