



Farm converted to home for special-needs clients



Julie DeBruin photo

Gabe Wertman-Paris is one of the residents who calls Blooming Acres in Oro-Medonte Township home. Owners Howard and Sherri Ann Bloom have recently opened a second home for adults with high special needs in Springwater Township.

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From the laneway, Blooming Acres looks just like an ordinary farm.

Aside from the llama, a gift from a friend, who shares the field with several beef cows, there is nothing that hints this place a little different than its neighbours in picturesque Oro-Medonte Township.

Howard Bloom and his wife Sherri-Ann purchased the rambling old farmhouse with its old wooden bank barn and 100 acres of fields and bush with the idea of raising their family in the country. It has become a home for more than a dozen teens with complex special needs.

"This is our ninth year living here," said Bloom from the family's kitchen. They have their own living quarters inside the large house with they share with their two children. The other side has room for up to 10 clients and 15 staff members at any given time.

Before moving to the farm, the couple lived in a small condo in Toronto.

For several years, they would take trips out to the countryside, looking for the perfect place. They found their diamond in the rough in Oro-Medonte Township between Barrie and Orillia. It was close to both Toronto and Muskoka.

The original farmhouse and the property were in need of some attention, so the first thing to do was to renovate. "We put all our stuff in storage and renovated it," said Bloom.

Because of the couple's previous work with special-needs children, they started getting requests to have children and teens come up for the weekend to give their caregivers a break. "Before we knew it, we had four or five kids here most weekends.

"It was great. It was another opportunity for kids, especially those with autism."

The guests enjoyed the quiet country atmosphere, families were given a much-needed break and the Blooms were eventually able to expand the respite care into a unique summer program for young people with complex and often multiple special needs.

It started with a summer camp program that has grown into a year-round residential program for 10 people at a time. The gradual expansion of the program meant that an addition was required, so work began to expand the building into a 5,000-square-foot building and ensure they met all building code requirements. They decided to keep the homey, farm style of the original home in the addition, which features wide plank flooring and a large stone fireplace.

Several years ago, families of these clients began discussing how they would be able to access funding to pay for the one-on-one care. To be able to do that, the centre had to become licensed under the Ministry of Community and Social Services. It is still privately run but families are now able to apply for funding. In the past, parents had to give up the rights to their children if they needed to find a residential alternative for them, but that has changed. Families are encouraged to be involved in their child's progress and a number of them go home on weekends.

The Blooms also have three respite beds for short-term stays, and the farm still offers a summer camp program.

They have a one-to-one staff to client ratio and individual programs are developed for each client.

"They stay as long as they are gaining something here," said Bloom. They work with families to develop goals for the clients.

The farm became in such high demand, a waiting list had to be started. "We get a call almost every day," said Howard. "We're full."

Earlier this year, after two years of searching, the Blooms found a second property about 20 minutes from the first.

Snow Valley Lodge is a 6,000-square-foot, seven-bedroom home on a two-acre property within walking distance of Snow Valley ski resort. "It was a massive house, but in need of a complete retrofit."

At one time, it had been converted into a series of apartments, but the building stood empty for several years. "There were lots of bedrooms and bathrooms ... and the location was right," said Bloom. They spoke to the neighbours and answered questions about the program and the township was supportive. "They wanted to see the building fixed up," said Bloom.

The new property was acquired last January and has undergone extensive renovations to meet all provincial zoning, building code and fire regulations. The lodge will soon be home to seven individuals with complex and multiple special needs. It also houses a bigger main office, and between the two properties, they provide work for 30 staff members.

The Blooms decided that while their energies are focused on meeting the needs of the clients they serve, they also wanted to maintain a farm environment.

A small flock of hens supplies the family with fresh eggs, and they also raise turkeys and chickens for meat that are used to feed everyone on the farm. "The kids are part of that process," said Bloom.

"At the table, they know where their food comes from." Most years, he also keeps a large vegetable garden. They used to have a larger herd of cattle and did raise pigs, goats and sheep for several years, but cut back on the livestock as the residential care side expanded. A neighbouring farmer hays the property.

Now that the second facility is nearing completion, the Blooms have their sights set on a new project. In an effort to keep up with demand, they are starting to the future again. This time, they're looking at the idea of creating an adult day program for high-needs individuals, possibly in Barrie, that would include a recreational therapeutic aspect. They realize it could be challenging to find the right place for their program, but that isn't stopping them.

"We dream. We plan. We make it happen," said Bloom. "It was a big risk to move out of Toronto to a big derelict farmhouse." While Sherri-Ann is a country girl, he was a city boy and there was a lot to country living he didn't know. "You learn very quickly."

For more information on Blooming Acres and the programs it runs, check out www.bloomingacres.com.