

Special Needs Group

Disabled find friendship in weekly get-togethers

The macho men on the TV beer commercials are not the only ones who have been getting together every week --- there's another more unusual group that gets together every Wednesday.

This is a very special group and their name says it all. It's the North Halton Special Needs Group. Coping with a wide range of disabilities, including multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, the effects of strokes, brain damage, and heart or respiratory problems, they all come together in the Acton Legion, and have discovered there is a life for them outside of television or staring moodily out the window.

Unique also are the volunteers themselves, many disabled in some way who, with only one part-time staffer paid by the Recreation Departments of Milton and Halton Hills, run their own show.

This weekly bright spot in the lives of some who rarely left their homes, all started a year ago when the Physically Handicapped Association asked anyone interested to come to a meeting. Shirley Raszweski, a rheumatoid arthritis victim, turned up and became chairperson.

After four depressing months confined to bed, isolated from the outside world, Shirley knew only too well the plight of others in similar circumstances. She then was enthusiastic about helping others with disabilities find fun, friendship and a place to go to feel at home.

The recreation departments of Milton and Halton Hills pitched in and helped them get a Wintario grant and Acton Legion gave its blessing and a free place to meet. The idea had caught fire and it was off to a faltering start.

After only one year, 30 eager faces light up as they come in the door and head for their favorite activity. For some it is simply drinking coffee and having a chat, others play cards, bingo, ping pong, or crokinole, while others enjoy crafts, and flower making. A simple sit-and-fit exercise program has been started. Two jigsaw puzzle addicts head for their favorite pastime the minute they come in.

One of the members, a talented caricaturist delights the others with his drawings, while another, who cannot talk as a result of a stroke is now communicating by signs and smiles, which he did not do in his first hesitant visits.

Each does just what they want with no-one coercing them into an activity. For Shirley Raszweski, the warmth of the camaraderie makes it worthwhile, and watching the mildly disabled help the more severely disabled is heartwarming.

Everyone does their bit in big or small ways, with some helping to set up and clean up, while others bring coffee for those in wheelchairs who cannot move around easily. They carry "the helping themselves" theme to the point they even raise their own funds for many extras and outings through bake sales and raffles. A friend of the group donated a quilt which was successfully raffled.

Some of the volunteers themselves have some form of dis-

ability, which makes it more difficult but more rewarding for everyone involved. Disabled they may be, but helpless they are not.

A recent outing, recalled excitedly by the members, was a trip to the Burns Conservation Area near Milton where a Fishing Derby for Special Persons was cohosted by Halton Region Conservation Authority and Four Seasons Anglers and Hunters. Milton Optimists not only gave their time, but freely handed out hot dogs, hamburgers and drinks to the happy fishermen.

The usual Wednesday gatherings are not held in July and August but two eagerly awaited events, a trip to the African Lion

Safari and a corn roast, will keep them in touch until September.

But of course everything is not sweetness and light, this very special groups needs more volunteers to help in the activities, but particularly with transportation from Georgetown and Milton.

"Transportation is the big problem. While having drivers every week would be ideal, if someone wants to do it only once a month we'd still be delighted. While some arrive by Activan, frequently it is already booked," explained Shirley.

If you have a couple of hours to spare give them a ride. It's short trip for you but a big step for them.



Sittin' and fishin' is the ideal way to spend a summer day, so the expressions on these faces seem to say. Here in the front of the lineup of anglers is Mary Burak, who may have one on the line.

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