

Neighbour to Neighbour

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OSHAWA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE SERVES THE COMMUNITY JUST IN TIME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

By Adrienne Martin

It's late in the evening when the New Life Church's Neighbourhood Centre begins to fill with the sound of Christmas carols.

They're not the traditional carols you might expect to hear at a church – instead, they've been remixed to a reggae beat. As unconventional as it may seem, no one in the kitchen seems to mind. Everyone appears familiar with the songs and they sing along absentmindedly as they bustle about, busy at work.

These are just a few of the volunteers with the Neighbourhood Centre, a not-for-profit community service located in south Oshawa. In just 12 hours, the Centre will open its doors for its annual Christmas Dinner, providing a home-cooked meal to some 200 people in need from the local community.

This is the centre's fifth annual Christmas dinner and as with every year, no effort or expense is spared to ensure that tomorrow's dinner guests are treated to the best possible experience. Next door, additional volunteers are busy decorating the church's main hall. Ornaments are taped along the walls, tables are covered in red and white

tablecloths and decked with poinsettias. At the front, volunteers erect a small Christmas tree and makeshift fireplace. A live band is scheduled to perform a roundup of carols and for the children, the Centre has even arranged a surprise visit from Santa Claus.

For almost 20 years, the Neighbourhood Centre – formerly known as Open Arms Food Bank – has been a pillar of provision and support in the Oshawa community. A registered food bank operated by the New Life Seventh-day Adventist Church – the Centre is in downtown Oshawa, a part of the city that for years has seen a troubling rate of poverty among its residents.

Director Ann Thompson began the annual Christmas dinner when she joined the centre in 2012. "I think for many of us, we're so focused on what's happening out in the world that we forget those who are right under our noses in need of help," she said. "People may not realize it, but there's a lot of people in Oshawa who are struggling to get by. Unfortunately, it often only becomes harder during the Christmas season."

While one in 10 Durham preschoolers live below the poverty line, in Oshawa that rate climbs to as high as one in five. The downtown core is recognized as one of seven "Priority Neighbourhoods" in the region, meaning that residents have lower than average income levels and require a municipal focus to build on health and wellbeing.

According to the Durham Region Department of Health, while the median after-tax household income for residents in the region is more than \$70,000, in downtown Oshawa, this annual salary sits just above \$32,000. Residents in the area are also less likely to pursue a higher education – 23 per cent don't finish high school – and

unemployment rates are higher than the regional average.

Recognizing these staggering numbers, over the years the Neighbourhood Centre has expanded its many offered services to adequately meet the needs of the surrounding community. The Centre regularly distributes meal boxes, personal and baby hygiene packages and snack lunches for children. Once a month, the centre also hosts a drop-in continental breakfast for clients (the term used to refer to those in the community who access the Centre's services) as well as a pancake breakfast. At any one of these events, the Neighbourhood Centre can serve anywhere from 50 to 100 clients.

"As important as it is to give, it's also really important that we support our clients' personal development," said Thompson. "We really try to uplift them and give them the tools they need to better help themselves. Personal growth and development are very important and over the last few years, this has been one of our growing focus areas."

In 2015, the Neighbourhood Centre partnered with DRIVEN to help support women victims of domestic abuse and gender-based violence. As part of the partnership, the Centre offers a safe space for women to video chat with a DRIVEN support worker. The Centre also hosts an evening cooking class aimed at helping clients to prepare healthy – but affordable – meals on a limited budget. (The cooking class is currently on hiatus as the centre looks for additional volunteers to help lead it).

Though the Christmas dinner is just one of the many events the Centre hosts throughout the year, it's undoubtedly the biggest. The dinner depends largely on the generosity of donors and the hard work of volunteers and preparation begins months in advance. Despite the head start though, preparation often comes down to the wire. There's simply so much to do. On top of the served dinner, clients also receive free frozen turkeys and chickens, gifts for their children and hand-knitted winter wear. But once again this year, the

volunteers' hard work has paid off: the Neighbourhood Centre served close to 300 meals and distributed almost 100 turkeys and chickens.

Since arriving at the New Life Church in 2013, Pastor Frank Dell'Erba has seen firsthand the Centre's impact on the surrounding community. A pastor for 15 years, he says the Neighbourhood Centre is "the most wonderful ministry" he's ever experienced in his career.

"It's more than just, 'I'm coming here to get a [food] hamper' or 'I'm coming here to get a Christmas dinner,'" he explained. "People are having a good time, they're talking together. It's an opportunity for community, which is what I always see the church as being."

Despite its affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Neighbourhood Centre's events are intentionally kept separate from the church. "The best way to do evangelism is to help people where they're at, free of judgment, no strings attached," Dell'Erba explains. "People here aren't just served food, but they're also given dignity, respect and friendships."

To help facilitate this notion, the Centre welcomes volunteers from all religious – and non-religious – backgrounds. In fact, almost three quarters of the centre's roughly 100 volunteers aren't members of the church.

"They believe in helping the community," said Dell'Erba. "And what a cool opportunity to just let people know who we're about and we get to know who they are. It's this wonderful kind of team and community that's forming here at the centre."

"I love what it's all about."