

# Portage Atlantic has been changing lives for 20 years

LORI GALLAGHER | Fredericton Daily Gleaner

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Portage Atlantic is celebrating 20 years and a wonderful partnership with the Lions Club. From left are: Ron Evans, Portage Atlantic board member and a member of the Nashwaaksis Lions Club; Susan Sangster, a member of the Barkers Point Lions Club, as well as the Lions Club International Foundation and District N1 co-ordinator; Dave Emmerson, Portage Atlantic board member and co-chair of the Lewis Fitness Centre Capital Campaign; and Carol Tracey, director of the Portage Atlantic Foundation.

Photo: Lori Gallagher/The Daily Gleaner

And it all began with a concerned and caring group in Fredericton.

“Back in 1985, the Nashwaaksis Lions Club, a few of their members had a dream to create a little character called Huggy,” says Dave Emmerson, a member of the Portage Atlantic board and co-chair of the Lewis Fitness Centre Capital Campaign.

The plan was to team up Huggy with a Lions member and a police officer to talk about drug awareness in area schools.

“Then, they found out that it was a really big problem and they wanted to do something more substantial, so back in 1988 they formed a company called Huggy Youth Treatment Centre Inc.,” he says.

This brought together Lions Club members with other concerned members of the community, like Emmerson.

“In the late '80s and the early '90s, the Lions Club lobbied to see if we could get some funding. One of the things they were doing is they really wanted to get a drug treatment centre here,” he says. “They were also raising money and sending kids to Maine and New Hampshire on a 28-day program, which cost \$250 U.S. a day ... After a few years, we realized 28 days really wasn't enough time.”

In the 1990s, the organization was put in touch with the Portage Foundation out of Montreal. With funding from both the provincial and federal governments, in December 1996 the Lions Club and Portage opened Portage Atlantic at Cassidy Lake.

“It was the Lions Club's dream,” says Emerson. “Since the project started in December of 1996, the Lions Club has given over half a million dollars, and specifically on this Dr. Lewis Fitness Centre, it has been over \$250,000.”

When he talks about the Lions Club, he's also talking about Lions International, as there are times when they have matched funds raised with the local club.

“The Nashwaaksis Lions Club started this, but it was the district (N1) that got behind it,” says Ron Evans, a member of the Nashwaaksis Lions Club and of the Portage Atlantic board.

In fact, says Susan Sangster, a member of the Barkers Point Lions Club, as well as the Lions Club International Foundation and District N1 co-ordinator, that first Portage Atlantic project involved multiple districts throughout the Atlantic provinces.

“The Nashwaaksis Lions Club was a springboard and District N1 was an extra springboard,” says John Murray, current president of the Nashwaaksis Lions Club. “The extended community of Fredericton is largely responsible for all the success that's happened here because a service club needs the support of the community for it to be able to make things work.”

Portage Atlantic, its growth and success, is a classic case of this, he says.

“There was a starting point, there was an idea, the community embraced it, leaders in the community embraced it, celebrities outside of the community embraced it and the result today is this magnificent centre down at Cassidy Lake which is doing a lot for youth in Atlantic Canada,” says Murray.

The centre opened in December 1996, so 2016 marks the 20th anniversary of Portage Atlantic, says Carol Tracey, director of the Portage Atlantic Foundation.

“Maybe more importantly, we’re celebrating the nearly 2,000 youth that have attended the facility in the last two decades,” she says. “As we celebrate our 20th, we want to thank our staff team, we want to thank our board members, our partners and our donors, especially our district N1 lions who have, for the past two decades, been part of the amazing transformations that have taken place at Cassidy Lake.”

Portage Atlantic sits on 165 acres of property.

“In 2010, we opened a new centre to answer the demand of youth who needed long-term rehab. In 2013, we officially opened the recovery trail at Cassidy Lake and, most recently, it’s our new fitness centre that will again enhance the programs and services at Cassidy Lake,” says Tracey.

“How the fitness centre came to be is, a few years ago, we were residual beneficiaries of the estate of Dr. William Lewis, so the Portage Atlantic board came together to put together a campaign to raise funds so we could build the Lewis Fitness Centre.”

Once again, they’ve had a lot of help from the Lions Club, she says.

Some of that help has come from the Lions Clubs International Foundation, the donation arm of Lions Clubs International.

“We as Lions Clubs, have the opportunity to apply for grants for specific projects. They have to meet certain criteria, but this one did,” says Sangster. “We applied for and received a matching grant which, in dollars and cents, equates to \$102,000 from LCIF and \$102,000 from the Lions of District N1. It enables us to take on larger projects that we wouldn’t be able to take on otherwise.”

The Nashwaaksis club started the project, she says, but the district quickly stepped in once it became Portage and has taken on little parts as it has progressed.

“For the fitness centre, we’ve made that donation and it’s come from basically 79 clubs and almost 1,800 members in District N1,” says Sangster. “We’re so very proud of what we’re able to do for the youth of Atlantic Canada [and beyond].”

The fitness centre, says Tracey, will have a positive impact.

“Physical activity for youth at the centre will help them with their focus on rehabilitation and in the classroom,” she says.

Any enhancements to the site, whether it’s through programs, services or a new fitness centre, give the youth a better chance at more successful outcomes, says Tracey.

“When we help one youth, it’s not really just about helping one youth. It has a ripple effect,” she says. “You’re helping the youth, you’re helping the family, you’re helping the school, you’re helping the community. I think it’s an important program.”

Emmerson notes that Portage has been around for more than 40 years and has programs in 11 countries around the world. The youth served by Portage Atlantic are between the ages of 14 and 21.

“It’s quite amazing that this whole thing got started in little old Fredericton, New Brunswick, because a few people really were driven to fix some problem,” he says.

Evans has been part of the Lions Club since before the project began. What is it like for him to see how the idea has grown?

“When we first started out, it didn’t go that easy at first,” he says, as people didn’t realize what a serious problem drugs were, especially for the youth. “I saw it creeping in because I’ve been involved with youth since I was one.”

He’s amazed to see what they’ve managed to accomplish. It took a lot of work, he says, but it’s worth it for all the youth they’ve been able to help.

“You’ve just got to not give up,” says Evans.

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