

## Community Living St. Marys and Area

St. Marys is a small town located in Perth County and is a two-hour drive south and west of Toronto, close to Stratford. Our population is about 7,000 and serves a larger rural area. Like many Community Living organizations, our association was started in the 50s by families looking for somewhere their young adult children could contribute and belong. Through the years, the association has grown but kept its strong roots tied to families and our community. A few years ago, we worked on articulating our signature gift. It is “We have a long history of being innovative, engaged in community and committed to people.”

Innovation teamed with a willingness to create new ways of doing things and letting go of old ways, has a long history in St. Marys. In 1968, a new sheltered workshop was built with big support from community groups like the Kinsmen. Just five years later, the workshop closed when a Stratford industry hired all its workers. The workshop was opened again the next year when the Stratford business closed but the goal of real jobs with real pay never left once people realized competitive and supported employment as alternatives to sheltered work. This led to the development and eventual spin off of Partners In Employment and the closure of the St. Marys sheltered workshop.

In 1990, a steering committee of individuals and organizations interested in advancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities began meeting. In 1992, with leadership from Community Living, Partners In Employment or PIE was incorporated. In the following years, staff was seconded from Community Living and CMHA. The investment of financial and human resources from our association was significant; however, our Board believed the potential benefits outweighed the risks and PIE continued to be nurtured and supported by our association. We continued to sit on their Board and do their accounting until the last few years. Today, PIE assists hundreds of people in Perth and Huron Counties to find and keep employment. They offer services to employers, job seekers and work with all levels of government. They are a generic service with many different funding sources. In 1990, we could not have imagined the service it has become.

Leadership within the association took risks because they believed people with disabilities could work and needed the same opportunities as others. In the early years, many people supported by the association got jobs through PIE. With the movement of employment resources to PIE and the success of people with disabilities working in real jobs, a decision to close the sheltered workshop in St. Marys was made. Through an individualized planning process, people remaining at the workshop secured jobs and meaningful volunteer activities.

In the late 70s, adults with disabilities and their families talked about having a home of their own, separate from their parents. As well, families asked the association to help them bring home their children and siblings from institutions. Association volunteers toured the province and learned about existing residential services, mostly group homes. Board member Barb Taylor said she couldn't imagine living with five or six unrelated people considering how

challenging it can be to live with your own family. The Board made a bold decision to not build or operate group homes. Instead, they chose to find ways to support individuals. This story about Barb's response to group homes is part of our 'folklore'.

Shelley was someone who wanted to move out of her parents' home and she would talk about this often. Before she had a chance to move, she had a stroke and ended up in the chronic care end of our local hospital. When we started planning to provide support for people in their own homes, we asked Shelley's doctor if he thought we could do it. He responded yes and that he would help us try. Shelley moved into her own apartment and lived there for close to thirty years before her death last fall.

In the 1980s, our association had two main service areas - vocational services with an emphasis on competitive and supported employment and residential services with a focus on the person and their home. Keen to continue learning and developing, the association welcomed many disability leaders to St. Marys, invested in training and hosted a three-year project on quality. A commitment and investment in ongoing learning has been a key strategy for our association's development. All of this learning and an important organizational planning retreat that involved people using services, their families, volunteers, staff and community members, led to a decision to re-structure the organization. Their vision for change was big and bold.

A detailed plan to end the delivery of segregated vocational and residential programs was developed with the involvement of all stakeholders. Employees would no longer work for programs but instead, would work for people. An implementation team with representation from all stakeholder groups was formed to lead the change. These leaders held the vision, carried the message and worked through the issues as the plan was implemented.

In 1990, the association stopped delivering segregated services. We re-organized into two main areas – Community Development and Community Involvement. All employees were laid off and hired back on teams to support a person.

Essentially, twenty-five years later, this continues to be our organizational structure. We have a strong set of principles framed by simple but challenging vision and mission statements.

Our history is important and remembering our past helps us focus on what is dear to people supported and their families, our association and our community. The focus for us remains providing individualized, person and family directed support and community development.

Our first principle is everything starts with the person. A person and their family is introduced in many ways but our first work is to understand who the person is. Planning facilitators spend time with people, using a variety of tools to assist the person in developing a life plan. If support services are requested, then the facilitator works with the person to design services that work for them and their family. From there, an individualized budget is developed. All people using services of our association have an individualized budget that reflects the cost of their paid supports. Our organization budget is a roll up of these individualized budgets. All

expenses are allocated back to individuals. When a person receives paid support, they are involved in the recruitment and hiring of workers, and in supervision and evaluation. In these situations, workers are employees of our association but we also support individuals and families to engage self-employed workers, share your home providers, neighbourly supports, etc.

Providing person directed supports can challenge service agencies. Brian is someone that told us for many years that he wanted to move closer to his family in Toronto. However, when we asked him to do some planning, he would say 'in ten years.' When Brian broke his back, he finally got a chance to move closer to his family. We were able to find a place for him to recover just a few blocks from his parent's home. After his recovery, Brian and his family worked with us to find a private service provider and an apartment for him to live. It took a few years to find a developmental service provider to support Brian the way he wanted to be supported. As well, it was over four years him living in Toronto before our area Ministry office agreed to move his identified funding from our agency to the Toronto based agency. It was not easy to organize supports or monitor them from 160 km away. It was the right thing for Brian and we were committed to him.

When we talk about community development, we mean developing capacity in our community to welcome all citizens. This has been our focus for more than 30 years. In St. Marys, we have led and participated in initiatives that have resulted in the development of an accessible transportation system, nursery school resource support, a literacy program, two co-operative housing complexes, an employment service, Citizen Advocacy, and more. In the last ten years, examples include bi-weekly Community Dinners, Housing First committee and new supportive housing units, Accessibility Committee, training and support for Kids Klub and other Town recreation staff, accessible playgrounds at two local schools, support for local student driven inclusion initiatives and the introduction of Core Gift. We are committed to building and supporting a strong, vibrant and inclusive community.

Community development with a more direct disability focus include activity to support a local People First chapter, development and nurturing of Parents in Perth, Voices high school project, Perth Facilitator Network, and Facile Perth County. Provincially, we have supported with human and financial resources, People First of Ontario, Ontario Independent Facilitation Network, Individualized Funding Coalition, and development of the Ontario Community Services Coalition.

Our community development work facilitates, supports and goes hand in hand with our association's primary focus of providing individualized, person and family directed support.

Through the years, we have learned to listen deeply to people and to hopefully, find meaningful ways to respond. Carrie-Anne's story is one that needs to be shared. About fifteen years ago, we met the family of a young woman stuck in a psychiatric hospital. They were desperate to get help to bring her home to their community. They had watched her deteriorate in the hospital to the point that she was not eating, talking or seemingly knowing them. They

were afraid she would die there. A plan had been developed but no funding was secured. The family had written letters, made videos, met with politicians, and asked for help repeatedly. Eventually, our board heard Carrie-Anne's story and made a decision to help.

An external facilitator was hired to work for Carrie-Anne and her family. The facilitator's question was always "Who can you bring?" understanding that relationships, the people in her life, would be the most important piece of Carrie-Anne's healing and journey home. The external facilitator spent many hours bringing people back into Carrie-Anne's life. They visited her in hospital and eventually, were able to bust her out for short drives. To this day, those same people are with Carrie-Anne. Her circle is rich and full of people who love and appreciate her.

Building a team of people to work for Carrie-Anne took very intentional work. As part of the hiring process, potential support workers met Carrie-Anne with her family at the hospital. Once the team was hired, extensive training was organized with an emphasis on values of self-determination, relationships, choice, home, etc.

Having an external facilitator working for Carrie-Anne and her family in a full-time capacity for several months was a huge financial investment. It was the first time that St. Marys invested so heavily in the set-up of a support arrangement.

Today, Carrie-Anne lives in a lovely home bought for her by her family in a nice neighbourhood in Stratford. She has many people in her life and is always celebrating something. There were probably a hundred friends and family at her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party this summer. She is physically and emotionally as healthy as she's ever been in her life.

Carrie-Anne's story is documented in the book [Kirby's Lane](#) and the accompanying guide. It's available from Community Living Ontario.

One of our principles acknowledges the value of Facilitation independent of services and our role in making that a reality for individuals and families in Ontario. We heard from families that this was service needed in our community. Parents in Perth, People First and the Perth Facilitation Network supported the idea of creating local, independent and unencumbered facilitation. Developmental service providers in Perth County had some experience with external facilitation and took an opportunity to use some Ministry funding for this purpose. A plan was developed with many stakeholders. Four agencies committed significant resources over a three-year period and hoped that Ministry legislation and funding would be made available sooner rather than later. With loads of hard work and financial and other support from many groups, Facile Perth was launched. Our organization acted as a transfer payment agency for Facile, did the accounting, agreements, and provided funding for one FTE. It was a huge investment and very risky. We did less and some people had to take on more because we were down one position for most of three years. We were part of the Facile Board for several years. We believe Facile enriches our system of supports and we are proud to have supported its development.

Through the years, we have listened to people, their families and friends to learn more about what they want in life and what makes it good for them. We have tried to design flexible and responsive supports. We use the term 'tailor made' in our principles. This is very important to people and their families and we hear that from them.

Kaylee is a young woman who has always lived with her mom. Her mom has been the driving force for Kaylee to have a full and good life. One of their shared dreams was for Kaylee to move out of home and live with a housemate. A planning facilitator from our association met with them to explore ways to make that happen. When the Ministry created an opportunity to apply for a two-year innovative housing grant, Kaylee's mom and Community Living developed a couple of proposals. 'Neighbourly Supports' proposal was accepted and we were able to move quickly to begin implementing the plan. Neighbourly Supports is all about relationships and creating supports within community to reduce the reliance on paid services. A Neighbourly Support family lives near the person, spends time with them, facilitates their involvement in community and provides typical friendly neighbour support.

Neighbourly Supports requires an investment in facilitation and a commitment to building and maintaining relationships. Two units in a small and new apartment building were secured within a couple of weeks because we met the building developer/owner at a housing meeting a few months before. Kaylee's mom asked someone she knew to be the Neighbourly Support family. A wonderful housemate was found early on because someone recommended giving this young woman a call since they thought she was wanting to move from her parent's home. This support arrangement is early on but we fully expect that all parties will enjoy and benefit from their situation.

Much of our work in the last several years has been touching on the idea of gifts, their discovery and ways we use them. We have invested in training for staff and others and a group interested in exploring this has met regularly. We have learned about how to uncover core gift through an interview process and we have been engaging staff, some people supported, families and volunteers in this process. As well, we have been trying different ways to explore gift discovery with people that have difficulty with the interview method. For one person, the members of her Circle told stories about her and then weaved threads from the stories together to make a gift statement.

Our board created a new gift principle. The United Church Women and another women's leadership group invited us to do a gift workshop with them. Recently, the local Girl Guides and Pathfinders asked to do some community service time with us. We will engage them in a gift discovery process.

What we know so far is that uncovering gifts is the beginning of belonging. And belonging is about getting people where they really need to be. Belonging is most important for all of us. 'A community where everyone belongs' is our vision.