

Friendship Bible Hour exemplifies Spark Change campaign by Community Living

By [Ellwood Shreve](#), Chatham Daily News

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Community Living Chatham-Kent clients, Derek Gore and Suzanne Peach are looking forward to the annual Christmas program being hosted by the Friendship Bible Hour at Grace Christian Reformed Church in Chatham, Ont. on Thursday, December 8, 2016. They are pictured here with Hilda Wiersma, a co-ordinator of the Friendship Bible Hour at the Community Living office in Chatham, Ont., on Tuesday November 29, 2016. (Ellwood Shreve/Chatham

Community Living Chatham-Kent has many partnerships that benefit its clients; one of its most enduring is the Friendship Bible Hour.

In 1984, Elsey Snee, who worked at the former Southwest Regional Centre, and Marg Turner, a former high school teacher who taught students with intellectual disabilities, decided to start the Friendship Bible Hour through the local Christian Reformed Church. They invited four people served by Community Living.

Today, 70 friends with intellectual disabilities are part of the group, which now has to be split between the Grace Christian Reformed Church and First Christian Reformed Church.

The group meets Thursdays from 7 to 8:15 p.m. for what Hilda Wiersma describes as a meeting full of song, Bible stories, prayer and social time.

"Our main goal really is to open them to God and show them God's love," said Wiersma, a co-ordinator of the program.

However, special events help make the program even more enjoyable for participants, including craft nights for Christmas and Easter, a special Thanksgiving evening, talent night, bingo night, and the annual Sunday Church Service near Easter followed by supper.

Wiersma said the highlight of the year is the upcoming Christmas program for the community on Dec. 8 at Grace Christian Reformed Church at 7 p.m.

She said there are a lot of friends who not only want to sing, they want to perform a solo.

"We have more willing people than we have parts for," Wiersma laughed.

"It's beautiful, they're just so real and open," she added.

Suzanne Peach and Derek Gore, clients with Community Living, are looking forward to the Friendship Bible Hour Christmas program.

"I love it," Peach said, adding she is looking forward to singing a solo of Jesus Loves Me.

Gore said he likes "meeting new people, learning new songs and hanging around with friends."

Wiersma said members of the churches involved in the program also gain something special.

"You come here maybe feeling a little tired or down, but by the end of the evening your spirits are uplifted," she said.

Angela Corso, manager of community relations for Community Living, said the people involved in Friendship Bible Hour "do all of this out of the goodness of their hearts."

She added this is great example of the ongoing Spark Change campaign the Community Living movement in Ontario has launched to encourage people to become engaged in assisting people who have an intellectual disability and lead the way in advancing inclusion in their own lives and in their communities.

Wiersma said it comes down to what standards do humans use to measure the value of a person.

"Do we believe that because a person has an intellectual disability he or she does not have as much value as those with 'normal' intelligence?" she said.

"God doesn't," she added. "We are all very special in His eyes and wants us all in His family."

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