

Kerry's Place marks 40th anniversary as 'best kept secret'?



By Brock Weir

In the past, people living with autism and other challenges on the autism spectrum were often living in a world of darkness or, perhaps worse, put into 'dark places'.

But Kerry's Place Autism Services provides a vital beam of 'sunshine' into the lives of people living on the spectrum, and that sunshine can be found within its staff, volunteers, and the clients they have come to serve.

That was the view shared Friday by Liberal Senator Jim Munson, a long-time advocate for children and particularly children and families dealing with mental health challenges, as he helped the Aurora-based autism charity kick off its 40th anniversary celebration.

The Aurora-based Kerry's Place provides support services, ranging from education and advocacy to hands-on group homes, throughout southern Ontario.

Touring group homes in York Region with his wife Ginette, and accompanied by Kerry's Place Staff, Senator Munson said he was struck by the wide range of services Kerry's Place provided its clients.

'This has to be one of the best-kept secrets in the country, and yet it is the largest place of its kind in the country,' he said. 'This is a story that has to be told over and over again about the group homes, the teaching aspect of it, the intensive behaviour aspect of it, the applied behaviour analysis and all that is included.'

'What sets Kerry's Place apart is its care which begins at such a young age and just continues without an age cut-off. This is life-long care and the idea that every autistic child and adult has an opportunity to be a part of our society and contribute to it, because in the past people have been put into dark places. There is a sunshine at Kerry's Place, and that sunshine comes in attitude.'

Arriving back in Aurora after touring a group home in East Gwillimbury 'where they dropped a not inconsiderable amount of money on art created by Kerry's Place clients' they were welcomed by staff and volunteers at their Berczy Street headquarters to properly begin the celebrations, including a cake cutting.

They were also welcomed by Councillor John Abel, who paid tribute to Kerry's Place's 40th anniversary on behalf of Council and the Town.

“Kerry's Place has been offering services to families touched by Autism since 1974,” noted Councillor Abel. “From its humble beginnings as a collection of dedicated families in the Clarksburg Area (Simcoe-Grey County), Kerry's Place now helps to enhance the lives of more than 7,000 people with autism and provide needs support to their families. This is a remarkable accomplishment and one which would not be possible without the support and care of many dedicated volunteers.”

Following his official welcome and the all-important cake cutting, Tracy Mansell, Regional Executive Director for Kerry's Place in York and Durham Regions, as well as southeastern and southwestern Ontario, presented the Munsons with a northern-inspired painting by Orangeville artist Dan Widdifield, who lives in a group home.

“While I have been deaf for all my life, I enjoy the life I see and painting watercolours of the world around me,” said Mr. Widdifield in a note presented with the painting.

For Senator Munson, it was an emotional day and “a day of discovery” for him and his wife. He told the assembled crowd one of the things that motivated them to become involved in child advocacy was the untimely death of their infant son who lived with Down syndrome. Since that life-altering event, they have watched as awareness has grown for people living with mental health challenges as governments and organizations have stepped up to the plate to lend a hand.

He was also inspired by his days as a journalist, covering an orphanage for kids with physical and intellectual challenges in Cambodia. Appointed to the Senate by Jean Chretien after serving as his press secretary, he said he made it his mandate to be “The Children's Senator” and has worked to be an advocate for kids with autism, including getting recognition for April 2 as World Autism Day.

Seeing the artwork created by Kerry's Place clients, he said, created a “magical moment” of seeing the capabilities of their clients in action.

“We have travelled this country and seen so many good works done by many groups involved in the autistic community, but today has been the best,” he said. “Kerry's Place should be a template for others in terms of life-long care, which I think has gotten lost in the debate. There is a crisis in this country, we all know it, and that crisis has to do with those adolescents and adults who have no place to go like they have in Kerry's Place.”

Celebrations for Kerry's Place 40th Anniversary will continue throughout the year. Beginning in April, they will be highlighting a new story and achievement each week for 40 weeks, including clients, staff and volunteers. This summer, they also promise their annual Volunteer Recognition Day, will be bigger and better than ever. Events will conclude in November with a special gala. For more information, visit kerrysplace.org.