

Welcoming Arms continues to evolve to meet needs of evolving community



By Brock Weir

Since its inception nearly 12 years ago by several local churches to address the needs of low income Aurora residents, Welcoming Arms has grown to become so much more – and it has grown with the community.

They were founded with the idea that the best case scenario would be to put themselves out of business, addressing each need that came through their door, but Welcoming Arms is getting ready to place an order of high chairs to meet the sheer demand of local children taking advantage of their meal programs each week.

There's still a lot of work to do if they want to put up their 'Out of Business' sign, but they currently have wind in their sails thanks to a new Strategic Plan and an upcoming infusion of cash courtesy of the Magna Hoedown.

Welcoming Arms is once again one of 20 community organizations that will share in the proceeds of York Region's biggest annual party, which will take place at Magna's Aurora headquarters this week. Their share of the pot will go towards not only keeping the doors open but fostering their mission which evolves continuously with the community.

'It is a true honour and privilege to be selected as one of the recipients again this year,' says Sarah El-Geries, Executive Director of Welcoming Arms. 'Being part of the Hoedown is such an incredible experience. It is such a unique fundraiser that to get to have a platform for all the non-profit organizations in this community and working together to raise awareness and raise funds for the programs that we deliver.'

Their pitch to be part of this year's Hoedown was similar to previous years, highlighting their role in providing meals to low income members of the community, providing grocery gift cards and transit tickets to those in need, and helping families gain their independence by making choices.

But there was a key difference this time around. As focus around the country turns more and more towards the issue of mental health, so too does the attention of Welcoming Arms.

Part of their share of this year's Hoedown funding will go towards providing their many volunteers with mental health training so they are best equipped to serve their 'visitors.'

'That is one of the needs we have identified in past years: a need to have better training,' says Ms. El-Geries. 'This was something that came out of our team lead meetings, which we have every month where we get to talk to them about what is happening with our visitors. More and more we would see that we need to be better equipped for this. We reached out to a clinical counsellor and her partner who were putting together a pilot project and they tailored their training session to our needs and even incorporated our chart that we use to keep track of our visitors. It was very personalized and it is something that our volunteers felt was very relevant and they were very excited. We are looking to provide it again in the fall.'

They are also looking to provide for an increasing demand for resources, as this too has grown with Aurora.

With the meal programs Welcome Table and Martha's Table now under Welcoming Arms' umbrella, their once small but mighty band of volunteers is now close to 200 members, but there are close to 500 visitors to their programs every month.

'We have a lot of new people and many, many children are part of our dinner,' says Beverley Wood, one of Welcoming Arms'

founding members, of the needs at Welcome Table.

Adds Ms. El-Geries: "And we're looking at getting some high chairs for the amount of children we're getting."

Strategic planning is certainly not a new concept for Welcoming Arms, but their 2018 three-year plan is their first strategic plan which looks at their new tri-fold landscape. It identifies fundraising and sustainability, programs and services, volunteers, and communications among their top priorities.

For fundraising, their goal is to generate sufficient revenue from their participating churches and other sources through a well-established fundraising program to meet the needs of the Aurora community, while their goal for programs and services is to accommodate all those who need assistance within the mandate of their vision, which is a belief in "the inherent dignity of all people. Reflecting Christ's love, we seek to help those in need to experience a fuller participation in society by providing social, economic and spiritual support."

"It was really a wonderful experience," says Ms. El-Geries of developing a strategic plan addressing their three key programs. "It was really unifying as an organization to have representatives from different areas of the organization come together to discuss and we had great discussions, great ideas were raised [on] how we can improve our programs, what programs we can start. The part I think was very important and something Welcoming Arms really stands by is we want to be shaping our programs around the needs of the people instead of the other way around. We had two representatives from York Region come and do a presentation on statistics for Aurora and its surrounding areas to better understand the population trends and who we're serving in this community. It set the tone for who we're serving and we had the opportunity to talk about our programs and how we can improve them."

Many ideas are currently percolating through Welcoming Arms and Ms. El-Geries and Ms. Wood say more will be announced in the coming months, but how those programs can be improved could be up to you.

Welcoming Arms is always looking for volunteers, whether your expertise is in helping people file their tax returns through Welcoming Arms' financial advise programs or whether you're a cook looking to lend your skills for either of their two meal programs.

For more information on Welcoming Arms, how to become involved, or to support them through your purchase of a Hoedown ticket, visit welcomingarms.ca.