

King Holds Court *with Community*



By Allan McCarthy

A small township nestled just north of Toronto and west of Newmarket is doing big things to make its recreation programs and camps accessible and inclusive to individuals of all abilities to better support the community's needs.

With a population of just over 28,000, the Township of King is not a large municipality, which comes with advantages and disadvantages. There are budget restraints and sometimes fewer participants in recreation classes and programs than is ideal. But King's Community Services department benefits from meaningful engagement opportunities with the community. In fact, it utilizes that strength to bolster its inclusion efforts.

"We look for feedback," states Jason Ballantyne, the township's Communications Officer. "We work with our connections with community groups to identify those who need accessible programs. We ask them what they want because, frankly, we're not the experts in this space. We want to give everybody in the Township, whether it's a child or an adult, the opportunity to do the same things that everybody else does."

Ballantyne adds that, that approach extends to new programming ideas too, by proactively seeking out feedback from specific segments of the community. "If we're going to offer a new program, we're going to find out what the community thinks about it first," he shares. "A smaller population allows us to get real-time feedback for our learning. We see the emails from parents of our participants who, because we're smaller, might feel more comfortable reaching out to us."

Dori Wilner is the Township of King's Lead Hand for Aquatics and Inclusion Services. She's overseeing the municipality's new recreation centre and its first indoor pool, scheduled to open later this year. Wilner speaks to the challenges with supply and demand for the Township, particularly with its summer camp inclusion programs which she oversees as well. "We have so many families wanting to register their kids with disabilities but because we offer one-on-one support for these campers, having enough staff to keep up with those requests is difficult," Wilner explains.

Truly inclusive, Wilner's camps are not specialized, meaning that the Township does not offer individual adaptive camp programming. "We embrace everyone together and find that works really well," she emphasizes. "If a camper isn't able to participate in a general activity, we always have options, like going on a walk or going to our sensory room if needed. Everyone contributes to the camp community. We encourage everyone to do all the activities, but no one sits and watches."

Wilner also talks about lessons learned on the job for her and her camp staff. "In the classroom you learn about the general idea of different

exceptionalities and what one may experience, but when you actually get into the workplace and work one-on-one you realize that what you've learned doesn't apply to everyone," she says. "Everyone is so unique and so different; what may work with one individual may not work for another, so being able to pivot and adapt and learn while you're working is really important."

Some of that learning comes from partnerships with community leaders too. The Township of King received a grant several years ago from the Ontario Sport and Recreation Community Fund. With that support 16 sledge hockey sleds and 16 sport wheelchairs for wheelchair basketball were purchased. "With all of this equipment I really wanted to give back to the community and have everyone try these different sports because they're so unique and so fun," Wilner offers. "We invited ParaSport® Ontario to join us at a couple of events as experts to lead the sessions and share expertise with people who wanted to try these sports."

Ballantyne says that consultation extends to regular programming too. "Maybe we've tried everything we can think of with a participant who needs adaptive services and we don't know what else to do. We look for help from their families on what works best for them. We're very open to those conversations because they are the experts and we want to work together to give families the best recreation experience in our programs. Again, being a small municipality, we can have those conversations."

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The Township also leans on its Accessibility Committee for direction, specifically with its communications to the community regarding accessibility and inclusivity. "We want people to see that we're walking the talk," Ballantyne says. "When we think about our inclusion strategy it's quite simple: we don't want anybody left behind." Ballantyne adds that the Township's Council is very supportive as well. "In my time here, I've never heard Council, or any Councillor, ask 'Do we really need to spend this money on this project?' at the budget table. That's just not the mindset."

Both Wilner and Ballantyne agree that inclusion can be complicated at times with so many things to consider and things that they might not know. "Our ability to get feedback by talking to the people who are in the programs and services to make sure that we're meeting their needs takes time," sums Ballantyne. "Actually seeing the impact that these programs can have for participants with disabilities puts a smile on my face... they should have the opportunity to just do what everybody else does, right?"

