

CHKC MOVES FORWARD WITH DREAMS OF EXPANSION

“WE CAN DO ANYTHING we want to if we stick to it long enough” are wise words from Helen Keller that embody the enduring dedication of her namesake organization, Canadian Helen Keller Centre (CHKC).

Over the past several years, CHKC has channeled this spirit to lead the way in many areas. Among them, increasing the agency’s profile while creating a strategic plan to build a new training centre. To achieve this ambitious goal, CHKC is continuing to raise awareness so it can attract the donors and sponsors needed to help make their dream a reality.

“It’s a very exciting time for our organization and our community of deafblind consumers,” says Philip Corke, Chair of CHKC. “Our board and staff have been working extremely hard to lay out our strategic vision. It has led us to develop our expansion plans, which are greatly needed for all of our stakeholders. These plans will further secure our consumer services and housing needs into the future.”

“The wonderful thing about sharing our vision for an expanded training centre is that we can show supporters the difference their dollars will make because we are already succeeding on a smaller scale,” says Jennifer Robbins, Executive Director of CHKC. “We have been a trusted provider of barrier-free housing, training programs and intervenor services to Ontario’s deafblind community for more than 25 years.”

There are many reasons why CHKC’s Board is moving forward with its expansion plans. Among them, the existing training centre is not physically adequate from an accessibility standpoint. While a retrofit project several years ago ensured that basic re-



quirements were met, it remains difficult for many deafblind consumers to navigate on their own. Hours of service for consumers have also recently been increased by the government, so CHKC is providing more assistance than ever before. At the same time, Ontario’s deafblind population is growing, so CHKC anticipates ongoing demand for training and intervenor services. The new facility would also act as a gathering place and community centre for the deafblind community, where friends and peers can meet to socialize, network and learn from each other.

“We are quite literally bursting at the seams,” adds Robbins. “CHKC has more staff and a bigger mandate to fulfill than we’ve ever had. We also need more space for our staff, which now exceeds 60 employees, as well as more parking.”

CHKC’s Board includes the necessary financial, legal and real estate development experts to oversee a project of this

size and see it through to a successful completion. The organization’s leadership team is also passionately supportive and excited to work towards making this project a reality. To do so, the Board has determined that it must raise between \$10 and \$12 million.

“The meaning of this project is immense for the deafblind community,” says Al Kowalenko, Vice Chair of CHKC and Chair of CHKC’s Strategic Planning Committee. “It would crystallize in a very significant way the services and assistance that could be provided to the deafblind community in a focused center similar to CNIB. The deafblind community would have a place that they could call their home, their own. In addition to serving as a national training centre, it would provide excellent space for administration of our programs, larger classrooms, social spaces and areas to hold fundraising events. It would also help focus more attention on CHKC, which could then attract more corporate sponsors,

community support and volunteers. Ultimately, it would be a win-win and I can't emphasize strongly enough how this would transform the awareness, understanding and services for Canada's deafblind community."

Among the options being considered, CHKC is proposing to construct a new building on two adjacent sites in Willowdale, the area of Toronto where the RCA apartment building and CHKC training centre are located. The organization is also looking at the possibility of securing a parcel of land from the City of Toronto, which is being made available to community-based organizations for construction purposes. Other options include securing and retrofitting a surplus school in the Greater Toronto Area or entering into a rental agreement for a commercial property.

"Even with the greatest of plans, there is no guarantee that we can move forward without help from the community or key groups," says Corke. "Our largest hurdle to date is the cost of land in Toronto and it has been very difficult to compete with developers for a property that would suit the needs of our consumers. That's why we are so excited about the potential to be part of Toronto's Housing Now initiative, which will offer incentives to non-profit housing providers that build affordable units. This type of opportunity would provide the type of financially responsible, long-term outlook that is so important to our deafblind consumers. That being said, if there are other potential partners reading this article that could help us execute on our vision, we're very interested in a discussion of what could be done."

"This has been my dream for many, many years," adds Kowalenko. "I've been a volunteer in the deafblind community since 1973 and I've seen transformative change over the years. This dream however would be a quantum leap for CHKC, and our Board and leadership teams are committed to making this dream a reality."

NEW CONSUMER RELATIONS ROLE AT CHKC

Community and the cultivation of meaningful relationships are at the heart of CHKC's core values. These types of connections reduce isolation and help people who are deafblind to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion.

TO INCREASE CHKC's reach and ability to support Ontarians living with dual hearing and vision loss, the agency recently created a new consumer relations role. Working from CHKC's offices and in the community, the successful candidate will foster strategies to promote programs and services to deafblind consumers and other stakeholders across the province. Everyone was encouraged to apply for the position and CHKC was excited to receive significant interest from applicants in the deafblind community.

"Everybody who submitted an application has been incredibly passionate. This energy and the possibility that the role will be filled by a consumer who is deafblind are extremely exciting," says Mélanie Gauthier, Consumer Programs Manager for CHKC. "We believe that adding a consumer to the CHKC team would increase our credibility and make us more relatable. It may also make it easier for new consumers to approach our agency because they will have the option to speak with a peer who is already receiving services from us."

The successful candidate will have a variety of important responsibilities as he or she settles in to make a difference



Consumer and intervenors attending Deaf-blind Adventures at Blue Mountain

at CHKC. These include reaching out to potential clients to help increase CHKC's consumer base, promoting the services of the agency on a user level, and representing CHKC at various events, fairs and expos.

"We are extremely excited about the creation of this new role," adds Gauthier. "Strong ties and existing connections to the deafblind community, which have been established over the years, will help CHKC's new Consumer Relations Coordinator thrive. Having increased representation from the community is also important. Knowing that our team will include somebody that the deafblind community can relate to and see as a mentor is yet another important step forward for our organization."