## Event held to boost UWO Community Leadership Program <sup>e</sup>

## by Nathan Howes

Special to the Beaver

Community organizations such as United Way Oakville (UWO) and STRIDE (Supported Training & Rehabilitation in Diverse Environments) have become instruments of positive change for people like David Nickerson.

A former client of the UWO-funded, Halton-based STRIDE, which helps those with mental health challenges find meaningful work opportunities, Nickerson struggled with homelessness after fleeing his job and community because of paranoia and psychosis, among other issues.

He spoke of his experiences and recovery recently, at a reception at O'Connor MacLeod Hanna LLP to raise awareness and increase donors for UWO's Community Leadership

Through annual donations of \$1,000 or more, the initiative supports the collaborative efforts of the UWO's network of 53 programs and services, helping more than 34,000 local people.

The Feb. 26 function drew 55 people, with more than 20 becoming new donors.

Nickerson said having social, mental or emotional difficulties is similar to driving in Canada in the winter because "we all have days where we lose control over our life, but can regain control with nothing but a raised heartbeat.'

"Many of us have spent some time in a social,

mental or emotional snow bank of some sort and needed to dig ourselves out. Very few of us, thankfully, have needed the help of the professionals, as we were so deep in the problem we couldn't dig ourselves out," said Nickerson.

Although he spent three years without a home, Nickerson lived on the street a short time, he said, noting the situation began with "just a simple thought that I wasn't wanted

"I left the neighbourhood, then the city and then my entire network. I kept running and eventually got stuck in homelessness. But really, who hasn't run away from life even just for a day at some point?" asked Nickerson.

He noted most of the medical, psychological, spiritual and social care he received from professionals was funded by the government, fundraising or "some combination."

At some point during his recovery, Nickerson was ready to do something, but not "real" work, he said, as he volunteered in project management with his church and did consulting work with a local company.

This is when STRIDE stepped in and provided him with basic employment and-related counselling, as well as on-the-job social services.

"Within a few months, I was able to move on to one of my former clients. A few years later, I'm teaching at two community colleges," said

"Your funding to the United Way Oakville enables experts in snow bank recovery to continue to help people like you, who become stuck like me, get driving again."

Oakville businessman Stephen Sparling, who organized the reception, and employed Nickerson at Stephen Sparling International (SSI), described Nickerson as a "wonderful man who has done great work for me and with me."

Nickerson is currently a project manager at SSI.

At a previous UWO leadership reception he hosted in 2013, Sparling raised \$42,000.

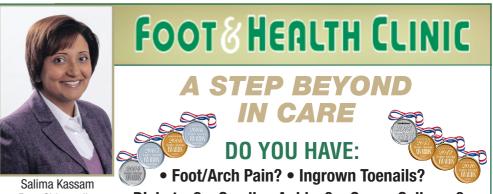
As part of the community donor program, the Sprott Leadership challenge matches dollar-for-dollar, new and increased leadership

When first-time donors raise their contributions from \$750 to \$1,000, The Sprott Foundation will match it — doubling their UWO donation to \$2,000.

Sparling noted the foundation will match all funds collected on Feb. 26, up to \$250,000.

"I'm sort of a community activist in town and have been very, very involved in trying to make sure that those business people in the community are aware of a role they can have in helping others," said Sparling.

For information on UWO's Community Leadership Program, visit www.uwoakville.org.



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