

Local centre marks Aphasia Awareness Month

By Kate Gilderdale
Stouffville This Month

When Dorothy Barton first had a stroke and found herself unable to communicate, she heard a doctor remark that she would never be able to speak again.

"That made me decide I was going to speak," said Dorothy, a cheerful and determined woman who came to Canada as a war bride in 1945. "I thought to myself, I went through World War 2, I can get through this." Today Dorothy is a regular at the York-Durham Aphasia Centre and an inspiration to everyone she meets.

"People don't know what it's like to have aphasia. You know what you want to say, but your mouth won't help you." The idea of losing the ability to share your thoughts and feelings with others, even though your intellect remains unimpaired, is unthinkable to most of us.

Aphasia occurs as a result of a brain injury such as a stroke or tumour, and affects an individual's ability to speak or understand speech. In



York-Durham Aphasia Centre volunteer Marg Curtis looks through Ella Pellet's beautiful life history book while Dorothy Barton and her son, Mike, look on. Every Thursday, the centre, located at Parkview Village, offers a full day of programs for people with aphasia, a condition that usually occurs after a stroke, head injury or brain illness and results in communication difficulties.

most cases it also affects the ability to read and write and its effects can range from mild to profound. Although it is more common than multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease or cerebral palsy, many

people are not aware the condition exists.

Parkview Village in Stouffville is home to the Aphasia Centre, one of the finest facilities in North America, which is run by professional speech-language therapists and

social workers, together with more than 70 trained volunteers. Using group-based communication programs, they help clients gain greater independence, allowing them to restore some control over their daily

lives. The centre also provides support for families learning about aphasia.

"We do art, we have group meetings so we can all get together, and we do exercises," said Dorothy. One particularly effective method of establishing communication is the life history book that clients put together with the help of staff and volunteers. Each book is a personal history of the individual's life, and often includes photographs, newspaper clippings and information about background and family.

Client Ella Pellet proudly shows off her life history book. "When she first came, you never saw a smile," recalled volunteer Marg Curtis. "You just sat here with you head down," she said, turning to Ella. "You've come a long way." "I had a stroke," explained Ella, who worked at the IGA in downtown Stouffville for many years. Last month she started using the computer and she is also involved in the art program at the centre.

Support from the family members makes an incredible difference, said

Marg, a point heartily endorsed by Dorothy whose son, Mike, has taken care of his mother ever since she had her stroke. The atmosphere at the centre is relaxed, with laughter echoing around the room and a sense of camaraderie between clients, volunteers and caregivers.

"It's fun, it's interesting and I have met some truly amazing people from all walks of life," said volunteer Anne Treeby, who has worked at the centre for four years. "These people have given to the community in the past and now we need to give to them. I've learned so much about the human spirit from working with them, they are so resilient."

There is no medical cure for aphasia, but speech therapy is an effective means of treating it. However recovery can be a slow process and people often become frustrated, isolated and depressed at their inability to connect with others.

New volunteers are always welcome. For more information, 905-642-2053.

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