

## 50 years of friendship at the NHCIA



By Nate Smelle

Supporters of the North Hastings Community Integration Association (NHCIA) got together to celebrate a milestone for the organization on April 22 marking its 50th year of service in the community. Working closely with children, youth and adults with intellectual disabilities the NHCIA provides individualized support for all self-advocates and their families.

Bancroft's Mayor Bernice Jenkins took part in the celebration along with approximately 50 others who filled NHCIA offices in downtown Bancroft. She remembers when the organization first formed back in 1965. Reflecting on the NHCIA's humble beginnings in a home on Hwy. 62, Mayor Jenkins expressed her gratitude for the work of the organization, pointing out that it has now grown to employ 50 people in the community.

"I remember some of the first teachers and I remember some of the first clients [self-advocates]," said Jenkins.

"At the time we no idea that it would grow the way it has. I like to believe, and I am proud to say on behalf of the town of bank that we are an inclusive community. As we feel that we are inclusive you're also inclusive. You is self-advocates make us better people and we hope that we make you better people too."

As a board member at the NHCIA Bancroft's former mayor Lloyd Churchill was also in attendance. Addressing the filled room he stressed how important the work they are doing is in making Bancroft a better place to live for everyone who calls the community home.

"We have a tremendous organization here in Bancroft doing a tremendous job," said Churchill.

"When you look at the people that you serve often people will say that they are handicapped but I say they are not handicapped they are being given bigger challenges in life to work with than most of us have."

Emma Woodcox has been working with self-advocates at the NHCIA for 28 years. Through her experiences working as an independent living facilitator, and as the mother of self-advocate Rhoda Dickinson, Woodcox said she has spent far more time learning than she has teaching. Not always able to communicate with her daughter and other self-advocates in words she has to be open to communicating in other ways.

"Never underestimate their ability," said Woodcox.

"Just because someone can't communicate verbally with you doesn't mean they can't get their message across. When I think of the things Rhoda has taught me, and taught others over the years it is truly amazing. She is a great teacher. ?

Through such communication friendships are born. Being able to foster these friendships in the community is incredibly important, said Woodcox, because it improves the quality of life of the self-advocates and their new friends.

Janet Christie has been working at the NHCIA for 27 years. Like Woodcox she also feels she has learnt more from the self-advocates that she works with than she has taught them.

"We all have different gifts to share," Christie said.

In her time working as an individual support coordinator with the NHCIA she has seen many changes come to pass within the organization. One of the biggest improvements she has observed since she started working at the NHCIA is that self advocates now have more choices in regards to how they live their life.

?In the beginning they [self-advocates] didn't really have much of a choice in where they worked or what they did,? Christie said.

?If you can think about if you had no choice about where you live, who you live with, or where you went and what you did during the day that's a pretty narrow life. People take a lot more ownership and responsibility they are doing the things they want to do.

People are a lot more capable than we give them credit for.?

Through her work Christie said she has learned the importance of tolerance and perseverance in following your dreams. Assisting self-advocates in going after their dreams is made easier in Bancroft, she said, because of the helpful nature of the community.

?It is a really great place to live,? she said.

?I think the people who need support can have a lot more freedom living here because it is a small town and people know and lookout for them. People look out for each other here regardless of the situation...more so than in the city.?