

‘I’ve always had a really strong drive to make a difference’: Norah Kennedy to retire as executive director at Family Transition Place



by PAULA BROWN

When Family Transition Place is brought up in conversation, the name of their executive director, Norah Kennedy, doesn't typically fall far behind. The two have been tightly intertwined for nearly two decades.

But soon the local women and children's shelter will find themselves in the hands of a new leader, as Kennedy lays out her plans to retire by the end of the year.

The Board of Directors for Family Transition Place announced in a press release at the end of last month that Kennedy would be retiring from the position but would be staying on for the remainder of the year to help through the transition period

‘If I'm being honest, it feels surreal and more than a little overwhelming. I've received so many lovely, kind words from people,’ Kennedy told the Free Press after announcing her plans to retire.

Kennedy has served as Family Transition Place's executive director for 17 years, having joined the shelter and the violence against women (VAW) sector in 2007.

Reflecting on joining Family Transition Place, Kennedy describes it as a full circle moment.

Originally from Dufferin County, Kennedy grew up in Mulmur Township and attended high school at Centre Dufferin District High School in Shelburne. Like many youths from rural communities, Kennedy left the area to pursue various career paths after graduating from high school. First a professional actor for 10 years, Kennedy later became a language interpreter with the Canadian Hearing Society in Kitchener/Waterloo from 1993 to 2007. In 2007, Kennedy left the Canadian Hearing Society to become executive director of FTP.

‘I took the job at Family Transition Place, which brought me back home to Dufferin County. We moved back onto the very same property that I grew up on,’ said Kennedy. ‘I have pretty deep roots in this community.’

Speaking about why she chose to join the violence against women sector and Family Transition Place, Kennedy explained,

"I've always had a really strong drive to make a difference, to do something that I feel is important, and at that point, I'd been working in the not-for-profit sector for about 15 years," explained Kennedy. "When the job at FTP came about, I recognized an opportunity for me to take the skills that I had learned and bring them into a sector that I really believed in and believed in the work."

Spending such a significant amount of time with a single organization, Kennedy has been a front-seat witness to the changing landscape of gender-based violence services within Dufferin County.

Ever the beacon of leadership, Kennedy tends to skirt past discussing her own accomplishments with the local shelter, rather she eases the conversation to focus on her team that works day-to-day with clients.

"One of my biggest sources of pride is the people that I work with, who are just so good at what they do and who make my work life so rich; honestly, it will be the hardest thing for me to leave," said Kennedy.

At the forefront of Family Transition Place for 17 years, Kennedy has guided the shelter through its highest of highs, in contrast, as a result of the nature of working in gender-based violence, she has also seen them through the toughest of experiences.

Kennedy has been on hand as the shelter faced the death of clients, cases of femicide and gender-based violence, and navigating the difficult landscape of aiding clients in need during a global pandemic.

"You can't work in our sector without experiencing some of those very profound pieces; we've had tragedies. As a leader of an organization, I may not work as closely with the women or clients that my frontline staff do, but there is a sense of overarching responsibility," said Kennedy. "When something goes wrong on your watch, as the leader of the organization, it rests heavily on your shoulders for sure."

Making the decision to step back from Family Transition Place was not a quick or easy process for Kennedy after being at the helm for so many years. But, she admits now feels like the "natural conclusion" of her career.

"It really took a while to come to the decision of when the right time was going to be. The time comes, I think when every leader realizes that it's time for somebody who is younger and fresher, to come in and take the organization to its next level. The job of running an organization like FTP is pretty all-consuming and I absolutely love my job, but I also want to make sure that I'm leaving at a point where I am still quite honestly on top of my game."

The Board of Directors for Family Transition Place has started the early process of hiring a new executive director to fill Kennedy's shoes in the upcoming months.

"I'm grateful that I've had the privilege of working for such an organization in the community. It's my home, it's where my heart is, and I mean that for both FTP and Dufferin County. I'm very proud for the opportunity to serve it," said Kennedy in her final message for the community.