

## Welcoming Arms marks 10 years in a changing community



### By Brock Weir

For the past 10 years, Welcoming Arms has been helping low income people in the community make ends meet and, a decade on, the ecumenical group continues to evolve to meet the changing needs of Aurora.

This year, the organization, which is run by 30 volunteers and one part-time employee out of the Rectory behind Trinity Anglican Church, is marking their 10th anniversary once again as a local charity chosen to share in the proceeds from next month's Wild, Wild West Hoedown, hosted by Magna International.

Their volunteers are hard at work, fanned out across the community selling raffle tickets for York Region's biggest party, as the 14 other organizations are as well, and the money they have collected will be combined with all other proceeds and split evenly among the 15 following the event.

Welcoming Arms' share of the pot will be used to help vault themselves into their next decade with new programs to help address the Town's changing demographics, including programs on money management.

'I would say 90 per cent of the folks we see here are on ODSP or Ontario Works, or have a very low income,' says Julie Cruickshank of Welcoming Arms. 'A lot of them get into debt and bad circumstances, so we will have money management one-on-one.'

Dubbed CAP or, Christians Against Poverty the program will be joined by a new nutrition program (at this point without a snappy name to call its own) that will focus on teaching clients how to store food, identify good food, supplement food they get from local food banks with more nutritional options, and creating recipes on a limited budget.

'Even if you are going to a food bank, you can supplement with fresh food by utilizing the grocery gift cards,' says Ms. Cruickshank. 'We're going to teach them how to clip coupons, take them to the grocery store, and show them how to shop properly instead of being lured by all those things at the end of the aisles, which we all are. At the final workshop, we will actually put together five entrees for their family for them to take home.'

'We have had quite a lot of interest from newcomers in the area and they participate because their kids are saying they want peanut butter or Mac and Cheese and they're thinking, 'What is this? How do I make it?' We're going to teach them that, and they would also like to share some of their recipes with us, which I think is phenomenal. It is beyond a nutrition workshop, it is a place to get together, to meet other people in the same situation, and to be able to network and make some new friends.'

Over the last year, however, Welcoming Arms is one of a number of local service clubs who have seen their numbers start to go down. While it is a goal for any organization which serves the needs of the disadvantaged to put themselves out of business because the job would then be done, Ms. Cruickshank says in speaking to her counterparts in other groups, they can attribute the trend to a different reason.

Although she initially thought the lower number of participants stemmed from Welcoming Arms becoming a little less loose with its application process, it has more to do with a lack of affordable housing in the area.

“People are moving north and social service agencies are moving people north because there is no affordable housing in Aurora,” says Ms. Cruickshank. “That is the main impact and I validated that with other agencies.”

But, there is a silver lining.

“This year we were able to actually double what we give out to people in our Bridging the Gap program,” she says of the program which gives grocery cards, transit tickets and basic toiletries to clients. “People certainly appreciated it as the cost of food has gone up so much that it has been great to be able to double.”

In the next decade, Ms. Cruickshank says Welcoming Arms would like to introduce life skills coaching to their regular roster of programs to aid people address social issues. All too often their clients “get into a head space where they think they are less than” and such a program would help them build self-confidence, job skills, and achieve the best to their ability.

They also hope a move to a new location is in the cards, something with Yonge Street frontage that could be shared with other organizations.

In the meantime, however, this small band of volunteers is firmly focused on getting out there selling their raffle tickets.

“We are grassroots,” says Ms. Cruickshank when asked what her pitch would be to people in the community to support Welcoming Arms through this year’s Hoedown. “We have 30 volunteers and our member base is our clients. The funding we get comes from the community. This is a community charity serving those in the community and we would very much like to be supported by the community. We believe in our mission and values.”

For more information on Welcoming Arms and the other 14 charities involved in this year’s Hoedown, visit [www.hoedown.ca](http://www.hoedown.ca). Hoedown will take place September 16 and 17 at Magna International’s Wellington Street East campus. Over the coming weeks, The Auroran will profile other participating charities and community organizations.