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Four days, 172 years... and a whole lot of Fair

By Julie Cashin-Oster

For 172 years, the Orono Fair has been doing what a good agricultural fair does best: bringing people together, celebrating the work of the community and giving everyone — farmers, families, competitors, musicians, kids and those of us who simply enjoy a good midway, a reason to get out of the house.

This year's Fair runs September 10 to 13, and the organizers have packed four days with enough activities to make the most dedicated fairgoer wonder how anyone is supposed to see it all.

The theme is 'Sow It, Grow It, Show It,' which seems particularly appropriate for an event that has been doing exactly that since 1852.

And while plenty has changed over those 172 years, the basic idea hasn't.

People make things. They grow things. They raise things. They bake things. They build things.

And then they bring them to the Fair to show them off. That is the thread running through the entire history of the Orono Fair. Four days — and something for everyone.

The 2026 Fair opens Thursday evening with the midway, official opening ceremony, Demo Cross, the Ambassador

of the Fair competition and live music. The grounds will already be filled with home-craft and school exhibits, fruits and vegetables, field crops, maple syrup, scarecrows, vendors and antique tractors. There is also a Craft Beer Festival to get things rolling.

Friday is all about animals, agriculture and entertainment. There are poultry, dairy, beef and goat shows, sheep-shearing demonstrations, blacksmithing and chainsaw carving. The AgVenture Zone will offer visitors a chance to learn about farming and even visit with a veterinarian.

Then come the pie and cake auction, fiddle competition and Pony Pull, followed by the Friday night concert headlining Tenille Townes, featuring Nate Haller and Alycia Herbert.

Saturday is the big one. There are horses, beef cattle, poultry, goats, agricultural demonstrations, the Fair parade, an antique tractor pull, music, children's entertainment and vendors. Then, at 7 p.m., the Truck and Tractor Pulls take over the grandstands.

Sunday brings the Hunter/Jumper Show, 4-H and goat shows, poultry, sheep-to-

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Photo by Julie Cashin-Oster

A LITTLE FAIR MAGIC Rita and Frank Novielli have brought a little bit of the Orono Fair to the Post Office with this wonderful homemade Ferris wheel, built to get local kids excited for the weekend. With a school bus alongside it, the display captures September in Orono perfectly — Fair time and back-to-school time, all rolled into one.

Autism Home Base: Rethinking what accessibility means

By Julie Cashin-Oster

When people hear the word accessibility, they may think of ramps, elevators, accessible washrooms or other changes that make it easier for someone with a physical disability to navigate a building.

But accessibility can mean something very different for an autistic or neurodivergent person.

For Autism Home Base in Bowmanville, it can mean understanding how a person experiences the world — and making changes that allow them to participate, connect and, most importantly, feel that they belong.

That broader understanding

of accessibility is at the heart of the work being done at Autism Home Base, which was recently named one of eight recipients of the 2026 Durham Region Accessibility Awards.

The organization did not apply for the award. Chief Executive Officer Judy Hanson said someone nominated Autism Home Base, although the organization was not told who did so.

"We were pretty excited to be included and considered, along with a number of the folks that I feel serve the autism community," Hanson said. "I think it took a little while for people to think about accessibility and autism. It's not what most peo-

ple think of when they think about accessibility."

The other 2026 recipients include Progressive Life Centre in Ajax, Donna Schirle in Brock, Beyond 18 in Oshawa, the Snooze Room in Pickering, The Port Cheese Co. in Scugog, the Lucy Maud Montgomery Society of Ontario in Uxbridge and Durham KidsKare in Whitby.

Together, the recipients represent a range of individuals, businesses and organizations working to improve accessibility and inclusion throughout Durham Region.

For Hanson, however, the recognition speaks to an important shift in how accessibil-

ity is understood.

"What we do here is create safe spaces so that autistic, neurodivergent people can meet, connect, enjoy recreation, social activities, and have a sense of belonging," she said.

For the first 12 years of Autism Home Base, that was largely the focus — creating a place where people could find connection and relief from the social isolation that can accompany autism.

About three years ago, that focus began to expand.

Hanson said the organization started looking beyond its own walls and asking what happens when its members leave.

"They can have a great time here, but when they get on the bus to go home, if the bus driver doesn't understand, or the other passengers, or the rest of the community isn't also helping create a safe space, then they haven't had a great day," she said.

That led to the addition of an Outreach and Inclusion Manager and a growing emphasis on education and training.

Autism Home Base has provided presentations for firefighters and first responders and is working with police on ways to help autistic people become more comfortable with police presence.

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AHB from FRONT

The organization also offers LEAP — Lived Experience Autism Perspective, training.

The training brings together staff and either a parent or autistic adult to talk about autism and, importantly, practical ways of creating more supportive environments.

“We’re not telling anyone how to diagnose autism. We’re not telling anyone how to fix anything,” Hanson said. “It’s just here’s how we experience life. Here’s what you might expect.”

Sometimes, those practical lessons can make the difference between a situation escalating and an autistic person being able to respond successfully. That training has recently included Clarington’s service staff at its pools, as well as management and senior management.

Hanson said the response has been encouraging, particularly because people are willing to examine their own practices and consider what changes might make their facilities more welcoming.

“What I really wanted to stress is that when we think of accessibility, and what we advocate for is adaptations of outside environments, so that the people that we care about can be successful,” she said.

An accessible program, she points out, is not necessarily accessible simply because it has been given that label.

“When somebody offers an accessible swim time, what makes it accessible? It’s not just calling it that,” Hanson said. “They need training for their staff, so the staff understands different types of adaptation. That will make people successful.”

That idea of success extends beyond simply being included.

Senior Development Officer Tracy Deans says there is an important distinction between inclusion and belonging.

“It’s a matter of being able to walk into a space and feel like you belong there.”

Hanson added that people should not feel as though they are an afterthought, or that someone is being generous simply by allowing them to participate.

“Exactly, you belong in those spaces,” Deans said. “Wherever support is required, I’m getting that support because I belong here, not because of an afterthought.”

Autism Home Base’s Zen Den, which it takes to community events and festivals, is one example of that philosophy in action.

Hanson points to Rotary Ribfest as an example. The festival itself is not a sensory-friendly environment. It is noisy, crowded and filled with strong smells. But the presence of the

Zen Den sends a message.

“They are making a statement,” Hanson said. “Those Rotarians, when they invite us to have a presence there, just like they would have EMS on site or they would have security. We want people to know that you are welcome here.”

That message matters.

Hanson recalls when her son was younger and people did not necessarily understand his behaviour.

“When Eric was little, an autistic three-year-old looks like a three-year-old,” she said. “It’s not until they get a little bit older, and if people don’t know, you get a lot of judgments.”

She remembers the looks, the unsolicited advice and the assumptions about parenting. Later, when Eric received a service dog at age 10, something changed.

“All of a sudden they were smiling kindly,” Hanson said.

For Hanson, that experience helped define what accessibility really means.

“It was so freeing to me,” she said. “So, for me, that’s what accessibility is. It’s about having an informed and understanding community around you.”

The organization’s ambitions now extend beyond Durham Region.

Hanson is working on a project that would share Autism Home Base’s best practices with other municipalities interested in developing neuroinclusive recreational programming.

The approach would consider each municipality’s facilities, staff knowledge and available resources, while also asking a fundamental question: Is there actually a safe space that people can access when they need it?

A safe space, Hanson said, cannot be something that is available only occasionally or requires people to track down a key.

“It has to be available all the time, when they need it,” she said.

The long-term vision is ambitious.

“That’s sort of our big hairy audacious goal, is that one day every municipality would be able to provide safe spaces, neuro inclusive programming,” Hanson said.

But there is another challenge facing the organization — sustainability.

Autism Home Base has deliberately worked to keep its programming economically accessible. Parents chip in \$100 every year and volunteer their time.

“We’re able to keep it economically accessible, and that comes with its own set of challenges. We’ve been successful, and the reason we’re successful is because of the community. That \$100 a year is not paying

our expenses. It’s all the corporate supporters. It’s the region. It’s the municipalities who support what we do, and that has been a journey of inviting people to really understand us and see us,” said Hansen.

Hanson adds the organization does not have core government funding. That is where Deans’ role becomes increasingly important.

As Senior Development Officer, she is focused on building relationships with donors and funders who can help Autism Home Base maintain its existing programs and develop new ones.

“For me, it’s about sustainability, but also growth,” Deans said. “We certainly want to be able to maintain the programs that we are doing, but there’s going to be areas where we need to grow, just like the needs of the community in this community are going to continue to grow.”

That need will not disappear as children grow older.

Hanson points to provincial autism supports that focus heavily on children. As those children reach adulthood, the responsibility for creating opportunities for them as members of the community becomes an increasingly important question for municipalities.

“There’s programming for seniors. There’s a budget line for sports. There’s a budget line for youth programming,” Han-



Building a more inclusive community: Autism Home Base Senior Development Officer Tracy Deans and CEO Judy Hanson stand in the AHB Hub, where the organization is working to create spaces where autistic and neurodivergent people don’t simply participate, but feel that they truly belong.

son said.

The question, she believes, is what happens next as the number of autistic adults in the community continues to grow.

“So now what? So, what are you going to do?” Deans asked.

It is a question that goes beyond Autism Home Base.

The organization can create safe spaces, provide training and help community organizations understand autism. But true accessibility ultimately depends on what happens outside its doors.

Hanson said the goal is to make autism a consideration not only in attitudes, but in municipal planning and recreation budgets.

“With the incidence of au-

tism increasing exponentially, just like the province who now is investing billions, at the municipal level we want to inspire them to make autism a consideration, not just in terms of attitudes, but a budget line to support recreation and neuroinclusive recreational programming,” she said.

For Deans, that brings the conversation back to action. The question is not simply whether autistic and neurodivergent people are included. It is whether they can walk into a community space and know they belong. And, perhaps most importantly, what the rest of the community is prepared to do to make that possible.

SEPT 27

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