

Caledon Community Services opens its new Exchange building

By Constance Scrafield

For a great many years, Caledon Community Services (CCS) has been working with staff and volunteers to better the lives of Caledon citizens, especially those in need of help.

At one time, they used to assemble baskets filled with food, clothing and toys for families in Caledon who would otherwise have to go without at Christmas.

Every year, the Santa Fund would need a place large enough to collect the very large number of items that were donated by the whole community, from individuals to corporations. That, plus the huge cast of volunteers who came in the last day to pull the baskets together for distribution, required a warehouse's worth of space.

Each year, the hunt would be on and sometimes, it was down to the wire before the Santa Fund could be accommodated.

Six or seven years ago, the idea of the baskets gave way to freer options of inviting Santa Fund families to come in to choose for themselves what they wanted from among the items available.

Now, CCS has announced that its new, permanent facility is open to house so many of the services the organization sponsors. What is wonderful about this new home is that it has been built by the community for the community. It is the Exchange at 55 Healey Rd. in Bolton.

CCS's Manager of Poverty Reduction Partnerships Kim D'Eri recently conducted a tour of the facility, and was pleased to explain how the whole thing had come together.

"This was two units," she said, "it was completely stripped and rebuilt as you see it here. It has been built for the whole community by the community. See the plaque with the names of the donors."

Modern design mixes with discretion. Everywhere is white. There are many rooms, with thought given to the endless situations in which staff and volunteers at CCS find themselves.

Most of the offices are quite small, where it is not space that is needed so much as a private place to talk or work. A couple of the rooms are sound proofed, where a person might be counselled, consoled or advised with real privacy; a room for care coordinators to help. There are other small rooms that give staff places to work on their computers in quiet work for a few hours.

The larger rooms provide a myriad of opportunities. These spaces are not exclusively available to CCS staff and volunteers, but also to others in the community who may need a place to meet with clients, for other agencies and for workshops.

The workshops cover many subjects, including self-help and well-being. When the workshops are cooking lessons, the large staff room becomes the dining room.

There is a splendid kitchen. Of this, D'Eri is obviously especially excited. Ovens, cook tops, refrigerators, all so new and so ready to work. Beside it is the pantry, shelves laden with packaged goods. On the other wall, are more refrigerators and freezers in which are fresh produce and frozen goods, which have never before been possible to supply.

Now there can truly be discussions about the virtues of eating fresh vegetables and feeding them to children. This means that the doors to eating better can be opened for the food is here, ready for the taking.

This is one of the primary functions of the Exchange, offering "food support," and never calling it a food bank.

"There are 200 families in Caledon, including 250 children, who rely on the food support here," D'Eri explained. "The food is presented in aisles and people can come every week to pick up what they need. This way their dignity is maintained."

Asked about the spoilable products like milk, she replied, "The milk is donated by producers through the Association of Food Banks and we exchange as needed. We sometimes have more of one thing and need another. That way, there is no waste."

Another large room stands outside the kitchen, a gathering space where people from all walks of life and all conditions can meet with a chance to socialize, with a coffee. The Girl Guides come there once in a while. There is a small play area for tiny children. Beyond is a huge space storing a large stock of toys and things that will please many, many young people. For teens, there are gift certificates.

For one week before Christmas, the place is open solely to the families available for the Santa Fund. There were no baskets; they could choose for themselves what went on their tables and under their trees. They were given coupons for turkeys. As far as possible, dignity and well being were given, possibly, returned to these souls.

Throughout the year, the CCS uses all its resources to assist families with heating their homes; give advice about nutrition; support the families generally.

Donations are accepted any time, of course to support the work the CCS does. Cash donations for the Santa Fund specifically can be made all winter as the Fund works to assist with heating and other wintery challenges.

Said D'Eri, ?We are very lucky to be living in such a generous community. Everyone wants to do the most they possibly can.?