

Serving our Community: One Plate at a Time

Submitted by Owen Sound Downtown Improvement Area

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I had the great pleasure of visiting a scarcely publicized community gem in the heart of Downtown Owen Sound, known as Union Place. This program, located at the back of the Canadian Mental Health Association's offices, is not your typical drop-in brunch and social recreation program, but a thriving community of people who gather in a spirit of cooperation and mutual support.

The social recreational programming at Union Place is for adults 18 and over and works with individuals who are diagnosed with a serious mental illness. I was struck by the real sense of serenity in this unassuming space, and the happy faces on the patrons, the kitchen staff, volunteers, and of course the CMHA staff. The Brunch Program offers employment opportunities to those that are members, where they produce and share a daily meal; they connect with a range of community resources and recreational activities; and explore inclusion in a safe and comfortable atmosphere. By working at the Brunch Program, members learn skills in serving, preparing food, and working in a kitchen on a shoestring budget of \$20 per day! Thanks to the donations from the community, churches and the occasional sharing of healthy staples from OSHaRE, the kitchen finds a way to stretch the groceries into a wholesome brunch, served daily from 10am to 11am, Mondays through Fridays. For one hour a day the space is open to the community and hosts many people from all walks of life who work cooperatively and inclusively, building trust, respect and friendships along the journey.

The grassroots movement of community gardens is no stranger here either, and the successful CMHA Grey Bruce Garden Program at Union Place has grown over the years. (pun fully intended!) The CMHA Garden Program maintains about 70 garden boxes at St. George's Church, another 19 boxes at the United Way, and of course maintains the Snack Gardens along the harbour wall along 1st Avenue East. This program offers a great opportunity for people to garden, or to learn the art of gardening, harvesting, and to bring the "field" to their plate. For many of the members, this has been their first experience in preparing or eating food that is fresh picked from a garden that they have nurtured themselves. This remedial and uplifting program does not only have a ripple effect of a positive nature with the members and volunteers of the program, but it also greatly supplements the Brunch Program with fresh produce at a very low cost to Union Place.

Although the Brunch Program is a great success and a keystone of the program, Union Place is much more than a free meal program. The nourishing food served in this atmosphere of warm respect helps to open doors to addressing underlying issues of poverty and nutritious eating, to skills development and finding resources for individuals with needs. Thanks to the committed community we live in - providing volunteers, donors and experienced partners - the program offers many opportunities for growth, understanding, and gaining skill sets. It begins with a nourishing meal and tangible respect, which slowly transforms to self-directed work toward

clear goals. Those in our community who are feeling overwhelmed, find a path forward at Union Place.

The resources that can be found at Union Place are vast, from the employment and identification clinics (which assisted our recent Fire Victims), to legal, medical and educational programs. For those who want to become a member of Union Place (those diagnosed with mental illness), there is an array of recreational and leisure programs offered, for the most part, free of charge. (*special programs may have a nominal fee to them, for example, a golf day*). At Union Place the staff and volunteers work with community partners such as Community Connections (part of HOPE Grey Bruce), to share resources and costs, and to introduce members to each other. Recreational programs run every day starting at 11:30 am. Some are right at Union Place, and some are out in the community, like visiting Ribfest, or special outings to private locations, such as an artist's studio. Many volunteers come in to Union Place to lead skill-driven programs including cooking, sewing, exercise, coping skills, and the popular shopping outing, purposely coordinated to line up with pay day from social services. When the plates are cleared from brunch, the building is closed to the public, but is kept open for members until 2pm daily. Members can join in one of the planned recreational programs, or join other members in a game of cards or pool; cozy up on the couch and watch a movie on Netflix; or partake in a video game on the wii. The space is open and welcoming to all members that come in.

As with all not-for-profit organizations, funding is always a reality. The social recreation programming at Union Place is funded by the Southwest LHIN, but additional fundraising efforts are focused on through the CMHA annual Ride Don't Hide event in June. Additionally, the new cmhagb.org website has an easy way to donate money to the programs of CMHA, including Union Place. Volunteers are always welcome, and are invited to contact the office if they would like to share their time with one of the amazing programs here in Grey and Bruce.

At 2pm, the lights are dimmed, and the doors are closed to the community. It may be quieter at Union Place at this time, but it certainly isn't slowing down in activity! This is the time for the staff of three to sit down at their desks and get their paperwork done, attend meetings, look at budgets, recruit volunteers and coordinate fundraising efforts. And the work doesn't end there for this energetic staff! This time is also used to pick up donations, go shopping for the Brunch Program, or visit with community partners. In speaking with some staff and volunteers at Union Place, it was obvious that the work is plentiful and there is always much to do. But it was just as evident that they love their work and the people they affect on a daily basis.

Union Place is not just another social rec. program - it's a safe and thriving community right here in the heart of Downtown Owen Sound.



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