

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.”