

Blue Mountain Village Foundation (BMVF) Provides \$15,000 in Community Grants

By Shannon Szucs and Tina Ward

Social organizations in our South Georgian Bay community have come together to openly discuss the need to support struggling youth, provide mental health supports, combat homelessness and invest in specialized equipment for our hospitals.

The Blue Mountain Village Foundation (BMVF) is working with these organizations through collaboration and fundraising support to close gaps and meet the challenges our community is facing head-on. Last fall the Foundation raised money through a charity golf tournament to help support local youth, individuals and families most in need. A call went out to community groups to submit grant applications following a three pronged criteria that includes; programs geared to South Georgian Bay community members, projects that impact children, youth and families and lastly financial requests up to \$5,000.00. The deadline to submit applications was October 1st 2019. On January 23, 2020 the successful grant recipients were announced, including:

- Meaford Hospital Foundation, Lab Transfusion Medicine Fridge
- Home Horizon, The Barbara Weider House's Essential Life Skills Program
- Elephant Thoughts, School in Nature, Access for Youth from Low Income Families
- Collingwood Youth Centre, Culinary Skills Development & Food Supply

We invited leaders and volunteers from each organization to join Andrew Siegart, President of the Blue Mountain Village Association and Chair of the Foundation for a round table discussion on the challenges faced by members of our community and how their respective programs are making a difference. Some pressing insights and needs quickly became apparent:

- Our youth need more opportunities for mentorship to overcome the unique pressures they face in today's achievement-focused and technology-driven world;
- While programs are needed to address acute needs of youth such as mental health, unemployment and social isolation, we also need proactive programming to help parents and kids remain ahead of these challenges and to build resilience;
- All social agencies cited dramatic impacts on their clients' lives due to the increasing cost of living, growing homelessness, mental health challenges and addiction rates;
- Improving capital infrastructure can help us to recruit the best talent, a great example is modern healthcare equipment which elevates health care service and helps to attract the best doctors, nurses and health care practitioners;
- Lastly, we need to break social stigmas that keep us from openly talking about these challenges. Acknowledging and addressing our growing regional homelessness rates has taken too long. Better communication and sharing of our stories between local residents, businesses, social agencies and government leaders has the power to include more community members in finding creative solutions.

“What challenges are most impacting our community?”

South Georgian Bay is comprised with varied challenges, but also exciting opportunities. One distinct challenge in our community is our ability to serve our booming population of retirees which is requiring healthcare resources and facilities (i.e., growing demand) that are not yet aligned with our health care capacity (i.e., slow growth of supply) because it was built and funded before current demographic shifts and growth levels were in play. Jen Wright with the Meaford Hospital Foundation added that “... this puts pressure on the health care facilities, our growing senior residents and of course other locals who need every day healthcare services as well as specialized health care.” Realigning supply to match demand is an important part of our physician recruitment strategy.

Deb Piggott with Barbara Weider House informed participants that “...in our area alone there are 700 homeless youth, 180 of those are under the age of 18.” Youth homelessness can be the result of a many factors, including people who are struggling with mental health without adequate care as well as youth who become disconnected from parents or other family supports. Typically, unresolved conflicts in the home or overstretched families who are juggling working multiple jobs, increased stress levels and time deficits contribute to the problem. Barbara Weider House has implemented a new program called Essential Life Skills, which provides key supports including art therapy, budgeting, basic life skills, hygiene, responsibility, job and/or school assistance, cooking, navigation through social service systems, permanent housing placements and more. It is a program that already has a wait list.

Lee Pankhurst with Collingwood Youth Centre suggests that demanding expectations on youth to excel, perform and rise-up to peer pressure are causing high degrees of insecurity and anxiety; which can all be accelerated by today’s social media landscape. The Centre’s Kids Feeding Kids Program leverages a culinary learning program in a barrier-free youth drop-in centre to provide mentorship and empowerment – a physical place where they can go to be encouraged and inspired by program leaders as well as their peers.

Speaking of mental health and high cost of living, Elephant Thoughts’ School in Nature reinforces the role that learning in nature can play in youth wellness and pre-emptive strategies to foster self-confidence and good mental health. With families often over-stretched and over-budget, access to these programs can be cost-prohibitive. This program encourages a back-to-basics connection to the natural environment that is truly needed.

Andrew Siegwart noted that “... as Co-Founder of the Rainbow Club of South Georgian Bay, an association serving the needs of the LGBTQ+ community in South Georgian Bay, I see that consequences can be steeper for marginalized youth who experience rates of poor mental health, homelessness, underemployment and social isolation. We must ensure that diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of all our work.” This very fact was the genesis for Blue Mountain Village’s upcoming Rainbow Ski event and the first-ever Collingwood Pride festival that will be hosted in July of 2020.

While the challenges are varied, common threads of empathy, mentorship, advocacy and collective community action demonstrate that challenges can be quickly turned into opportunities.

“What can our fellow community members do to help?”

Participants suggest starting by identifying and focusing on an issue or cause that is close to you and your family; you will be more motivated to take action and you will find that it presents a great opportunity for networking and special family time. If you're unable to donate money to programs like these, please consider providing your time by volunteering or hosting an awareness-building or fundraising event. You can also make a difference by advocating to our community leaders to prioritize some of the issues we discuss in this article or the issues that matter most to you. A final challenge: ask questions and keep an open mind when programs and initiatives and social service providers come to your neighbourhood or community. We need a “Yes in My Backyard” mindset!

“What are our local elected leaders doing right – what can they do differently?”

We elect our local leaders to advocate and work on our behalf for the betterment of our economy, community and local social values. Participants would love to see our elected leaders forge closer ties to social agencies so that we can collectively identify community priorities, reduce overlap, align where possible, efficiently and collaboratively raise more funds and create solutions that can be put into action faster. Together, we can be stronger.

About Blue Mountain Village Foundation

The Blue Mountain Village Foundation's mission is to close social gaps in our community. We do so through community engagement & advocacy, program delivery and fundraising to support registered charitable organizations whose activities provide benefit to the residents of our local communities.

The BMV Foundation 16th Annual Charity Golf Event will be held on Friday September 25th, 2020 at Monterra Golf Course. **Call to Action:** sign up to golf, sponsor, donate an item to the silent auction table or volunteer. For additional details www.bluemountainvillage.ca/foundation/golf-event or contact Tina Ward at foundation@bluemountainvillage.ca .