

Memorial golf tournament aims to help those suffering with addiction



By Nate Smelle

As the COVID-19 pandemic approaches its third year, the extent of its indirect impact on society is becoming more evident. Because of the fear, isolation, and uncertainty caused by the persistent threat to public health the pandemic poses, life has become even more of a struggle for those already faced with a personal crisis of mental health and/or addiction. For those battling an addiction, the additional stress, anxiety, and depression has caused many people to relapse and resume their use of substances. In far too many instances, this compounding of crises has pushed them over the edge.

After spending most of her life in the Caledon area, in June 2020 Vera Robinson and her husband Peter decided to purchase the family cottage on Papineau Lake from her mother. Noting that her father was raised on the farm down the road from where they are now living, she said her family's roots in the area stretch back to the 1800s. Shortly after moving into their family cottage in North Hastings, tragedy struck the Robinson family when their son Andrew passed away of an opioid overdose on Sept. 23, 2020.

Describing her son Andrew as a well-educated, kind-hearted, hard-working young man, Robinson said he was also a natural athlete, a business owner, and a member of Local 183. Pointing out how he was always the first to offer a hand to anyone in need, she said her Andrew was loved by those who knew him.

While helping her son throughout his 19-year struggle with addiction, Robinson said it became difficult at times to remain positive when she witnessed how judgmental others could be. Realizing how detrimental this stigma is to individuals working to overcome

the disease, she became involved with organizations and programs that raise awareness about addiction through public education.

"We give our children life but we don't get to tell them how to live it," said Robinson.

"Realizing that you cannot love someone's problems away is one of the most frustrating and heartbreaking realities of life. I learned what unconditional love truly is; accepting that while I was unable to forcibly pull Andrew out of the hole he kept finding himself in, I would always be there waiting for him to reach his hand up and ask me to help him out."

In honour of Andrew's compassionate spirit, Robinson, Andrew's sister Krysta Ceres, and his friend Steve Podsadecki came up with the idea to carry on his legacy by organizing a memorial charity golf tournament. Through the tournament, she said they have been able to help others by increasing awareness about addiction; and, raising funds for the Vitanova Foundation – an organization in Vaughan that helps individuals dealing with an addiction and their loved ones heal.

Since Vitanova was founded in 1989, the foundation has helped some 18,000+ clients and their families deal with substance use issues. Declaring the inaugural tournament in 2021 "a huge success" in terms of raising awareness, Robinson said they also managed to raise more than \$60,000 for the Vitanova Foundation. While the majority of the funds will be used by Vitanova to continue offering the rehabilitative services it provides, she said \$8,400 has been set aside to establish a scholarship in her son's name.

One of the reasons that the first tournament was so successful, explained Robinson, was the generosity it brought out in its sponsors and participants. Indicating that a great deal of that support came from local residents and business owners in North Hastings, she said she was grateful for everyone who pitched in to make a difference for those who are suffering. Robinson extended special thanks to hole sponsors at Barry's Bay Home Hardware and the Combermere Service Centre. She also expressed her appreciation to the following businesses who donated prizes for the raffle table: Grumblin Granny's; Grail Springs Retreat for Well-being; Barry's Bay Family Dental Centre; Metro; Posies Flowers and Gifts; Cat Nap & Lazy Dog Pet Outfitters; Intuitive Hands Massage Therapy; Gift It Gray; Pine Cliff Resort; Valu Mart; Madawaska Coffee Co. Roastery; Church Street Flowers; and, Barrie Flowers 649.

Tournament sponsors from outside North Hastings include: Platinum, Innovative Crown Construction, Just Breathe Birth Collective; Jus Press; Gold; T.A. Brannon Steel Ltd.; Barrie Endodontics; Empire Communities Corporation; Silver, Maratex Realty Inc.; Interior Finishing Systems Training Centre; Garden Foods; Caledon Hills Private Wealth (Kimberly Seipt); Bronze, DiGregorio International Paving & Construction Ltd.; DG Psychotherapy; Grenadier Restaurant High Park; M-O Freight Works; Egan Funeral Home; Francesco Riga, Bolton Optometry Clinic; Jennifer Beasley – The Cooperators; Fines Ford Lincoln; the Boyle Family; Robinson/Gunn/Ceres Families; Rafat General Contracting; Podsadecki Family; Frances McGrade; Rescom Group Ltd.; Prestige Contracting; Derek Watt; Mike Koupolos; Sheheen Guerini; Kimoto Demolition; Randy Flemmings Insurance Company; Cavalier Transportation Services Inc.; Dr. Mahar Abou-Seido; Classic Optical; Ball Real Estate Inc. – Jim Alexander; Health First Wellness; Water Depot Bolton/Georgetown; and the Bottrell Family.

According to Robinson, Vitanova's programs were very beneficial for Andrew and for their entire family. She hopes that by raising funds for the organization, and, awareness of the services they provide, they will be able to help families heal by preventing others from falling victim to the opioid crisis.

"Getting proper/professional support for myself was also a key factor that helped me cope and offered me recourse for not only myself but Andrew as well," said Robinson. "Although our system is lacking facilities, programs, and trained professionals for not only the person suffering with any type of mental illness, especially addiction, there are many supports that can be found."

Offering further insight into the nature of addiction and the damage it causes, Robinson continued: "Addiction is a family disease...the entire family suffers. Unlike other diseases where someone suffering with a disease is treated in our health care system; mental health and addiction need to be addressed by the person suffering with the disease. Some people don't have the courage or strength, ways or means to do so. It is devastating not only to the person suffering but to the family and friends watching them helplessly suffer."

Acknowledging that her son's problem with substance use existed long before the pandemic, Robinson said COVID-19 still had a 'profound impact' on his mental health. Without access to the social support programs he had come to rely on during his recovery, she said being forced to isolate to prevent the spread of the virus exacerbated the sense of loneliness he was already experiencing prior to the pandemic.

'He was just keeping himself afloat using the coping tools he had available to him,' explained Robinson. 'Lockdown essentially took away a lot of his support systems and like many others, his recovery regressed as he found it more and more difficult to keep his head above water. With the need escalating for support, telephone and virtual appointments became less available. In person counselling wasn't available which also means accountability wasn't there. Virtual programming allowed contact for clients, however it wasn't and isn't the same. Suffering alone became a reality.'

Hoping to build on the success of the first tournament, Robinson said they plan to hold another tournament/fundraiser later this year. Despite the uncertainty regarding what the situation with the pandemic will look like this fall, she said they have already booked the venue for the second annual Andrew Robinson Memorial Golf Tournament. This year, she said the event will take place on Sept. 17 at Harbourview Golf and Country Club near Barrie. Robinson said anyone interested in becoming a sponsor, and/or registering for this year's tournament can contact her by email at: zena_tkw@hotmail.com; or by phone at: 416-998-6495.

While it is too early to advise of what public health measures will be in place at that time, Robinson said all COVID-19 guidelines in place this September will be followed. Should anyone sponsor, donate items for the raffle table/auction or register to golf and they aren't able to proceed with the event, she said Vitanova will hold the donations in trust, and refunds and returns will be issued. In order to make a donation; and/or learn more about the services and programs offered by the Vitanova Foundation, visit their website at: www.vitanova.ca/. From there, supporters can make a donation in Andrew Robinson's memory; or, directly to the scholarship that is also in his name.