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NEWS LOCAL

Good Works, Social Justice centre grand opening

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The planning had been in the works for many months.

And while the Centre for Social Justice and Good Works (The Centre) opened its doors in August, a grand opening for the new local organization took place Tuesday night at Precious Blood Cathedral with a concert and reception.

The move to create the non-profit organization began nearly two years ago, spearheaded by four local people: Frank Sarlo, a well-known retired lawyer and chair of The Centre board; Mary Anne Amadio, a retired teacher and former chaplain at the Catholic school board; Precious Blood pastor, Rev. Hamish Currie; and businessman Joe Ruscio.

The group discussed issues with a variety of organizations to identify the needs in the community.

While many issues were pondered and weighed, two main needs surfaced, said Christina Coutu, executive director at The Centre.

“The two that came up that we're tackling this year was a mentorship program for people that want to start businesses,” and a leadership skills development series for young people.

The entrepreneur project will see volunteers from the business community hook up with Ontario Works recipients.

“We're hoping to get between eight and a dozen” recipients involved with the program, Coutu said.

The Sault Ste. Marie District Social Services Board (DSSAB) has earmarked \$5,000 for up to six participant of the program to start their own businesses, said Coutu.

The Centre is partnering with the EDC, which will provide training and assistance with business plans.

It will also work closely with the Northern Ontario Research, Development, Ideas and Knowledge group (NORDIK), which operates out of Algoma University.

“But to start, our pilot is with Ontario Works,” Coutu said.

The leadership skills program will offer 12-weeks of training that will be headed up by Sarlo, who has a PhD leadership, and Coutu, who studied business at Sault College and marketing at Lake Superior State University.

“What we're trying to do is teach youth leadership skills so they can go into the community, take on some of these leadership roles at various organizations, such as Canadian Cancer society and United Way, and be able to do some good works projects,” Coutu said.

The Centre is located on the main floor of the former Catholic convent, located at 1 Herrick St., behind Precious Blood.

The cathedral owns the building and the group rents the space.

The Centre, which will work with residents of various ages, started small, Coutu said.

“But we've got a lot of volunteers that have come on board in the last couple of months.”

Numerous volunteers have stepped up to help in different capacities.

“The community support has just been phenomenal, not only just for the opening, but in general. We have had donations, but just the number of people who have come forward saying they want to participate and volunteer.”

The Centre is also compiling a list of potential volunteers who may be needed somewhere down the road.

“Because we're finding that opportunities or needs are coming up that we don't even know (about),” Coutu said.

For example, organization is in talks with representatives at the Soup Kitchen Community Centre that will likely lead to volunteers from The Centre hosting budgeting workshops at the James Street facility.

“We're going to try to create these volunteer opportunities that make people feel good because they've given back to the community. But also in the youth perspective, it's not going to be just the regular Joe Blow job. We're not going to send someone out to rake leaves and paint a fence,” said Coutu.

“It's going to be actual job-related skills they can put on their resume. And with the youth leadership skills program, they'll be getting a certificate with that.”

The received a \$50,000 grant from DSSAB to operate for the first year. Much of that money will be used to implement the mentorship program.

An additional \$32,000 came from the Bishop Alexander Carter Foundation to help with start-up costs.

Prouse Motors also made a \$5,000 contribution toward the leadership program.

And on Tuesday the provincial government, through the Ontario Trillium Foundation, announced it would provide \$75,000 to the newly created centre.

“The Centre for Social Justice and Good Works is a great example of an organization that is helping members of our community learn new skills, become more active and improve their lives,” Sault MPP David Oraziotti said in a prepared statement.

“Our government is committed to ensuring Ontarians have access to programs to enable them to reach their full potential.”

The Centre is a non-denominational organization.

“We are completely ecumenical,” Coutu noted.

Although the group has a close relationship with Precious Blood parishioners.

“If it wasn't for the individuals that attended that church, our organization wouldn't be running. However, we are an open inclusive environment ... We are just promoting the good works of the community,” Coutu said. “We're not a religious organization.”

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