

# IMPACT: Kawartha charities evolve to combat coronavirus impact

*Catherine Whitnall*

For agencies that have long prided themselves on the positive ‘contact’ they have had with children, the COVID-19 pandemic has really thrown a wrench in their mission statements.

However, that doesn’t mean they have sat idle, waiting for some semblance of normal to return.

Janice Balfour took over the reins at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kawartha Lakes-Haliburton in November. She was just getting into a good groove when “COVID hit and we had to shift gears pretty quickly.” The state of emergency meant Bigs, Littles, Mentors and Mentees could no longer keep meeting.

“We had to find alternate ways to make those connections ... and some of our families didn’t have the means. We’ve been doing our best, but it hasn’t been easy,” said Balfour.

For Big Sister Karen Szostak, the pandemic has been both a curse and a blessing.

It was initially heartbreaking to be separated from her Little Sister Emily.

“She’s at home and seeing her family, but she didn’t understand why she couldn’t see me, too; she thinks of me as part of her family,” said Szostak who has been texting and using FaceTime weekly since mid-March.

“She’d beg me to just drive over ... she promised she’d be good and keep her distance. But I just couldn’t do it without the hugs. That’s been the hardest part.”

Szostak has been matched with Emily for only two years, but states it’s been an incredible time filled with amazing experiences. She explained the 12-year-old had experienced loss and abandonment early on, resulting in a lack of trust. Szostak worked hard to build that and, in doing so, learned a little something about herself.

“She’s done a lot for me. I can’t believe how much she’s changed my life. I have so much more self-confidence and courage thanks to Emily,” said Szostak, adding virtual meetings have taken her into the youngster’s world. “It’s been interesting to see that side of her life.”

Having made such progress is a key reason why many Bigs like Szostak are committed to staying connected.

“I’m really proud of our Bigs and Littles who have transitioned into the virtual world,” said Balfour. “In fact, we’re thinking about keeping a lot of those connections moving forward into this ‘new normal’, whatever that looks like.”

When it comes to Five Counties Children's Centre, that provides such outpatient and community based services as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech language therapy, augmentative communication services, recreation, social work, resource teachers, pediatric medical assessments and specialized clinics, serving clients sometimes requires creativity.

Seven-year-old Isaac has been receiving assistance from Five Counties since he was one. He has lived with a number of challenges including hand-eye co-ordinating, impaired hearing and Attention Deficit Disorder. The support he received from the Centre shifted when he started school. His mother Mara knows that getting professional services will do more. She is desperate to get him on the waiting list for speech therapy.

Although the agency had to cease face-to-face services, its team has been working remotely and remained available to support children and families using telemedicine. Therapists have been remarkable at developing and adapting their services to a virtual model, and have continued to provide connection, reassurance and support to families.

For example, Isaac was provided with a sensory pillow and a squishy ball to absorb some of his restless energy. Staff have also provided Mara with a variety of suggestions for behaviour modification and she recently enjoyed a course on dealing with a "spirited child," leaving feeling validated that she was a good parent doing all she could for her only child.

"While our sites are closed, be assured that we are continuing to do all we can to address the immediate needs of our clients like Isaac," shared Lyn Giles, director of fund development.

"For years our communities have supported our kids and their families to get the treatment they need. We know that virtual care and telephone consultation is not a temporary solution for supporting families during this emergency closure. At Five Counties, services online and by phone will be our new normal and will continue to be the backbone of our service delivery model for several months as we gradually reopen our sites."

With health and community services providers now able to open or expand services, Five Counties has slowly started to provide in-person services to families whose children are in urgent need as part of its three-stage reopening plan. It is a slow, staged process that safeguards the wellbeing of clients, families and staff.

But it's not just a case of playing 'catch-up' with client services.

The pandemic is also wreaking havoc on charity coffers.

"First we had to cancel all meetings, which had an impact on St. Dave's Diner which hosted our morning meetings," said Lindsay Optimist Club president Mike McGregor.

This was followed by cancelling the Leahy concert that was scheduled for the Academy Theatre for Performing Arts in March.

"This was going to raise significant money for us, but now will cost us some money," said McGregor, adding that having to also cancel April's adult dodge ball tournament

was another hit.

The club has already begun its annual soccer registration when pandemic restrictions came into play. Money was refunded without any cost to the club.

“Normally we'd be halfway through our soccer schedule. We love running it, and yes, it is a major fundraiser for us. We still hope to run the program in the fall, if health officials give youth sports clearance to begin,” continued McGregor.

Recently, organizers of the annual International Plowing Match and Rural Expo — at which the club had hoped to raise some funds — announced the event was postponed to 2021.

“So, I guess overall, we have been financially impacted by COVID, but we haven't been sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves. We know others have been hit much harder than us. We will find new ways to raise funds and continue to contribute to the community,” said McGregor, pointing out members unanimously supported a \$11,400 donation to the Kawartha Lakes Food Source in March.

“We continue to meet and discuss other ways to help contribute to youth in these unprecedented days ... Oh, and we continue to accept new members into the club.”