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Alzheimer?s Society of Dufferin County educates community for awareness month

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

The Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County is making sure those diagnosed with dementia-causing illnesses are not forgotten as they recognize Alzheimer's Awareness Month.

Alzheimer's Awareness Month is a 31-day campaign recognized each January by the Alzheimer's Society of Canada, which looks to raise awareness and education for those living with dementia-causing illnesses.

?Our overall goal is to let people know that we're here to help and to get people to understand that the numbers speak for themselves; dementia is a health care crisis,? said Carmelina Cicuto, executive director of the Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County.

Dementia is a broad term that describes a set of symptoms that may include memory loss, changes in mood, and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving and language. Dementia happens when brain cells become damaged and eventually die. There are many diseases and conditions which can cause dementia, with Alzheimer's disease being the most common.

The Alzheimer's Society reports that in Ontario alone over 300,000 people are living with dementia and that number is expected to triple by 2050.

According to the Alzheimer Society of Dufferin County, there are currently 1,500 people living with a dementia diagnosis in the County, which has a population of 66,257.

?I don't think people realize the staggering number. People need to understand the importance of that number,? said Cicuto. ?Unless you know someone who has the disease, you're not going to look into dementia. It's not part of your world.?

In helping bring more education to the growing disease, Cicuto said it's important to address the stigma faced by those with a dementia diagnosis.

?People are afraid to say ?I have dementia'. Dementia is not the end of life. There are people still working who have a dementia diagnosis and there's a young onset group of people in their 50s and 60s that have dementia, but they're still living,? said Cicuto.

?The more we talk about it the more accessible it's going to be,? added Nancy Frater, Chair of the Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County's Board of Directors.

Alzheimer's Awareness Month helps to highlight the resources available to people with dementia-related illnesses, including supports for their loved ones and caregivers.

Mono resident Margot Steane has been a caregiver for her husband, George Steane since his diagnosis in 2017 with cognitive impairment, which has since developed into Alzheimer's. She contacted the Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County in 2019 for education as a caregiver and eventually joined two support groups for caregivers.

?My role now is to mainly ensure safety and to ensure that he is well taken care of. These groups are very supportive of each other. They really help people like me who have not experienced [Alzheimer's] firsthand,? said Steane

She spoke about the significance of Alzheimer's Awareness Month in recognizing families going through the dementia journey.

?The month really brings it home that there are people who are going through this journey, there is help out there, and this disease is not going away. Bringing it to the public reminds them that this is something people are living with.?

While Alzheimer's Awareness Month gives the local Society the time to raise awareness and share education with the community, it also gives them the time to fundraise for donations to support the programs and resources they provide.

According to the Alzheimer Society of Ontario, dementia presents challenges for individuals, families, care partners and the health care system which ultimately costs the province over $30 billion annually.

Cicuto told the Free Press that operating all of the programs provided by the Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County costs over $700,000 per year.

Although they receive partial funding from the government, the Alzheimer's Society also depends on generous contributions from community members ? such as Susan Reynolds.

In December of 2024, Reynolds raised funds for the local Alzheimer's Society by selling almost 40 handcrafted ?pocket dolls? at Booklore in Orangeville.

The miniature-sized dolls were hand-knitted by Reynolds and took roughly 12 hours to complete a single figure.

The decision to donate the proceeds raised from the sale of the pocket dolls was one close to Reynolds' heart.

In 2000, Reynolds and her husband became the primary caregivers of her mother, Clarice Hunt, after she was diagnosed with dementia. Remembering her mother as a beautiful knitter, Reynold wanted to use the knitted dolls as a tribute to her memory.

?I was unaware of the Alzheimer Society back then and the programs, awareness and support, and so I didn't reach out to them,? she recalled.

Reynolds' pocket dolls sold out within the week of availability and raised more than $1,000 for the Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County.

?We couldn't have raised the money without the incredible support of those who purchased them. It was a community effort; wasn't just me,? she said.

To help spread awareness of Alzheimer's and other dementia-causing diseases, the Alzheimer Society of Dufferin County will be hosting a ?Dementia Experience Day? event on Jan. 30.

The event will consist of two one-hour sessions, where participants will be walked through different scenarios to simulate a first-hand look and feel of what it is like to live with dementia.

?We're putting people in a situation where they have no choice but to be vulnerable and the only way you'll understand what someone's going through in the dementia world, is to be vulnerable,? said Cicuto.

?You need to have the experience to truly understand,? said Frater.

For more information about Alzheimer's and the local resources available, visit the Alzheimer Society of Dufferin County website. The Alzheimer Society of Dufferin County can also be contacted directly by phone at 519-941-1221 or by emailing info@alzheimerdufferin.org.