

Recognizing local charities for Non-Profit Appreciation Week

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A small group of Dufferin County organizations will be recognizing the work of local non-profits next week as part of a campaign for the first-ever Non-Profit Appreciation Week (Feb. 14- Feb. 20).

In December of 2021, the province passed Bill 9 to create Non-Profit Appreciation Week, a motion that was unanimously support by all parties. Starting on Feb. 14 and running until Feb. 20, the week is focused on acknowledging the people in the non-profit sector whose work changes the lives of individuals, families and communities.

Michele Fisher, executive director of Dufferin Community Foundation, said the week of appreciation has been a "long time coming".

"Most other helping occupation get recognized for their impact. During the pandemic, for instance, health care workers were deservedly praised for their efforts. But frontline worker in the non-profit sector " many of whom were deem essential too " flew under the radar. This is why we like to call them "invisible champions", said Fisher. "Non-Profit Appreciation Week gives us a chance as a community to say "Thanks". It makes visible all that they do to help some of our most vulnerable and to strengthen our communities. I hope that it makes our non-profit professionals feel truly recognized for all that they do."

In Dufferin County alone there are over 150 non-profits that work within the community ranging from human services, environmental/conservation organizations, arts and culture, recreation, health, mental health, community development, housing and homelessness, food security, and much more.

The Free Press spoke with a few of Dufferin County's local non-profits ahead of Non-Profit Appreciation Week.

Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County

For persons living with dementia a consistent routine can help them thrive. As a non-profit focused on providing support, programming and education, the Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County for more than two years now has faced the challenge of maintaining that routine.

"Over the past two years, what we've seen is a significant decline in the availability of things like day programs, community support, PSW support. Basically, anything that would allow someone living with dementia and their families to keep a consistent routine," said Lindsay Gregory, awareness and education coordinator. "Without that structure we're seeing increased complex cases, increased behaviours, and caregiver burnout."

To help deal with the lack of structure for clients brought on by the pandemic, Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County began offering training and educations sessions online as well as social programs, activities, and exercise sessions.

One program, Gregory points to as a moment of pride over the pandemic is their Bring Back Box program. The Bring Back Box program is a Montessori approach in dementia care where clients are given customized activity kits based on their hobbies, interests, and memories that provide stimulation, and meaningful engagement.

"We are seeing a lot of persons with dementia who are bored," said Gregory. "It's been a really beautiful way that we've been able to connect with people in an otherwise virtual world."

The Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County has approximately 400 people on their active caseload and while their caseload hasn't increase since the pandemic, they have seen more intakes looking to access education and support.

'We're talking with people who are now at home with their loved ones more often and maybe noticing that cognitive decline that otherwise they wouldn't quite pick up on,' said Gregory.

Moving forward out of the pandemic Gregory said after seeing how people have connected with them, Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County will likely continue to utilize their virtual opportunities in a 'hybrid model'.

Community Living Dufferin

Community Living Dufferin for over 60 years has been providing support to adults in Dufferin County who have intellectual disabilities and when COVID-19 hit, rather than accepting a pause in all programming, Community Living Dufferin staff got creative.

'It could have been very easy for us to say 'sorry the building is closed and the programs have ended, we're just going to ride this out', but our staff didn't,' explained Karen Murphy-Fitz, executive assistant. 'We changed our programs from ones that we operated at the main building to programs that we offered in each of our homes.'

One of the ways they transformed, Murphy-Fitz added, was through distributing craft boxes amongst their homes, which contained games, science projects, and art supplies.

'The residents had something different to fill their days with,' said Murphy-Fitz.

Operating 14 homes that provide housing to over 60 adults supported by the non-profit, Community Living Dufferin was challenged early on by isolation as visits from families were stopped.

Community Living Dufferin applied for and became the recipients of a number of grants allowing them to purchase smart TVs, iPads, and Google Home units so they could continue to connect with families.

'That was enormous in helping people we support to keep in touch with their families, giving them the ability to see each other face to face,' said Murphy-Fitz.

While Community Living Dufferin has learned like many organizations to balanced the setbacks brought on by the pandemic, it's the emotional impacts that continue to be freshly felt.

When speaking with the Free Press, Murphy-Fitz held back tears as she spoke of their adaption while the hallways and rooms remain empty.

'It's been hard not seeing people, and it's just going to be nice to have everyone be together again.'

Streams Community Hub

As the saying goes 'the show must go on.'

As a relatively young organization that began with seasonal programming, Streams Community Hub has been faced with the challenge of bringing the arts, a naturally collaborative and in-person discipline, to the virtual space.

'We spent quite a few months really, like everybody who works in a space dealing with a lot of in-person programming, trying to figure out what to do,' explained Juli-Anne James, co-founder of Streams Hub. 'It's difficult to put on a stage play without a stage.'

While not fully equipped with the technology and staff to deliver virtual programs, Juli-Anne and Andrew James figured a way to bring the arts into the homes of the children through a monologue competition.

The Word of Mouth Monologue Competition was launched in March of 2021, and saw local youth between the ages of 8 and 17 submit online performances of various monologues and compete in a live finale.

"The monologue competition really was a great opportunity that we realized after turned out really great," said Andrew. "It made us realize that's a good outlet and now we have to continue doing it even when things return to "normal". We recognized it's importance in helping young people have another outlet to express themselves."

Although restricted for a year on providing arts programming to youth, the James duo note that internal work was being completed to deepen their roots in the community.

"We were able to see some of the need that are in our community and see how we would better address those needs," said Andrew.

Streams Community Hub is gearing to open their first permanent location, tentatively set for early March.

"We know the importance of connection, of being together in a space and that we can never escape that need or desire," said Andrew. "Our show must go on, to move forward in creating a greater space not just for the youth, but for the artist who also need a place to express themselves in their art, while making a livelihood and teaching the next generation."

Organizations who have worked in developing local activities in recognition of Non-Profit Appreciation Week include Dufferin Community Foundation, United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin, Headwaters Communities in Action, DC MOVES, Dufferin Board of Trade, and Dufferin County.