

Welcoming Arms volunteers mark first decade of service



By Brock Weir

It's probably an anniversary they'd have sooner not reached, but Welcoming Arms marked its first decade of helping disadvantaged Aurora residents last week with a salute to the volunteers that make everything happen.

"Unfortunately, we're still here because we're needed," said Susan Lanthier-Doyle, a founding member of Welcoming Arms, which was established by Aurora Cornerstone Church, Aurora United Church, Campus Church, Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, and Trinity Anglian Church to serve needy parishioners and the community as a whole. "There is still a need in Aurora for what we can offer. We would not be here if it wasn't for the wonderful volunteers, sponsors, and benefactors that have helped us for the past 10 years."

What they offer is practically limitless. Through their volunteers, they offer skills coaching, money management advice, grocery cards, transit tickets, and toiletries to those seeking their help. What they can't provide themselves, they help foster through their extensive network of contacts and relationships with community organizations and departments at all levels of government to make happen.

"The support from the clergy right from the beginning was very important," said fellow founder Beverley Wood. "They thought it would be worthwhile if we worked together and that, to me, is such a beautiful gift. That has carried us here through where we are now."

They now work two days a week out of The Rectory, the historic home behind Trinity. Today, Welcoming Arms is helmed by Executive Director Julie Cruickshank who underscored the importance of teamwork.

"There is such a commonality in what we believe in and how we impart that belief through the service of what we're doing through this agency that there are no differences," she said. "We find commonalities and we don't run up against any differences. It is such an easy relationship between all of the churches and all of the volunteers because there are no barrier or borders. We all have the same belief."

Added Ms. Wood: "We each have a God of our understanding and we respect the groups that are represented here as volunteers, we respect the people who come and visit us. The common element is we're here to be a benefit to those people who need some extra assistance."

While they come together with a shared belief, they also share in the same common challenge: funding.

It's a perennial issue faced by so many organizations, but co-founder Gail Kerstein said they are fortunate that they have never come to a point where they have run out of money.

"We have always been able to help everyone that comes through the door," she said. "I think that shows tremendous faith from our various churches. The congregations all come together and help with the funding."

But, will that model continue into the future. Over the last few years. Ms. Cruickshank said a growing concern is people who used to be considered "middle class" are now finding themselves "low income families."

"There seems to be a shift in people who used to be doing okay and could make a life for themselves can no longer do that because the cost of living has gone up so drastically and so many of them have lost their jobs or been downsized," said Ms. Cruickshank.

Added Ms. Lanthier-Doyle: "The needs have grown. We still see some of the same people we saw 10 years ago, but we are seeing so many new people that come in. They have jobs, but they just can't make ends meet. We can listen. So many people have so many

issues and we're able to listen and give some direction if we're asked. We provide a little bit of a smile and a little bit of comfort.?