

Caledon Area Families for Inclusion relaunching this Sunday with community event

'In this world if we can't help other people, then what good are we?' asks CAFFI coordinator

By Zachary Roman

People with differing abilities deserve to be supported and included in the community.

That statement is at the heart of local group, Caledon Area Families For Inclusion (CAFFI), which is hosting a meet and greet event this Sunday, November 13, as a way to relaunch in the community. It's being held from 2 to 5 p.m. at Christ Church Bolton.

At the event, CAFFI's coordinators Tina Liscio, Michael Brunetto, and Patricia Franks will be introducing the community to their mission, vision, and core values.

CAFFI seeks to engage and advocate with families, caregivers, and the community to support, include, and enable those with differing abilities. As an organization, they'd like to be active partners in planning, developing, and promoting inclusive communities. CAFFI believes every person of any ability has the right to participate fully in their home community where they live, work, and play.

Brunetto said this Sunday's event is the first time CAFFI is doing something of this magnitude, and, in the future, they're looking to work with the new term of Caledon Council to reach their goals.

Due to the pandemic, the differing abilities community was not able to gather for support and socialization like it used to, and the CAFFI event this weekend will serve as both a reunion and welcome to new members of the community.

CAFFI was actually launched in 2012, and remained quite active until COVID-19 changed everything in early 2020.

Franks said it's difficult these days for families supporting someone with differing abilities to know who the other families out there are.

Changes to government funding in recent years made community programs less plentiful, explained Franks, making it harder for people to connect in the community.

One of the main goals of CAFFI is to help families build a network of others who share the same experiences as them. Franks explained since CAFFI has families with relatives with differing abilities of all ages, being a part of CAFFI is a great way for families to ask for advice from someone who has an older relative and been through the thing they're worried about.

Liscio said in the differing abilities community, almost everything is learned by lived experience.

Brunetto said one of the things that drew him to Caledon was how friendly people are here, and that people doing things as simple as saying hello and smiling to people with differing abilities makes a world of a difference. Liscio added that it benefits both sides when there's more inclusion, as it contributes to open-mindedness and learning.

'When you finish school and you need to head to a community centre, are you welcomed? Are you part of the community? Or are you seen as a group that needs to be segregated?' asked Brunetto. 'These are the types of things we're trying to work on.'

Liscio said whether someone has a family member with differing abilities or not, it's important to be a part of the conversation and positive change in the community. She said Caledon needs strong voices at the table.

Brunetto said Caledon's Mayor-Elect Annette Groves has been great in the past helping CAFFI get meetings with the Town and getting things moving. He's hopeful that things will only get better in the future.

?I hope now that the elections are over, we're not going to forget what's truly important: helping the most vulnerable,? said Brunetto. ?We are lucky. We can speak, we can work. We can be independent, we can go into the community on our own. We have to think about the people who are struggling ? because in this world if we can't help other people, then what good are we? what do we have??

Franks said besides connecting families to each other, CAFFI also works to advocate at a policy level for those with differing abilities. For example, before the pandemic when the Town was making changes to documents on housing and homelessness, Franks said CAFFI ensured there was wording added so people with differing abilities weren't forgotten.

She said when you advocate at a policy level, you're recognized as a group that needs to be paid attention to.

?We want to encourage people to be involved in what's going on,? said Franks. ?Working together and with each other.?