

Branching Out Support Services celebrates three year anniversary supporting the neurodiverse community]

Written By **Sam Odrowski**

Branching Out Support Services (BOSS), an organization that serves adults with neurodiversities in Dufferin County, marked its three-year anniversary last week.

The social enterprise, located at 5 First Street in Orangeville, officially opened its doors on Dec. 1, 2019, a few months before COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic.

While it presented challenges, slowing the initial growth of the organization, it has developed steadily and set itself up with the infrastructure necessary to grow sustainability into the future.

BOSS started out serving 10 families and now serves between 45 and 50, according to Kimberly Van Ryn, founder and owner of the organization.

"I think our growth was different because of COVID. It's hard to know what it would have been like," said Van Ryn. "I think COVID gave us some time to settle down and decide what we're actually doing here, and now we have three very well-established streams [of programming]."

The three streams at BOSS are the CommonFare Kitchen, one-to-one programming, and the adult day service, recently rebranded as Architect Programming, offering more choice.

Through the CommonFare Kitchen, two neurodiverse adults are currently employed with their first job ever. They are responsible for the kitchen's granola project, where they make, package, and sell bags of granola.

People who are neurodiverse have a difference in their brain, which could be a developmental disability, genetic disorder or acquired brain injury.

Van Ryn said BOSS's goal is to make sure neurodiverse people and their families feel supported locally.

"Our work in this community, Dufferin County, is to create opportunities where everyone can belong and make choices," said Van Ryn. "On a grander scale, Branching Out's work in the world is to set the highest example of service in developmental services that we possibly can."

When reflecting back, Van Ryn said one of BOSS's biggest accomplishments has been surviving COVID-19, as a new small business owner, and developing a clear direction to move forward in.

After launching a respite program that didn't have the uptake BOSS initially anticipated, it shifted its focus to the CommonFare Kitchen, which launched in the spring of this year and has been very successful. Van Ryn says it will continue to grow in 2023 and hopefully create even more opportunities for people who are neurodiverse to have meaningful employment.

Being able to offer training, education and advocacy in the community is another significant accomplishment for BOSS.

"Being regarded and respected as a community partner, who can consult on issues of neurodiversity has been a very big step for us, to be recognized as up-and-coming leaders in this field," Van Ryn said. "I don't think we're there yet. I think we still have a lot of work to do internally to get there, but I think we're starting to see that recognition."

BOSS offers three teachable programs, online or in-person. The main boot camp course is Dimensions of Neurodiversity, where

participants learn about neurodiversity.

Other programs focus on ensuring businesses are compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, while fostering inclusion and belonging.

BOSS listens to feedback from the business they are working with and develops specific strategies to address any issues they're facing when serving neurodiverse people.

As a restaurant, having earplugs for people with hearing sensitivity or weighted utensils for people with Parkinson's or a brain injury can go a long way in making them feel comfortable, and attracting more customers.

"When neurodiverse customers are spending money, it's helping the businesses to make more money," Van Ryn said. "Neurodiverse people have money, and they need places they can get in the door so they can spend it."

Other work BOSS is engaged in includes developing a program on safe sexuality and relationships for people who are neurodiverse with Family Transition Place's Lotus Centre, which offers sexual violence counselling locally.

The program is teaching caregivers and support professionals what trauma looks like in a person with a neurodiversity and how to make their life more comfortable.

"In January/February, I'm going to be launching a neurodiversity and trauma training, which will be, as far as I can tell, the first of its kind ever," said Van Ryn.

She noted that rates of trauma and sexual assault are significantly higher in the neurodiverse community compared to the general population, making this work extremely important.

Through a Digital Main Street grant, BOSS launched its new and improved website this week, now up to provincial standards for accessibility.

"There are many features that people with differences in sight or hearing, or even motor skills on the mouse, can change what the website looks like," said Van Ryn.

Visitors to the site with seeing problems can brighten or darken its contrast, adjust the background colour, increase or decrease font sizes and zoom in or out with ease.

Van Ryn told the Free Press that the website could be used as a training tool when doing advocacy or education with other organizations.

As a social enterprise, the support BOSS has received from the community in Dufferin County has been very encouraging. Van Ryn says people understand the important role that social purpose businesses such as BOSS have in fostering a healthy community, and she's very grateful for all the support they've received.

"I could not repeat enough that we don't exist without the surrounding community and the support that we get from that community," said Van Ryn.