

In Touch

COMMUNITY LIVING UPPER OTTAWA VALLEY



Celebrating our fiftieth year of working together

Fifty years of hard work and community spirit led to a joyous celebration in May 2008 as people from all walks of life gathered to celebrate the golden anniversary of Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley.

The location itself was rich in symbolism. What was once ARC Industries on Bennett Street in Pembroke has since been transformed into the Germania Hall—a gathering place for all. On May 3, the hall was transformed into a golden-hued walk down memory lane, complete with 45 rpm records as centerpieces on the tables and poodle skirts on the walls.

Those who founded the organization back in 1958 were recognized as people

who came together to build a better life for their children by establishing the community supports they needed to deal with their disabilities. They were publicly honoured for their courage and commitment to find a “new way” in a society that would include their families.

While the event paid tribute to the past, the focus was clearly on the results that have been achieved.

Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley now supports more than 150 adults and their families. Many of them were at the 50th anniversary gala to celebrate this milestone for our full community. They mingled with dignitaries, including Diane

Garrels-Munro, president of Community Living Ontario, representatives of Special Olympics Ontario, delegates from both county school boards and the City of Pembroke, and Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke MPP John Yakabuski.

The guest speaker for the occasion was Fred Blackstein, whose message highlighted the richness of true community integration.

Blackstein spoke to the crowd about the culture of inclusion he experienced in his professional roles, but he noted that it truly came to life during his past 20 years as an active volunteer. In a number of community building projects, he has worked with individuals from all walks of life, including those with physical and intellectual challenges. He told the crowd that he has learned through experience that everyone benefits greatly when they work within a philosophy of inclusion.

Those thoughts, shared by everyone gathered for Community Living’s 50th anniversary celebrations, are best summed up by Executive Director Paul Melcher’s reflections:

“The legacy of our founders and all those who have contributed to Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley provides a strong foundation for the next 50 years. What hasn’t changed since the early days of the association are the basic universal truths: we all can succeed with the help of others; communities can come together in fellowship and purpose through leadership and vision; acceptance and appreciation of diversity are essential to everyone’s peace and well-being; and justice and equality belong to everyone.”



Founding members of Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley were honoured with flowers at the 50th anniversary celebrations. They are, from left, Mary Morris, Ivan Morphy and Grace Ford.

Volunteering is a family tradition with meaning

When Christine Reavie was told about an opening on the Community Living Board of Directors last spring, there was no hesitation about making a volunteer commitment.



Christine Reavie

“It’s a good fit and it’s certainly something I saw in my future,” she says.

Advocacy for those with special needs is a cause that is near and dear to her heart. Her father, Pembroke City Councilor Gary Severin, is a former member of the board. Their lives include extremely close connections with people with disabilities.

Christine sees this new opportunity as a way to find purpose in her daughter Lauren’s short life. Lauren had complex needs and serious medical conditions that led to her death five years ago.

“I walked her path with her,” Christine says of her conviction in taking on an advocate role.

She also talks of her nephew who has Down’s syndrome, and the role he plays in the extended family.

“He just touches everybody’s lives in amazing ways,” Christine says, offering the example as another factor in her passion to help.

“There is a lot of work to be done,” she says, citing the ongoing need for leadership and good decisions with a focus on the priorities of the clients who receive services from Community Living.

She is inspired by the association and the volunteers and employees who work for it.

“It’s a great bunch of people. Everybody is very passionate,” she says.

After a 20-year career as a musician in the Central Band of the Canadian Armed Forces, Christine recognizes that she faces challenges in her new role as a volunteer.

“I have a huge learning curve ahead of me,” she says. “Right now, I’m listening a lot and taking in as much as I can.”

She is also giving a great deal. In addition to her role as second vice-president on the Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley executive committee, Christine is also a member of the City of Pembroke’s façade improvement committee, the public liaison for Pembroke on the Ottawa Valley Waste Recovery Centre, and a member of the organizing committee for Miramichi Lodge’s annual fund-raising gala.

She also works full-time as an executive assistant for Women’s Shelter and Support Services.

“I’ve come home to the community where I was born and raised,” she says. “I have a commitment to it, and a responsibility to contribute.”



Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley’s 50th anniversary gala on May 3, 2008 was a time for formal presentations and recognition and a time to share memories, stories and a sense of community.



Bringing a family together for a summer celebration

For many of us, one of the much-anticipated highlights of summer is the family reunion.

As we grow older, our appreciation and enthusiasm grows for the opportunity to gather with aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters and others. We never grow tired of the stories we share, and together we create new memories to add to our family bank.

Rick Afelskie has a deep appreciation for that dedicated family time. This summer, he realized a personal dream when he organized his own family gathering at the Pembroke waterfront.

“It was a special day for me,” he says. “It took a lot of courage to do, but I did it.”

At 44, Rick knows what it is to lose family members. Two of his seven siblings have passed away, and he says that makes him appreciate the family ties that remain. Many of his relatives still live in the Pembroke area, and they get together for special occasions, but Rick wants to be sure that their family ties remain a common priority.

At planning discussions with his support staff last spring, Rick said more time with family was a priority in his life. Soon, he found himself making preparations for the

August 26 gathering. The timing, location, invitations and arrangements for food and drink were all in his hands.

In all, eight people were there to share a potluck meal as well as their common stories and plenty of laughs and good-natured teasing.

Rick vividly recalls seeing the others walking toward him and how happy he was to greet them at the picnic area. He paints the picture with his memory of his niece’s arrival:

“She put her arm around me, kissed me on the cheek and said, ‘Thank you for inviting me, uncle.’”

Jennette Surnoskie, a support worker with Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley, arrived later and was proud to see Rick talking with family members about his life—his apartment, his girlfriend, his membership in the Legion, and his job at Santa Fe.

“He has lots of good things to talk about,” she says. “His family saw how happy he is.”

Rick is now determined that the Afelskie family reunion will not just be one more addition to his photo album. He is thinking of organizing a Christmas gathering where he can share mementos of their summer reunion, and he is hoping that his brother-in-law will follow up with the moose steak barbecue he suggested for next summer.

“Family is important,” concludes Rick. “We need to make sure that we get together.”



Rick Afelskie, standing at right, enjoyed organizing a family picnic at the Pembroke waterfront in August.



A home of his own opens new doors for Robert Willson

When Robert Willson made the move from the Rideau Regional Centre in Smith's Falls to a supported home environment in Petawawa, Community Living staff were told that he was unable to communicate.

Within hours, his support staff knew that the assessment was wrong.

Diane Mitchell was with Robert throughout his first weekend in his new home. She still chuckles as she recalls him playfully moving the placemats on the diningroom table whenever her back was turned.

Diane knew that she was working with a man who possesses a good sense of humour and a desire to reach out and connect with others.

"You've been very gentle and very creative and very patient," she says to Robert as they share the task of describing his life in the Upper Ottawa Valley.

Since moving to Petawawa in February 2007, Robert has discovered a world of options that he never dreamed possible during the 47 years he spent in an institution.

He volunteers at the local Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, where he clearly enjoys spending time with the cats. He looks forward to weekly outings to local horse stables. He goes grocery shopping and he enjoys time on local walking trails.

Through trial and error, he has made it clear that he is not a major sports fan but he does like to watch the occasional basketball or football game. His favourite television show is "Dancing With the Stars". He loves variety in his schedule, and has enjoyed trips to Ottawa and tours of local attractions such as the Deep River clock museum, the Petawawa military base and the museum there.

The military community is a natural fit for Robert, whose father is a retired naval officer. To honour that aspect of his family background, Robert's support workers decorated his room in a nautical theme.

The Willson family is spread throughout North America, but Robert's sister Pat has traveled all the way from Seattle, Washington to see his new home. The trip was a bit of a family reunion that also included their brother Bill.

When she made the arrangements, Pat was careful to organize a surprise visit because she wanted an honest assessment of her brother's living conditions. She was 12 years old when her family made the difficult decision to place Robert in the Rideau Regional Centre in order to give him the assistance they could not provide.

"She speaks of how difficult that was," says Diane.

Diane recalls the lunch Robert enjoyed with his siblings at his favourite local restaurant. They chose to take their visitors to Kelsey's, she explains, "so that they could see first-hand that no matter who we are, we all get the same level of service".

Robert smiles and nods as Diane shares his stories. He is

relaxed and comfortable, even in the presence of a stranger, and it is clear that Diane and her co-workers seek out and respect his opinions and his approval.

The exchange may not be in words, but communication is certainly taking place on a rich and meaningful level.



Robert Willson's community commitments include volunteering at the OSPCA.

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FALL 2008 – PAGE FOUR