

Community should check out the Exchange

By Bill Rea

A lot of good work is being done at the Exchange in Bolton.

The main problem being faced by those running the facility seems to be getting the word out.

The Exchange, at 55 Healey Rd., has been operating for a little more than half a year. It officially opened in February with the unique ceremony of breaking a large loaf of bread, as opposed to the traditional cutting of a ribbon. And while food issues represent a component of this facility operated by Caledon Community Services (CCS), it's a lot more.

The aim is, and always has been, to create a vibrant 'community hub,' providing education and training, individual and family skills development, counselling, advocacy, employment resources, seniors and youth activities, cultural programming, cooking classes, workshops, volunteer opportunities, community gatherings, etc.

But letting the community know what's available has been a problem.

'It's been busy, but not as busy as we would like to see it,' commented Director of Community Resources Michelle Stubbs, adding the purpose of the Exchange is a lot more community oriented than just centering around food security.

Kim D'Eri, manager of community animation, is involved in bringing in community partners to increase use of the space.

Stubbs said they are in collaboration with 10 other groups in the community and have brought in a consultant to get them more formally involved and to set up a governance structure. The groups include CCS, as well as Bethell Hospice, Caledon Meals on Wheels, Caledon Public Library, Family Transition Place, Bolton Alliance Church, Peace Ranch, Brampton Caledon Community Living, Rapport Youth and Family Services, and Caledon Parent-Child Centre.

So far, the Exchange has been the site of numerous activities, including a wide variety of workshops on such topics as wild edibles. Stubbs said they are working on making the workshops varied, when it comes to topics.

D'Eri said other activities have included fun events, such as a recent Amazing Race Photo Finish, in which teams, made up of clients, staff, volunteers and others of all ages had to go out and get pictures of various items in the area (ala a scavenger hunt), and then return to make pizza and cookies in the Exchange's kitchen. There are also activities like 3-on-3 ball hockey tournaments for all ages and skill levels (D'Eri said there are even cheerleaders), breakfast bingo sessions and facilities are provided for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

It's also a place to learn Spanish Wednesdays, from 1 to 2 p.m., and Stubbs also yoga classes are offered too. As well, there are courses available in certain areas of skills building, like financial planning.

'There are different activities, and we're trying to have as many of them as possible, because the goal here is getting traffic in here,' she observed.

Numerous groups have made use of the facility. Stubbs said corporate groups have used of the ample meeting space, and D'Eri observed school and church groups have made use of the kitchen facilities, as well as contributing to food drives.

Officers from Caledon OPP even spent some time during Police Week in May in the Exchange kitchen, making cookies with students from local schools.

Local businesses have been on deck to help too, including MARS Canada. Local stores like Zehrs, Garden Foods and Walmart have been great with donations, and even Spirit Tree Estate Cidery near Cheltenham provides fresh bread. Peace Ranch and Albion Hills Community Farm have also been very supportive of the effort. In fact, Stubbs said the Exchange is used as a drop-off point for people buying food from the community garden at Albion Hills, and they sometimes leave any excess to the agency.

'We get a lot of fresh produce that way,' she remarked.

The access to fresh fruits and vegetables is helpful to people in the community experiencing food challenges, although Stubbs said that's a 'very small component of the space.'

'It's all about creating inclusion in the community,' she added. 'We want the community to know the space is there for them if they have a need.'

Stubbs stressed getting the word out has been a problem, although once people see what's going on inside, the message starts to sink in.

'When people come through the door for the first time, they see what's happening in the space,' she said. 'They come back.'

D'Eri recalled one young boy who came to the Exchange with his mother, and she put him to work making granola bars in the kitchen with one of the summer students. When it was time for him to leave, he gave the student a high-five and exclaimed, 'Buddy, I hope you're going to be here next week, because I like coming to this place.'

'There's a lot going on here,' Stubbs concluded, while lamenting that things have slowed down a bit in summer.

?We don't like that,? she said, although she also admitted it's the first summer for the Exchange, and they have been working on plans for the fall.

The include a Community harvest at the Exchange, which is set for Oct. 25 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. It will be community fall fun like crafts, games, scarecrow building, apple bobbing, pumpkin carving, food and other fun.

?There'll be stuff for everybody to do,? D'Eri said.



It might be summer, but these enthusiastic people were at the Exchange last Tuesday for some 3-on-3 ball hockey action. Photos by Bill Rea



Vicki Barker volunteers at the Exchange. Her children Melina, 8, and Zachary, 6, were recently working on some chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen.



The Exchange got this big boost of donations last Thursday from these participants in the Caledon OPP Youth Leadership Camp.



Manager of Community Animation Kim D'Eri and Director of Community Resources Michelle Stubbs of the Exchange.