

Mental health leaders celebrate half-century as difference-makers



As we mark twenty-five years into a new century, Kim Lewis marks time through a slightly different lens.

As the Senior Director of Services for Regional Programs for the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe (CMHA-YRSS), she laughs as she says she began her work on local mental health programs in a "whole other millennium."

She and Lisa Wood, the CMHA-YRSS' Youth Programs Coordinator are marking significant milestones this year, celebrating an impressive 25 years each dedicated to addressing mental health in the communities they call home – and, after a collective half-century with the CMHA-YRSS, they're focused firmly on the future.

"When you look back, it's amazing to be here for this long and see the impact that we have had and the work that we have done within the community, to see our programs grow and thrive, and to see the impact we've had with our clients," said Wood at the organization's Aurora headquarters last week.

"I think, as kids, we were always kind of helping others in the community as a family or doing things for other organizations and I think that is where the seed was planted for me, just seeing the work that we do here, the amount of people that we help, and I just think it's a gift for people to help others. Having that one-on-one conversation and seeing people make meaningful changes has had a real positive impact on me."

When Lewis, a resident of Georgina, joined the team, they were an agency of just 18, talking about how they can be an information resource for the community and "not necessarily as big in service delivery."

"Over the years, to see the agency grow by leaps and bounds has been pretty phenomenal for me," said Lewis. "To be a part of that growth has been really exciting, especially in the real, innovative community development that the CMHA has been involved in and supporting people in York Region and South Simcoe."

Growing up, Lewis recalls a time when mental health was an issue rarely talked about – and, if the subject was ever brought up, it was almost always discussed behind closed doors. This helped guide her in the direction of social work and social services, she said, and fight for a renewed focus on mental health.

"The need never goes away for help," agrees Wood, an Aurora resident. "It's important for us to be there for them and to support them as they go along their journey in mental health and see them recover. I think there is a lot of stress and anxiety out there and a lot of it has to do with social media, expectations – the world has changed so much that I think it is important to be there."

Indeed, the demand for service is ever-growing.

The growth of both demand and the need within the communities they serve only underscored for the CMHA-YRSS that they need to think differently and innovatively to be, as Lewis said, able to provide people the right type of care at the right time, and really looking at breaking down waitlists for services when people need it the most.

Like some of the other changes we've seen is a growing number of individuals who are surviving homelessness and the fact that things are unaffordable, she continues. Food is unaffordable, rent is unaffordable, and it's really coming together as a community of healthcare professionals to support people who are surviving homelessness and that is something I have seen us doing really well over the last little while and not just CMHA, but with our community partners.

As they look ahead to the next five, 10, 20, and 25 years, these dedicated care providers are anticipating a coordinated system where there's the right type of care at the right time and place to address the mental health needs of the community.

Hopefully people will have more access to our programs and more availability and just being there for people for when they need us at that point in time, said Wood.

Added Lewis: I think continuing to remove that stigma around mental illness is something we focus on every day and removing barriers to service. If we understand there is a wait list for service, how do we do things differently to be able to support people differently? It's really exciting to think about access to care. I wish I could flash forward and see five years from now.

One certainty on the horizon within the next five years is the completion of a new York Region Mental Health Hub in Newmarket, which has been a long-held ambition for the CMHA-YRSS.

The mission of the Hub is to ensure someone's first crisis is their last crisis, bringing that coordinated system into fruition.

And, after 25 years with the organization, they are waiting for doors and a brand-new chapter to open with great anticipation.

For me, it's about helping to reduce the stigma towards mental health, said Wood. There are so many assumptions that people have about people with mental illness and I think being a part of that de-stigmatization; what people think about others is important and just to be there for folks as they go through their own journey, and that is what's kept me going, as well as awesome colleagues! To think about where we started 25 years ago, we were a much smaller organization, and we've grown with the changes as we have gone along with society, and seeing it going for another 25 years is going to be pretty awesome.

Added Lewis: I love to come into programs and to be present, just to see what is going on, to reconnect with people who are using services that I haven't seen in a long time, and it's really impactful to hear people say how much they value the services and supports they receive. I think that's what keeps me going: hearing people's testimonies about our journeys.

By Brock Weir