

Welcoming Arms provide listening ears and steady hands



By Brock Weir

A steady stream of people filed into the Rectory behind Aurora's Trinity Anglican Church on Thursday.

As they introduced themselves and took their seats in the hallway, a flurry of volunteers went from person to person to make sure everyone was well taken care of. Some were regulars, some were newcomers.

Some came in dire financial situations, perhaps looking for a bit of advice, some grocery vouchers to help feed their children, or receive some toiletries, something the volunteers have found are most likely the items sacrificed when it comes down to a bottom dollar to buy a loaf of bread or a bottle of shampoo.

It was a typical day in the life of Welcoming Arms, the local charity founded in 2006 by Aurora's churches to pool their resources to make a greater impact on the people in the community who are most at risk.

Their mission statement is "in a loving partnership, we seek to be the hands and feet of Christ by promoting human, physical, and spiritual wellbeing in our community."

This, however, is a very broad stroke of what actually takes place behind the stuccoed walls of the Rectory.

"A lot of people simply need a listening ear because no one wants to be bothered with them," says Ena Hall, a member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church and active volunteer at Welcoming Arms. "Sure, they need money to buy groceries but they also just need somebody to listen and to appreciate what they are going through."

This was recently driven home to fellow volunteer Beverley Wood. Ms. Wood was shopping in the vegetable aisle of her regular supermarket when she was approached by a familiar woman with a group of kids and the mother asked to give her a hug. Ms. Wood recognized the woman and remembered her plight which brought her to Welcoming Arms, but she had not come across their threshold in quite a while.

"She said, 'I just want you to know that things are going okay,'" Ms. Wood recalls. "'We don't need to come anymore because'" and she explained why. She said the only reason she was standing there right then is because we listened. "We came in and you gave us a sense of self-worth and hope."

When the volunteers hear stories like that, it is really the ultimate of what they are trying to do. Over the years they have worked out programs with local groups such as the Aurora Food Pantry, the York Region Food Network, and Trinity's Clothes Closet, as well as

crisis management and therapy groups, and a food voucher program with No Frills to ensure people who come through their doors are able to leave with means of feeding their families.

Recent casework handled by Gisele Bedard of the Community Campus Church have included people who face financial challenges, such as being on Ontario Works or ODSP, or might otherwise bring in a low income or have no job at all. The team works with them through their situations to identify their real needs and how to remedy their personal situations.

?Imagine a person coming in making \$500 a month on Ontario Works and they pay \$450 for rent,? she says. ?We connect them with some of the means that are in Aurora and find out what their situation is and we guide them as best we can. There is a relationship that develops. They get to know us.?

Clients are often referred to them through their respective churches, but the group has increasingly found awareness of their services spreading by word of mouth. From there, the number of people that come through their doors each week continues to grow and find greater needs to address.

But as needs grow, so do costs. The group was disappointed this year not to receive their somewhat regular funding from the Region of York, so when they were selected by Magna as one of 25 Community Partners for this year's Wild, Wild West Hoedown, which will be held in September, it was a good shot in the arm and promises to go a long way to ensure they stay on track.

?We're often challenged by the monies that come to us,? says Ms. Wood. ?These services had been established with some of the churches before we joined as Welcoming Arms and we have carried on that tradition.?

As a community partner, and one of the go-to places for the public to purchase not only Hoedown event tickets, but also tickets for the Prospectors' Raffle, they, along with the other 24 groups, will ultimately split all proceeds collected for one of York Region's biggest annual parties.

?This will help us continue what we're doing, and it is beautiful timing for us,? says Ms. Wood. ?We're going to continue what we're doing and we're finding ways to connect more in the community. We're very excited about the Hoedown because it is an opportunity for us to be exposed and heard about, and it gives us an opportunity to improve, expand, evolve, and gives us the freedom to become more of who we are.?