

Ignorance, bad PR plague York Region group home proposal

Nothing ruffles a community's feathers like word that a group home for the mentally ill or unwed teens or the mentally challenged or alcoholics or abandoned kids or adult parolees is about to move in.

The truth is mental patients, drunks, the mentally challenged, criminals, pregnant girls, bad boys and orphans make some folks nervous.

Over the years, I've sat in the press box and listened as people voiced objections to applications which, if accepted, would provide much-needed housing and treatment to those in need.

The level of ignorance and discontent varied. A meeting in Whitby on an alcohol treatment centre was the worst. Some locals were sure the men undergoing treatment would get liquored up, escape in the dead of night and go on a rampage. It was a pathetic joke.

Eventually, Renaissance House opened. Nobody became drunk and nobody was raped. Instead, over the past decade thousands of men won the booze battle. Personal commitment, coupled with a supportive environment, turned sick individuals into alcohol-free people.

An application for an Ajax group home for abandoned teenage girls sparked human behaviour at its lowest. What area residents didn't know was the home had been operating for eight years. The application was a simple housekeeping matter. Zoning had to be updated to accommodate one more child. The girls from the group home had baby-sat in the neighbour-



Joan Ransberry

hood, attended the local school, served at weddings, and befriended seniors. No one feared anyone until someone applied the label "group home."

Recently, Whitchurch-Stouffville town staff outlined an application from Loft Ltd. to let Whitby Psychiatric Hospital (WPH) run a group home for 10 clinically depressed people on Church Street.

The applicant wasn't present. Nor did Loft return my calls. It's poor public relations to snub the public through the media. It also placed a call to WPH brass. But they're not talking either. However, a chat with the ministry of health was fruitful.

Here's what's proposed: WPH staff and the residents will live at the group home from Monday to Friday. Residents will go home on weekends.

Clinical depression is common, striking one in five families. If you don't have any mentally ill people in your family, you either have a very small family, you're lying or you simply don't know if one of your own is suffering.

Clinical depression breaks through all social and economic barriers. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill never made a

secret of suffering from it. Nor have actors Margot Kidder, Jim Carrey and Patty Duke, or former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

Let's hope accurate information is included at a fall public meeting linked to this issue. Nobody at the council meeting mentioned that clinical depression is a biological disorder caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. Or that one brain chemical (serotonin) is involved in affecting mood.

Depressed people have lower than normal levels of serotonin. Medications boost it. For some, counseling is also needed. For others, a quiet treatment place does the trick.

Church Street isn't a mean-spirited street. Some residents are just ill informed. Those supporting the group home didn't go to the meeting. Some did call me, however.

Judging from the comments heard at the council meeting, ignorance dominated. People referred to the clinically depressed as people who "sometimes escape." One called group home residents "pedophiles" who are apt to stare at children on the street.

A health care worker did her profession a terrible disservice by warning us not to mix pediatrics and psychiatrics. A nursery school and day care centre supervisor said she's worried she'll have to run a "locked down" facility. I think the educator needs an education.

While people spoke of property values at this meeting, nobody spoke of the value of human life.

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