

Caledon Area Families for Inclusion building a community support network, one family at a time

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A truly inclusive Caledon is possible if residents work together, say leaders of a local non-profit.

Mike Brunetto and Patricia Franks are long-time volunteers with Caledon Area Families For Inclusion (CAFFI), a community support network for individuals with differing abilities and their families. The group places a special focus on individuals with complex needs, such as individuals who are non-verbal, who can often be left behind when it comes to areas like recreation opportunities, housing, and financial support.

Brunetto and Franks each have a child with differing abilities.

Brunetto said CAFFI is looking to grow its support network and bring people together who want to support each other. The more people that join, the more data CAFFI can provide to decision-makers at the Town of Caledon and beyond. For example, the group would like to see staff hired at the Town who have the necessary training to facilitate programs for individuals with complex needs. The more people it can show are interested in such programs, the better.

Franks shared that between two and five per cent of the population has a developmental disability of some kind. She wants impacted families to know they are not alone in the challenges they face ? and she wants families who aren't to know what it's like.

?If we have the opportunity to talk with people in the community and have them realize what the real struggle is, then there'll be more empathy within the community,? said Franks. ?When they see us as families, when they see these people in the community they'll treat them more like a member of the community and not something to be shoved away in a corner.?

Brunetto said it's so important for individuals with differing abilities to be able to be social and part of the community even after they age out of the school system at 21. At that time, options and support for these individuals dry up almost instantly. Right now, many Caledon families access recreational services for their loved ones outside of Caledon.

Feeling like a true part of the community can be a real challenge when families are faced with prejudice.

?We've had many cases where we've gone to a restaurant and sometimes our kids make some noise. There's two kinds of reactions people can give: smile and understand, or laugh,? said Brunetto.

When the reaction is laugh, it's extremely hurtful.

?It's something that has to change because our families are not going anywhere? it's not easy for us but we're just trying to fit in,? said Brunetto.

Brunetto said it's the responsibility of everyone to make a more inclusive community.

?Together, it's all possible, but when we work in pieces it takes longer,? he said. ?Until you start giving, you'll never know the benefits? I learned that through my son. He doesn't speak ? I don't know how someone who can't speak can teach you so much about life but he has.?

Franks shared the importance positive interactions in the community have on her daughter.

?No matter where she goes in town somebody knows her, somebody says hello to her, and it just makes her day,? said Franks. ?And then I've had feedback from other people telling me it made them so happy to see her.?

As a voice for those facing unique challenges, Brunetto said it's important that CAFFI be invited to the table for discussions on the future of Caledon. CAFFI also wants to partner with more organizations in the community.

?We need to be heard? we need to be recognized as a dedicated group,? said Brunetto.

In addition to its advocacy efforts, CAFFI has lots planned for the year ahead including its monthly ?CAFFI in Conversation? talks that are open to all, events for Mother's Day and Father's Day, a summer barbeque picnic, and a Christmas party.

To learn more, those interested can visit cafficonnect.ca.