

ALAS Dufferin providing opportunities to people with developmental disabilities

Written By **MIKE BAKER**

Since its inception a little over four years ago, Active Lives After School (ALAS) Dufferin has been helping some of our community's most vulnerable people discover a sense of belonging in the town they call home.

The local non-profit primarily works with individuals with developmental disabilities. It was launched back in 2015 by a group of local parents who were mindful of the fact their children had very little options in the way of daytime programming upon graduating from high school.

What began as a three-day per week program operating out of the Masonic Hall on Fifth Avenue has transformed into a daily initiative, with a permanent home at the Lord Dufferin Centre.

"We have seen phenomenal growth pretty much year after year here at ALAS Dufferin," said Program Manager Kimberly Van Ryne. "We now have four full-time staff members and four part-time staff members. We serve approximately 25 families and have between 13 and 15 people at our program each and every day."

There are two core components to ALAS programming here in Dufferin County. The first, Ms. Van Ryne states, is therapeutic recreation. This involves getting the individuals out in the community doing "fun stuff", such as swimming, karate, yoga, dance classes etc.

The second part is a newer initiative piloted approximately 18 months ago called Active Lives Active Giving. Here, ALAS Dufferin has partnered with seven other community non-profit organizations, notably the Orangeville Food Bank, Meals on Wheels and the Orangeville Library, to provide individuals with working opportunities here in town.

The organization recently received a \$90,000 grant from the Ontario Brain Institute to help solidify that program in Dufferin County. A significant portion of that money, Ms. Van Ryne says, will go towards research and evaluation of the project.

"We're going to work with outside evaluators, who will help us look at what we're doing, help determine if it's working and then come up with suggestions to improve," Kimberley states. "From there, we're going to put together a tool kit, so that, at the end of the evaluation, we have a document we can provide to other day programs providing services to anyone with brain health issues, whether that be dementia, acquired brain injuries, autism or developmental disabilities."

She added, "The end goal is to get more people out into the community volunteering. It hits so many goals. We have some people in our program who have a genuine goal to secure paid work in their community. They don't have a chance to go out and get references like we did, doing odd jobs here and there, or babysitting for our neighbours. They don't have as many social opportunities as us, so this ALAD is helping to build their resume, helping them to build their skills."

As is the case with many non-profit agencies across the province, the future of ALAS Dufferin is far from certain.

"As a non-profit, there is always a concern for the future," Ms. Van Ryne admitted. "We what is considered a fee-for service. Everyone who comes to our day program has to pay \$75 per day. That money comes directly out of their passport funding, or out of pocket. That's really limiting, because if these individuals don't have passport funding, there are not a lot of people who can afford to pay that sort of fee on a daily basis."

The Passport program is a provincially-funded initiative that helps adults 18 years or older with a developmental disability to "participate in their communities". According to an expert from the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services website, passport funding helps individuals pay for community classes or recreational programs, develop work, volunteer and daily

life skills, hire a support worker and create their own life plans to reach their goals.

While the Ontario government, led by the Progressive Conservatives under the leadership of Doug Ford, have, so far, not made any changes to passport funding, there are fears that adjustments may be imminent. Earlier this year, the provincial government rolled out a plan to increase funding for youth with autism and other developmental disabilities. However, things were quiet when it came to funding for adults.

Ms. Van Ryne is praying that silence doesn't lead to a decrease in funding in the future. Looking at future enrollment, she is anticipating the demand for ALAS Dufferin to continue growing year on year in our community.

“Every time there's a new graduating class at Orangeville District Secondary School, there are new people relying on our program,” Ms. Van Ryne stated. “Demand for our services is only going to go up. We are definitely expecting to see growth next year.”

While she didn't want to focus on potential negatives, Ms. Van Ryne was fairly blunt when asked what the individuals who use her program on a day-to-day basis would do if their funding was cut, or ALAS Dufferin ceased to exist.

“The only answer to that is I don't know. I think, when you don't have good programming for people who need this kind of support, they just sit at home and do nothing, which makes their mental health crash,” Ms. Van Ryne said. “That in itself is a burden to society. In extreme cases, they end up on the street, in jail, or in the hospital if they can't cope. This program is giving people a safe place to be, where they're cared for. Where they are able to have a purpose.”

She added, “This day program is not just about entertainment. It's about giving people opportunities to really be part of this community. It's not a contained thing where we're just in the basement at the Lord Dufferin Centre, we're out in the community each and every day. We're making a real difference in the lives of so many people.”

For more information on ALAS Dufferin, visit alasdufferin.ca.