

National Volunteer Week Spotlight: Abbeyfield volunteers help facilitate affordable housing options for seniors

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National Volunteer Week (April 18-24) is a time to recognize the dedicated volunteers we have in Peel Region.

This year's theme, The Value of One, the Power of Many, highlights the impact individuals working together can have in our community, and at non-profit organizations like Abbeyfield Seniors' Residences.

Abbeyfield Caledon was founded in 2010 and provides affordable housing, nutritious meals, and 24-hour emergency assistance to seniors in need who aren't yet ready to move into a long-term care home, but it wouldn't be possible without its dedicated volunteers.

"Volunteers were vital to the creation of Abbeyfield Caledon and continue to play an essential role today," said Gerry Merkley, member of the Board of Directors. "In turn, supporting the residents of Abbeyfield gives our volunteers a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction. It's truly a win-win."

Abbeyfield homes are non-profit residences for seniors that provide, in addition to affordable accommodation and good nutrition, companionship. Each Abbeyfield location around the world follows a similar housing model that relies on local volunteers.

In Ontario there are currently four Abbeyfield houses (Caledon, Durham, Ottawa, and Toronto) and more are in development (Lakefield, Kitchener).

"I started volunteering with Abbeyfield Caledon because I love the idea of different housing options for seniors," said Alison Bambury, a volunteer at Abbeyfield. "I keep donating my time to support the people who live at Abbeyfield, and because I believe we need more places like this in our community."

This year's theme for National Volunteer Week was chosen to shine a light on just how much one volunteer at a place like Abbeyfield bring to the table and how critical every individual is in making things run smoothly.

"I think the value of one and the power of many really describes the people I currently work with at Abbeyfield," said Merkley. "We have a very small group of volunteers and they're essentially the board at this point and have been throughout this COVID pandemic. The amount that each one individually contributes is quite remarkable and together we just support each other in our independent tasks and what that results in for Abbeyfield is a magnification of success. That's the way we look at it."

Although Merkley knows the seniors appreciate the efforts of the volunteers at Abbeyfield, she understands that people who are willing to give their time to others need to be praised more often and that's why National Volunteer Week is a perfect time to thank community members who are involved.

"It's really important (to give the volunteers recognition), because it's a voluntary board?I wouldn't say it's thankless because the residents and their families appreciate it?it can be taken for granted," said Merkley. "And because our volunteer board members are very humble and go about their business without any fanfare, I think it's very important to every once in a while?especially when this time of the year rolls around?to take stock in the really important value that they bring to a place like Abbeyfield. We would not be able to run and provide affordable housing in this amazing home if it weren't for the volunteers, there's just no way, it would be exorbitant. If we had to replace the cost of everything that they do with a fee for service, it would probably defeat the whole purpose of affordable senior housing within a community."

Every community that has a senior housing option like Abbeyfield is lucky because it gives these community members a place where they can keep their independence and can socialize, but none of it is possible without volunteers.

‘It is absolutely critical (to have affordable senior housing),’ Merkley said. ‘There’s so many interesting positives about the Abbeyfield model and we’re really lucky to have on in Caledon. The reason it’s so important is, there are so many seniors in smaller communities that perhaps are finding their homes to be a little bit too much or maybe they’re suffering from some loneliness or isolation or poor nutrition?it’s hard to cook for one. We know about seniors who deal with these things and often it gets to the point where they have to begrudgingly move somewhere else. Often, they’re fiercely independent and where are they to go? They’re not ready for a long-term care home and they don’t need that level of care.

‘This type of home is sustainable for them and its affordable right in their own little community. They don’t have to move out, they can find a place to comfortably live until they need more care. It’s for independent seniors and it’s definitely not a long-term care home, but it’s a hybrid between independent living and long-term care.’

Merkley thinks volunteers, not only at Abbeyfield, but throughout Caledon, are the key for boosting tight-knit community driven feel and are the heartbeat of the town and she worries about need for an increase in younger volunteers.

‘I think volunteering is so important and somewhat overlooked,’ she said. ‘If you did a study on the per capita contribution per volunteer, so many of these organizations simply could not function without them. It actually keeps me up at night because the average age of volunteers is creeping up?many and most are seniors themselves or retired. You do see some youth, but if you looked at the overall demographic it’s definitely skewed to the older crowd and understandably so in the sense that when you’re younger you’re busy with your career, your own life, and your own family. Perhaps in retirement you have more time on your hands, but I think the whole notion of volunteering needs to be much more mainstream and engrained. What keeps me up is what happens when our aging volunteers start to get to a point where they can no longer serve as volunteers, if that drops off then what happens to all these organizations? We need to step back and think about that, it really concerns me.’

Spreading awareness that organizations need help to function at their highest level and the entire community has a better understating of the importance of community volunteering is a must going forward.

‘Not just a one-time event with volunteering,’ said Merkley. ‘I know they do volunteer for school credits, but it would be really great to see a more sustained thread of volunteering in one’s life. It’s just got to be something you do in your life, rather than it being a one-time event.’

Volunteers at Abbeyfield provide support in many ways including minor repairs and maintenance, photography, party planning, social media support, public relations, financial oversight, fundraising and so much more.

Anyone interested in volunteering is encouraged to reach out online at abbeyfieldcaledon.org or by calling 905-860-0181.