

Welcome Table provides "Food for the Soul"



By Brock Weir

Reaching out to the community, particularly those who needed a hand-up, has always been a way of life for Julie Cruickshank. So, when the Aurora resident and parishioner of Trinity Anglican Church took a package from her corporate job, she knew right off the bat what she wanted to do with her time.

Ms. Cruickshank is now coordinator for The Welcome Table, the weekly, year-round meal organized at Trinity's Binions Hall, providing food and fellowship for people in need, and, perhaps, people in the community just looking for someone to talk to.

"I have been involved for about three years now and when I wanted to become more involved in the community, I thought, why not start in my own parish?" says Ms. Cruickshank. "They were looking for a coordinator for the Welcome Table program and I thought it was a perfect fit."

However perfect the fit, however, it turned out to be a lot bigger than what she had anticipated.

"I just thought it was a little meal they put on every Wednesday night, but the first time I came I was blown away by the numbers," she says. "It is different every week and never boring."

Under Ms. Cruickshank's leadership, there are certainly no boring times ahead as she looks to expand the reach of Welcome Table. Recently, Ms. Cruickshank became the first Executive Director of Welcome Table's sister charity, Welcoming Arms, an outreach program bringing together six local churches under one roof to provide help, assistance, and guidance to struggling individuals and families.

Over the next few years, Ms. Cruickshank would like to see the two charities come under the same umbrella to have a much wider impact on the community.

"I want to expand the programming so [Welcome Table] is not just feeding people but together we can teach them how to cook, teach people how to shop properly on a limited budget and then, coming into our kitchens, learning how to cook and take food away with them."

In her new position, she says she has found there is a lot of confusion between The Welcome Table, Welcoming Arms, and the very specific mandates each group follows. Coming together under a separate entity and separate identity independent of the host churches could open up many more funding opportunities as an incorporated, charitable organization.

The community at large recently had an opportunity to get a flavour of this new vision at "Food For The Soul," an event hosted by

Welcome Table at Trinity, inviting members of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce to come in and sample their weekly meals.

Prepared in their kitchens by chefs from Magna International, in conjunction with a team of energetic volunteers who turn out each week, guests were treated to Chicken Cordon Bleu, potatoes, vegetables and dessert. Organizers were not putting their best foot forward for local business leaders ? this was the kind of meal regular Welcome Table patrons can expect on the average week ? hot and nourishing.

The ?Food for the Soul? event was, in part, the brainchild of Mary Georgiopolous, former owner of Jonathan's Restaurant. Ms. Georgiopolous became very familiar with the work of Welcome Table through the restaurant and their annual Christmas Dinners for needy families.

At the time, she says she didn't realise there was such a need at the community and was surprised by the uptake, but once she became involved there was no turning back.

?Throughout that time we had the privilege of meeting a lot of great people through our involvement,? she says. ?[Food for the Soul] encompasses the fact this is more about lifting people's spirits. You could be financially down-and-out, you could be lonely, you could be looking for conversation or just to be around people. It is about bringing people together no matter what the need is. It is about nourishing the soul. Just like other people I have introduced to Welcome Table, I was also surprised at the need we have in our community and it tugs at my heartstrings. I think it is a good way to give back to the community that really gave so much to myself and my family. I think it sets a good example for my family, and it sets a good example for my children, but honestly, it is just a pleasure to work with people and constantly meeting new people that are likeminded.?

Welcome Table was founded in 2003. At their first dinner, chefs and volunteers served approximately seven people, but that number has steadily increased. Five years ago, the average meal served under 100, but this year they regularly serve up to 120 ? the capacity of Binions Hall. It is not unusual, says Ms. Cruickshank, to ask some people who turn up for the weekly meals to leave with takeout because there is just no room for them.

Despite this high demand, Ms. Cruickshank says Welcome Table remains Aurora's ?best kept secret.? Food is always an immediate need for the group and donations of grocery gift cards and cash are ideal. Volunteer chefs are also being welcomed with open arms and anyone interested in learning how to cook for large amounts of people are ideal candidates. For more information on how to contribute to Welcome Table, email thewelcometable764@gmail.com.