

CAFFI continues to build connections, looks ahead to growth

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On July 19, the CAFFI Community Network (CCN) hosted its third-annual community engagement picnic at Cold Creek Conservation Area.

The event, which took place between 12 noon and 5 p.m., featured a variety of games, food and good company for families with disabilities.

The event included live musicians from the Mario Cariati band, which was a delightful surprise addition for all families and honored guests. Cobs, a local business in Bolton, also contributed to the success with baked goods and a helping hand from owner Mary Deltin.

"They do amazing things and with young adults with disabilities, and I was so humbled to be able to go and be a part of it, to see it, and learn about how many kids and families that are affected and what they do?", says Deltin.

After learning about CCN and all their hard work, Deltin said she was enthusiastic not only to contribute the baked goods but also to attend the event and help out in any way that she could.

"I taught for 20 years as a teacher and [had] students with disabilities that were in my class, each year, but I saw it on a smaller scale with maybe five or six students," says Deltin. "I supported them at school, and then they would go home. So, the work CCN does is close to my heart in the sense where I can still connect with the community and then specifically with the community with disabilities, young adults and family members."

CCN is building its brand to champion for the belonging of young adults with disabilities, including those with high support needs, as they transition into adulthood and into the community from secondary education.

They work hard to bring families and intentional conversations to the table so all individuals with a disability are valued, and able to participate fully in local community life.

Mike Brunetto, lead for Family Engagements and Community Partnerships with the CCN, plays a vital role in bringing great people together that put on another successful event, with the help of a timely sunny day.

"When we decided to launch our inaugural BBQ three years ago, we started out with 30 to 40 people coming together. We have now reached 100-plus both last year and this year."

"What I'm happy about," said Brunetto, "is that it's not just the families with individuals with disabilities, it's the broader community members that continue to take a heartfelt interest in being a part of this story, and our team is eternally grateful for their compassion to others, and recognizing our ongoing efforts."

"We continue to build bridges within and surrounding our community as friends, extended family, businesses, and our local Councilors for bringing their support in person during a very busy day in the community."

Amy Calderan, a Constituency Assistant for the Toronto area MP also attended this event and is looking forward to hopefully creating a partnership with CCN.

Calderan first met Brunetto when he visited her to get assistance about families with disabilities and the difficulties they face when claiming benefits from the Canada Revenue Agency, and was so moved by his story that she introduced Brunetto to Sgro.

Attending this CCN event not only gave Calderan the opportunity to see what CCN was doing but also gave her the chance to meet with families and learn about their specific challenges and journeys.

'It was a community within a community, seeing how they come together to support each other. The children that were there, the kids that were there, the people that were there, they were supporting,' says Calderan. 'It was just so wonderful to see them and just enjoying the time that they were there together, with both people on the same page as them, or people going through the same things as them, and it was just beautiful to see all of it? the volunteers themselves and just the families and how supportive the community has become of this and of each other and of them?.'

Looking to the future Calderan expressed both her and Sgro's interest in attending other CCN events and the opportunities to connect more with CCN and the community.

Although the event was quite successful, CCN's plan is far from over.

'Our core team is looking forward to a few light summer weeks to spend some time with our own family members with a disability, before planning, and preparing other venues and intentional advocacy work already in flight with key stakeholders,' said Brunetto.

'We are making strides in raising awareness to adopt augmented services needed for the most vulnerable and high support,' Brunetto continued. 'These efforts will benefit, and intend to integrate, everyone for an inclusive model.'

'Families with disabilities are the primary force that influences change. Those who support complexities have to push harder. Collectively, existing services should aim to adopt a more person-centered vs agency centered model before claiming to be truly inclusive.'

'We have lived through experiences that can be leveraged for better decision making', and this is where CCN has been grateful for those who have stepped up to the challenge and invite us to lead change as subject matter experts.'

The CCN families and stakeholders gather monthly from September to June for intentional conversations on living with a disability, being a caregiver, and what each of us is willing to do to support one another.

To learn more or be a part of a growing story, visit the CCN at cafficonnect.ca.