

Neighbours of

Woodbridge

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The Sara Elizabeth Centre: Building Confidence and Community





Some of the staff at the SEC, from left to right: Joseph Smith, videographer, Cris Smith, executive director and co-founder, Donny Smith, music director and co-founder.

The Sara Elizabeth Centre: Building Confidence and Community

BY RACHEL LEVY SARFIN | PHOTOS BY FRANCESCA DI CARLO

The Sara Elizabeth Centre (SEC)'s motto is "Where Everyone Shines Like a Star." On the frigid winter's day when Neighbours of Woodbridge visited the SEC, the motto came to life. Participants' faces glowed with happiness, confidence, and excitement at a recent Circle of Friends.

Circle of Friends is a chance for participants to share what's happening in their lives, sing, dance, and be accepted for who they are. SEC executive director Cris Smith calls the SEC "a home away from home" for the participants, some of whom come every day and some of whom come once a week. "There's no

judgement here," she declares. "Only unconditional love."

Cris, an ebullient woman with an infectious energy, explained that the Centre's approach has three steps: discover, develop, and nurture. The SEC's activities are arts-based, so the first step is to discover what talents or skills a participant has. Once staffers identify skills and talents, they can start to develop and nurture them.

Everyone has a hidden skill or talent. A participant who might not be verbal might love dancing. Someone else who is in a wheelchair may love singing.

The SEC's approach inspires confidence within participants – they're empowered to create, to share, to do. Participant artwork adorns the walls and display cases around the Centre, a testament to their creativity.

Cris and her son Donny founded the SEC in the spring of 2006. The SEC's roots stretch back further than that. Years before, Cris and her husband became the parents of a child with Trisomy 13, a rare genetic disease that causes severe physical disabilities. The daughter, who they named Sara Elizabeth, lived 26 days after birth. Although her time on Earth was short, she left a lasting legacy.

In the years since Sara Elizabeth's birth and passing, Cris and her family became involved with special needs youth and young adults. Cris served as a facilitator for a group of moms with special needs children. Her other children encouraged her to continue on this path and work more closely with special needs individuals, but it would take several more years until Providence gave Cris the impetus she needed.

A crisis in her extended family left her asking what she could do to help. Her brother-in-law encouraged her to launch a charity, and found a lawyer who would draft the normally-expensive incorporation documents for free. Cris founded The Blue Veil Charity, of which the SEC is its flagship project.

At first, the SEC was in a temporary location. Later, a parent of a participant suggested moving the facility to the Ciociario Social Club, an organization for people with roots in the Ciociaria region of Italy. His father bought the property decades before, and one of the structures on the property wasn't being used. The SEC moved into their current home in 2010.

Sharing a site with the Ciociario Social Club allowed the SEC to expand its programming. In addition to its day programming and seasonal activities for youth and young adults, the Centre also runs educational retreats for school children and faculty. Participants help facilitate these workshops, leading breakout sessions of drum circles, videography, or another arts-based activity that demonstrates everyone has the ability to contribute.

The emphasis on nurturing abilities, as well as the opportunity to facilitate workshops and educate others, boosts SEC participants' confidence. Cris cited the example of Michael, an articulate young man who has been coming to the SEC since 2010. As a result of being a part of the SEC, Michael has discovered his innate writing talents.

At a recent Circle of Friends, Michael shared the story behind one of his poems, entitled "Indestructible Wings." He wrote the poem at camp, inspired by his best friend and the SEC. "It's about being yourself, no matter what," he commented. "It's about lifting yourself up with friends and family."

After writing the poem, Michael felt compelled to share it with Donny, co-founder of the SEC and music director at the Centre. Donny suggested the two collaborate the put the words to song. Collaboration went quickly, and Donny and Michael performed "Indestructible Wings" for the first time at the SEC's annual gala in 2016.

The song is about rising above the sorrow and pain of the world, to a place of healing and light. Its chorus is especially poignant:



SEC executive director dances with participants at a Circle of Friends.

Then we'll free the shackles of the unwanted souls
Guide them where they need to go
Let us soar through the skies
Let the wind kiss our face
Let our hearts be healed with grace
Let us live our lives
In the clouds up above
Let us fly to a place of love.

To learn more about the SEC, visit www.blueveil.org.

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