

## **GUELPH SERVICES FOR THE AUTISTIC (GSA) PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2004-2005**

This annual meeting marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the incorporation of GSA as a charitable organization in 1980, and the eighth anniversary of GSA's mission as a housing trust, which is our central and continuing role. This anniversary year has seen a high level of activity and some new initiatives.

*Our mission and main focus is to help adults with autism to have their own homes and to live with dignity and safety in our communities, supported by family and friends, and with self-directed planning and individualized funding of necessary services.*

Our 25th year has been distinctive for partnerships with other organizations that support vulnerable people. Our ASPIRE project, supported by funds from Waterloo-Wellington Autism Services to encourage planning by families with adults with autism in our larger region of Waterloo, Wellington and Dufferin, is reaching its end. GSA's AGM a year ago marked the beginning of a new phase of co-operation with WWAS, in planning for a regional farm community and centre of autism expertise and services—now known by the acronym ACES.

GSA's most ambitious effort so far, the Guelph Spring Conference on Creative Supports for Vulnerable Adults in April 2005, also involved productive partnerships. A contribution to the whole Ontario community that is concerned with vulnerable people, this event was so popular that we decided to record and edit the presentations. We have now produced a videotape and printed book on *Creative Supports for Vulnerable Citizens*.

### **GSA AS HOUSING TRUST**

GSA can look after the financial administration and maintenance of homes for people who need such support but want to have a sense of pride and security by living in their own homes. GSA recognizes the rights of each focus person to make choices about their lives and the people with whom they will share their time and their homes. Each adult is supported by a cluster or network of family members, friends and professionals.

GSA's energies as a housing trust have been concentrated on making a success of its first house and organizing itself to extend its services to other vulnerable adults. GSA's first focus person (and active member) has lived in his own home for more than seven years. With his parents, he has helped to prepare the house for occupancy by others he may choose as personal support workers and living companions. He has also pioneered for Ontario the incorporation of an entity of personal empowerment and support which we call an aroha (aka microboard).

Because of this first success, GSA has been approached by other adults and/or their families who want various kinds of help with housing and person-directed planning and support.

## **ASPIRE PROJECT**

For the past three and a half years, GSA has made special efforts with the Autism Support Project: Information, Resources, Empowerment, using funds provided by Waterloo-Wellington Autism Services. ASPIRE has had two main parts. One is surveying the present situations, abilities and needs of adults with autism, in relation to available supports and services. The other is modeling effective ways to inform and empower autistic persons, with their families and friends, so they can plan and find resources for all the elements of a good life, including relationships with a personal support network, a home of one's own, ways to make choices and contribute to the community, and a safe and secure future.

Three ASPIRE Advocates have worked for the project. Jan Cooper made a good start in 2002-2003, meeting with 15 families at least once for in-depth discussion of needs and goals. Nancy Miles was an enthusiastic Advocate from July to October 2004. Nancy Cherry has worked for ASPIRE, as well as other regional and provincial initiatives, during 2005.

GSA has encouraged local young adults and their families to go through PATH planning processes and has paid the facilitators' fees in each case. All have found the experience most worthwhile and would recommend this form of planning event to others.

## **GSA OUTREACH AND COLLABORATION**

GSA works with other organizations in seeking to understand and draw attention to the needs of adults on the autism spectrum and to develop effective ways helping them to live with dignity and fulfilment in their home communities. GSA and Waterloo-Wellington Autism Services (WWAS) co-operate in the quarterly newsletter *Adult Autism Issues in Waterloo-Wellington (AAIWW)*. Information and communications about adult autism issues have been strengthened since March 2000 by the *Ontario Adult Autism Research and Support Network (OAARSN)* website at URL: <http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca> and its electronic bulletins.

GSA directors and volunteers represent us at various meetings inside and outside the region. GSA also speaks up on issues and supports movements that enhance quality of life and self-determination for and by adults with autism and related disabilities. We share our experience and documentation with other organizations and family groups who want to use housing trusts for residential support, so that individual adults may have homes of their own or incorporated aroha entities, directing their own lives with understanding support by family members and friends.

Organizing the Guelph Spring Conference on Creative Supports for Vulnerable Adults on 29 April 2005 was a major effort for GSA. We convened a gathering of nearly 200 Ontario people who need to be creative in supporting good lives with and for adults who are vulnerable because of their physical, mental, communication or developmental differences. We particularly wanted to encourage self-advocates, families and friends to take part. Our concern was practical--how to plan and implement the elements of a good

life for each person, and to learn from each other's effective strategies and success stories. Our approach was comprehensive and holistic. We hoped to put our minds and imaginations around various strategies, to show the connections among them, and to help persons and families think about and choose combinations that work for them. The conference was especially timely, in view of the announcement in 2004 that the Ministry of Community and Social Services intends to transform services for persons with developmental disabilities in lasting ways.

GSA was successful in obtaining a grant of just over \$10,000 from The Ontario Trillium Foundation to help with conference costs. Planning began 12 months before the conference, when we obtained the co-operation of our keynote speaker, John Lord, and the six workshop leaders from all over Ontario. The event itself called forth a great of interest and participation by a remarkable range of people--vulnerable citizens themselves as self-advocates, parents and siblings, friends, support staff, professionals in the various fields, administrators and managers. More than half came from outside our region, many staying overnight in Guelph.

Planning the event itself, and our follow-up efforts have involved partnerships locally, regionally and provincially with other organizations and groups. Locally, we have worked with the Canadian Mental Health Association and several of its initiatives, the Community Mental Health Clinic, Families for a Secure Future, Community Living Guelph-Wellington, Planned Lifetime Networks, Waterloo-Wellington Autism Services, Kerry's Place Autism Services, the Community Music Therapy Association, with others. Across Ontario, we related to another 30 groups and initiatives.

We planned a process of collaboration in discussion and sharing resources--during the conference and also beforehand and afterwards--using the OAARSN website and other media. About twice as many responded to the announcement of the conference as we could accommodate: we could have doubled the number of participants if we had the space. Many who did attend wished they could have learned from more than one of the workshops. To meet these needs, we recorded the conference and have produced a professionally edited videotape of the highlights (49 minutes) and a printed report of edited presentations (80 pages), both entitled *Creative Support for Vulnerable Citizens*. We thank Kerry's Place Autism Services and the Community Mental Health Clinic in Guelph for funds to have the video professionally edited by PAN Video Inc. of Guelph.

Since the conference, we have organized a series of four smaller workshops in Guelph, to address specific kinds of creative supports. Felicia Jervis led a workshop on Gentle Teaching. Graeme Treeby made a presentation about the Special Needs Planning Group. John Lord presented a sequel to his keynote address at the April conference on Individualized Funding. Elaine Atchison of the Ministry of the Attorney-General is explaining Capacity Assessment. And we have launched the Creative Supports Listserv and bulletin. See, for example: <http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/CS-20050918.html>

## AUTISM AND COMMUNITY

During 2004, GSA took the initiative in hosting a series of discussions and facilitated workshops about the vision and feasibility of an intentional community and centre of excellence with and for adults and families who live with autism. WWAS agreed to co-operate in a pilot phase, and both regional organizations are represented on the Management Committee.

The project has the acronym ACES, for which Brian Henson designed a logo:



*A stands for Autism, Adults, Asperger's, Abilities, Attitudes, Accessibility, Aspirations*

*C stands for Centre, Creative, Circles, Community, Co-operation, Conservation, Communication, Confidence*

*E stands for Empathy, Energy, Excellence, Experience, Expertise, Ecology, Environments*

*S stands for Self-Directed, Supports, Spectrum, Safety, Stability, Social Skills, Sensitivities*

ACES means top quality, and the plural form suggests diversity of people interested in supporting and developing the abilities of adults with ASD.

Core components of the ACES vision are:

- Home in an inclusive, integrated community (with ratio of 3+ persons not on the autism spectrum to every one with ASD),
- Land-based work and other meaningful activities,
- Natural social supports wherever possible, and
- Functions of a centre of excellence and expertise that brings together professionals with a key focus on ASD, and offers helpful resources.

During 2005, ACES has had three main aspects:

1. ***Land-Based Voluntary Work Initiatives*** at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph, in which work parties help with gardening and ecology projects. A special responsibility was to maintain and improve the large Ignatius Courtyard garden. Our voluntary activity in the gardens and grounds has earned us a welcome place in the Ignatius/Orchard Park community—a valuable basis of trust for the future development of our vision. Ted McCartney led us in this responsibility.

2. The ***ACES Day Program Initiative*** was prompted by the lack of enough transitional support for young adults who had left school. Moira Hollingsworth, supported by WWAS, took the lead in setting up a day program for young people in transition between school and adulthood. This has been offered on Wednesdays since May. WWAS took most financial responsibility—contracting with a paid co-ordinator and assistant, leasing an Activities Room at Ignatius for one year, and offering transportation. Families and

friends have given furniture and equipment. Will Wycherley has volunteered some advice on the basis of his years of experience working with adults with autism in England. Activities have included gardening, hiking, nature study, swimming, games, crafts, and computer. Experience with direct group support might be expanded to include respite and summer programs in future.

3. A future potential ACES role *as a Centre of Resources and Expertise for Autism* was pioneered through a series of workshops and other support group meetings. Nancy Cherry, ASPIRE Advocate during 2005, has also volunteered with ACES to support these activities—researching the availability of support and services and providing background information for families to advocate for what they need. Workshops organized by GSA in 2005, that have supported this role have been on gentle teaching; designing person-directed plans and individualized funding; financial and legal planning for people with special needs; and capacity assessment and supported decision-making. The OAARSN website and bulletin and the new Creative Supports bulletin are used to share information and resources.

The ACES Management Committee consists of Moira & Roger Hollingsworth, Nancy Cherry, Ted McCartney, and Gerry Bloomfield (chair). WWAS has taken most financial responsibility for the Wednesday program—contracting with a co-ordinator and an assistant, leasing an Activities Room at Ignatius for one year, and paying for transportation. GSA has contributed to the ACES costs—paying for gardening equipment and supplies, ACES meetings and Centre workshops, painting of the room rented for the Wednesday group, and insurance of all ACES activities and participants.

Everyone connected with ACES was asked by the ACES Management Committee to respond to a little survey in August 2005—to help with planning the best next steps towards good lives in community for our friends and loved ones who live with the challenges of autism. Responses were received to eleven more detailed questions. Overall, answers to the question: “What was really good about ACES’ first three months?” were: *“Pilot day program, meetings and workshops have been wonderful; initiating a relationship with Ignatius; initiative and idea itself; people willing to get together and make this initiative a priority in their lives; comprehensive vision and perception of opportunities at Ignatius; three-fold action steps – volunteering as part of Ignatius community, direct service, planning support and learning opportunities for families and friends.”* Asked “What was disappointing?” these points were observed: *“Some irritations associated with instituting a program involving families with varied expectations; lack of other such centres in other communities for networking; danger of settling just for the staffed day program –we must keep up our more comprehensive vision.”*

## **APPRECIATION**

GSA’s work is maintained by volunteers. To broaden our volunteer base, GSA is a member of the Volunteer Centre of Guelph-Wellington. We invite all our friends and supporters to help with our various efforts, in whatever ways they can.

We thank members and directors of GSA for their faithful service in 2004-2005—notably Andrew Foster (vice-president), Amar Arneja (recording secretary), John Verhart (treasurer), as well as Eleanor Fairbairn, Henk Ensing and Ted McCartney (who joined the Board in February). We greatly appreciate the service of Mary Johnston and Grace Swartz as Audit Committee for GSA's accounts in each of the past six years.

Board members were very active in planning and staging the conference. They were ably assisted by a team of volunteers recruited by John Verhart from the Holy Rosary Church in Guelph. We are most grateful for the help of Kathy Dunn, Magee McGuire, Joanne Tersigni, Ankie Verhart, Dianne and Ken Kroeger, Elsie and George Usitalo. Will Wycherley and Nancy Cherry were also keen and effective volunteers around the conference, while Roger Hollingsworth helped by chairing one of the workshops.

GSA does not receive any regular Government funding for its activities and services. We have been fortunate this year to obtain grants from The Ontario Trillium Foundation, to help with the conference, and from Kerry's Place Autism Services and the Community Mental Health Clinic (Guelph) to have the conference videotape professionally edited. We appreciate the funds from these organizations, and the continued support of our loyal members and friends.

Thanks to everyone. We look forward to the next 25 years!

Gerald Bloomfield, President  
7 November 2005