

Hearts Wide Open for Autism fundraiser coming to Shelburne Legion

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Hearts Wide Open for Autism is preparing to host a community Euchre tournament, offering residents an affordable and engaging way to support local children and youth with special needs.

The event, held at the Shelburne Legion on March 28, is designed to be accessible in the current economic climate, with a modest \$30 entry fee instead of a higher-priced dinner fundraiser format. Participants will enjoy card play, light food such as sandwiches, and the chance to compete for prizes for first, second, and third-place euchre players.

Doors open at 5:30 p.m. and games start at 6 p.m.

Deanna Avison, founder of Hearts Wide Open for Autism, said that this year's euchre tournament is the first they have run, and is designed to remain accessible to everyone.

"For 10 years we did a big mystery dinner theatre at the Shelburne Golf and Country Club, and that's how we raised quite a bit of money," she said. "But with the economy changing, I thought it was time to take a different avenue, so we're doing a Euchre tournament instead. People can more easily afford \$30 than a big meal, and with things the way they are, it just felt like time for a change."

The Euchre night is the latest evolution of Hearts Wide Open for Autism, which began as a small, grassroots initiative more than a decade ago.

Since its founding, the organization has raised approximately \$123,500 for local causes, directing funds to the Upper Grand Learning Foundation's special education programs in Shelburne schools, Special Olympics, and, most recently, the Orangeville Wolves special needs hockey team.

A core principle of the group is ensuring that funds go directly to programs for children rather than to administrative overhead.

Behind the initiative is Avison, known in the community as the "autism grandma."

Her work began after her twin grandchildren were diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

"I started it because I had, at the time, way back, two grandchildren, twins, actually, that were diagnosed with autism," she said. "I kind of went on a mission many years ago. I went to the town and had the flag raised for the awareness of autism, which comes on April the second. I asked if they would carry on my legacy, and every year, raise the flag in for autism awareness, and that was granted."

"I wasn't satisfied with just that. I wanted people to be aware, to participate, so I founded Hearts Wide Open for Autism," Avison added.

Motivated by love and daily involvement in their lives, she has championed awareness through annual autism flag raisings and now ongoing fundraising events.

Working closely with her daughter, Sherri-Lyn Ferguson, who manages much of the behind the scenes organization and online promotion, Deanna continues to build a small town network with an outsized impact for local families.

The euchre tournament will also feature a silent auction and raffles, with support from long standing community sponsors including GP Carpentry, M&M Food Market in Orangeville, Laura Lee and Grant Laverty, Main Street Family Dental in Shelburne, the Mullin Group, Shelburne Family Chiropractic, Brown & Self, All Pro Roofing and Fifth Avenue Dental.

Pre registration for the tournament is required so organizers can account for food and logistics in advance. Registration is handled through an online link available on the Hearts Wide Open for Autism Facebook page.

To register, go to: facebook.com/HeartsWideOpenforAutism