

Welcoming Arms spreads Christmas cheer ? and turns a page in 2018



By Brock Weir

Just last week, the rectory of Trinity Anglican Church was overflowing in a sea of red velvet.

Santa wasn't having auditions for some of his elves; rather, some of his volunteer elves at Welcoming Arms were busily sorting through dozens of Christmas stockings, lovingly packed by the Aurora Minor Hockey Association (AMHA), to meet the needs of their growing list of clients.

?It was all organized by the AMHA and they organized it on what the child wanted to buy,? says Sarah El-Geries, Executive Director of Welcoming Arms. ?It taught the kids how to really give to people who have less than them. It is one of the different, beautiful things about Welcoming Arms.?

Welcoming Arms was founded by six local churches to provide assistance to local families in need, whether these needs were financial or as simple as securing everyday toiletries. The group of volunteers, now numbering over 100 from the founding Christian denominations and well beyond, tapped into a very important need and their client roster has only grown over the years.

So too has Welcoming Arms' mandate.

Welcoming Arms is now an umbrella under which three distinct community services operate. These include Bridging The Gap (the new name under which the founding tenets of Welcoming Arms operate), the weekly dinner and fellowship provided by Welcome Table out of Trinity Anglican Church, and the similar lunch, Martha's Table, founded at nearby St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Keeping everything running smoothly is Ms. El-Geries, who assumed the mantle of Executive Director from Julie Cruickshank earlier this year.

Coming into the fold with a Masters in Health Care Administration, she first heard about the position from the pastor of her local Aurora church. Having met with Ms. Cruickshank, as well as Board Chair Beverley Wood, she says she knew ?instantly? that this is where she wanted to be.

?It all goes back to their mission and the work they do in the community and how there are so many different components of it,? she says. ?They work with community agencies and with other churches, and I find that to be a beautiful thing because usually you see them more divided and that was really appealing to me. It was their mission and seeing how compassionate these volunteers are. Wanting to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our community is something that really touched my heart.?

Securing the job, El-Geries hit the ground running. Job Number One was immersing herself in the ins and outs of how the individual charities are operating since the three organizations joined forces in June. There was a lot to understand, she says, and to ensure everything continued to run seamlessly.

She wanted to get to know the volunteers and foster a sense of what she describes as ?openness? to share the concerns, the information they glean from working with clients, and all concerns positive and negative.

From that starting point, she got a sense that there is a distinct need among the clients for employment opportunities and financial services.

?Instead of putting a band-aid on a problem by providing food vouchers, [it is a matter of] finding out why our visitors are in the

circumstances they are; if it is a budgeting issue, we can address that, but we're also looking to implement a budgeting course in the springtime.?

Stemming from England, CAP (Christians Against Poverty) is starting to plant roots in Canada. A number of Welcoming Arms volunteers have gone through the training CAP provides to address the needs that exist here in Aurora.

?I think everyone can really benefit from CAP,? says Ms. El-Geries. ?It is simple, learning how to use cash instead of credit cards. Credit cards have just been so destructive to our society, and especially to our visitors here. They can get a credit card no problem, but then they have credit card debt and they get further in the pit and it becomes a constant battle. We would love to support our visitors and teach them strategies to get out of that and realise how we can free ourselves from debt.?

2018 will also bring a new strategic plan as early as February which will be based upon these identified needs, trends found through a complete analysis of the data they have been collecting, and how they have been evolving as a service group themselves, says Ms. El-Geries.

?I look forward to seeing the needs more clearly and then addressing them,? she says.

In the meantime, with Christmas coming on Monday, Welcoming Arms and their respective volunteers are looking forward to making holiday dreams come true for their clients. They are hard at work, along with the Salvation Army, organizing the annual Christmas Dream Dinner, an initiative founded over a decade ago by local restaurateur (and Welcome Table volunteer) Mary Georgopoulos to provide a Christmas Dinner and fellowship for both those who can't afford to provide one themselves or might be spending Christmas Day alone.

?It's a beautiful time to get together and provide a space for those to have Christmas,? says Ms. El-Geries. ?We always have volunteer positions to be a friend and mingle with our guests because it is not only to provide to their physical needs, but it is to break social isolation as well and create connections within our communities.?

For more information on Welcoming Arms and how to get involved, visit www.welcomingarms.ca.