

# Community

## Acton 'Oasis' provides much-needed service

By LISA BOONSTOPPEL-POT  
the Herald  
Enjoying life isn't easy for mentally disabled adults, because they need a lot of support and encouragement to take part in social activities.  
To help the mentally ill in Halton Hills enjoy life, the Cana-

dian Mental Health Association has branched out in Halton Hills to offer 'Oasis', in the Halton work program space located at 100 Elgin Street in Acton.  
'Oasis' is a recreation program offered from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights and every other Satur-

day from 2-5 p.m. for adults in Halton Hills who suffer from schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, manic depression and other psychiatric disabilities.

"These people are capable of handling anything but they need a lot of bolstering," said Kim Peters, a mental health worker with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). "This program gives them something to look forward to and something to do instead of roaming around on the streets."

That's exactly what Tom, White, who lives in the Acton Village Manor, used to do before he became involved with the program.

"If I'm not here, I walk around and sit in a coffee shop," said Tom. "There's no room at the Manor to do things except sleep."

Tom is a person who likes to do projects. He is very interested in and knowledgeable about engines and likes to work on engines. But because there is limited recreational space at the manor for projects like these, he becomes bored and turns to the streets to get out and do something - even if it is only walking downtown to the local coffee shop.

But now, Tom has a place to go. Here, there are a couple of couches, easy chairs and tables set-up. When Tom and his fellow Oasis members meet, they can either take part in the activity of the evening or lounge around and engage in their own activities.

"It's a crash pad," said Ms. Peters. "It's quite unstructured and they can come and go as they please."

After spending time with the Oasis participants during one of their recreational sessions, it became apparent to an observer how relaxed and casual the get-togethers are.

In the table section of the room, many of the members sit smoking and quietly talking while playing bingo. In the lounge area, one person has dozed off in an easy chair while another comfortably sits smoking a cigarette.

While playing bingo, many of the members sit quietly just waiting for the next number to be called out. Ms. Peters said this is normal since many people with psychiatric disorders are "withdrawn and internal."

"They really need a social program where it is expected of them to take part in an activity and talk or else it becomes very comfortable for them to stay in their cocoon."

Tom's special friend, Margie, is very quiet but she'll say how much she enjoys coming to Oasis three nights a week. "I like meeting the people" she says.

Although most of the members already know each other from the Halton Work Program where Oasis is located, there are some new people the members have been able to become friends with. Developing friendships and learning how to relate to other people is an important part of the program said Ms. Peters.

"Part of the program is to teach the participants how to fit into society," she said. "What they learn here, they need to learn to cope in society. If they treat me or anyone else badly, I'll tell them they can't do that because they can't do that outside this room either."

But though the members are chronically and severely mentally ill, she says they aren't violent and being alone with them during the Oasis sessions isn't a frightening time. Rather an enjoyable time for Ms. Peters.

"Being here combines my interest in mental illness with recreation," said the graduate of Wilfred Laurier University in Waterloo. She's been working in Acton since Feb. 4 when the program first started and has been employed with CMHA since January.

She joins the group whether they're playing bingo, going bowling, learning painting and ceramics or just sitting around and talking. "I take them seriously and they enjoy talking to someone who does take them seriously," she said. "They're just like anyone else."

She also helps teach baking and cleaning skills which helps the members towards independent living.

For Tom, living on his own is a goal he's working towards. He's saving up his money to someday get a place of his own.

When he does, the practical and social skills he learned through this program will help him fight against the mental illness he lives with and make his move a successful one towards independence.



Playing bingo is one of the activities Kim Peters (far left) organizes for the psychiatrically disabled persons involved in the new 'Oasis' program put on by the Canadian Mental Health Association in Acton. The recreational program has about 25 members including Judy Leybourne (Herald photo)



The Canadian Mental Health Association has expanded into Halton Hills, in Acton, with a new recreation program called 'Oasis' for the psychiatrically disabled. People like Wayne Warren, seen here calling out bingo numbers at one of their recreation nights, are helped to develop social skills as well as given a place to meet and have fun through the program. (Herald photo)

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