

# Cassie's Place looking to grow with community support in 2023

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“Some see the disabilities but Cassie’s Place sees the abilities”

**By Zachary Roman**

**Cassie’s Place is a home away from home for individuals with differing abilities. It was founded in 2019 by Victoria Street, whose daughter Cassandra was born with epilepsy and a developmental disability.**

Street said Cassandra had participated in many programs before, and while service was good, she found the programs just weren’t quite right for . So, Street took matters into her own hands.

Cassie’s Place, named after Cassandra, provides numerous programs for individuals with disabilities. There’s the well-loved day program and

summer camp, as well as a weekly bowling league and online activities like cooking and crafting classes.

The official mission of Cassie's Place is "to inspire individuals with "disABILITIES to live more independently by recognizing, respecting and building on their gifts and abilities through advocacy, empowerment and education."

"In the Cassie's Place motto, the word abilities is highlighted in disabilities because "some see the disabilities but Cassie's Place sees the abilities."

When Cassie's Place began, it served five individuals and was located in Shelburne. Now, over 20 individuals attend its day program — now located in Southfields Village in Caledon — and other activities like the Cassie's Place bowling league are attended by even more individuals.

The Cassie's Place volunteer team has grown over the years, too, and in addition to Street, Joe Sassine, Tara Wilson, and Michelle Milani form Cassie's Place's leadership. Sassine and Wilson handle social media and finances, while Street and Milani handle the day-to-day operation of Cassie's Place.

"None of us have a PhD or letters behind our name. We're just moms and dads that want much more for our children and to be able to offer that service to other parents as well," said Street. "The four of us are extremely passionate. We're very protective of our participants."

Everyone who attends Cassie's Place becomes part of the Cassie's Place family. Street explained at Cassie's Place there's a poster on the wall of every participant and a write-up about them.

"I don't care if they come one day a week or five days a week, it doesn't matter. They're part of our family," said Street. "When anyone enters our home, they see our Cassie's Place family."

Sassine said all of the volunteers want to ensure Cassie's Place stays strong for the sake of their kids and kids in the future so they have a home away from home.

“This year is going to be the year that I want to put lots of effort into getting some sponsorship and fundraising going,” said Sassine. “The main purpose will be to buy our own place.”

Street noted another fundraising goal of Cassie’s Place is to buy their own vehicle for transportation, as in the summer participants love to travel around for day trips to places like the zoo and Niagara Falls.

Right now, Cassie’s Place leases a home at 107 Deer Ridge Trail in Southfields Village to run its programs out of. While it may seem unique that Cassie’s Place is run out of a home rather than a commercial building or community centre, it’s a very intentional choice. Street said making the move to a home in Caledon was difficult at first, but she knew it would be beneficial to the Cassie’s Place family.

“I didn’t want (participants) going into a commercial space as to me it feels like it’s more institutional. My objective was to find an actual home where we can convert bedrooms and things like that,” said Street. “For example, the master bedroom, we’ve converted into an activity room. We have another that’s an education room, another one for a quiet space, and one for an office.”

On the main floor of Cassie’s Place are more activity rooms, used for popular activities like yoga. Then there’s the big kitchen, which is critical as the independence individuals gain from cooking and baking is a key part of Cassie’s Place.

Street said all of Cassie’s Place’s programs are made to be intellectually stimulating and allow participants to flourish. No matter what level someone is at, they will be accommodated so they can participate and boost their self-worth and self-confidence.

When individuals with differing abilities age out of the school system, the opportunities for them to attend programs to learn and socialize drastically decreases. This unfortunate fact is one of the many reasons Cassie’s Place was created. Socialization is extremely important for anyone, a lesson learned the hard way during the COVID-19 pandemic’s worst days. Cassie’s Place was founded not long before the pandemic began, and it’s because of the pandemic that its online programs were created.

Street and Milani would meet with their daughters for lunch in a parking lot during the pandemic, each sitting in their own cars. While they were fortunate enough to be able to meet, they knew people were missing their friends, and it was during those lunchtime chats where the online programs were conceived.

They now continue to run every Thursday evening, and feature activities like bingo for number recognition, crafting for fine motor skills, and movie and paint nights. There's also a virtual cooking program that runs one Tuesday a month, and Cassie's Place creates packages for participants with everything they need to make a delicious meal at home. Participants need only to pay a fee to cover the cost of the food. On that note, Cassie's Place is completely not-for-profit and run by volunteers, and only collects fees for any program to cover costs.

Street said with more fundraising and sponsorships Cassie's Place will be able to offer even more programs. One of the favourite programs currently offered is the bowling league, which has over 30 participants. In addition to the league, Cassie's Place bowlers enter mainstream bowling tournaments against mainstream bowlers and have made it to provincial games.

"I'm all about inclusion into the mainstream for our participants, I don't want them put into a corner," said Street. "These people are in our community, they're part of our community, they make up our community and they contribute to our community."

Street and Sassine hope to forge a partnership with the Town of Caledon in 2023, as they say it would be beneficial for both parties.

Street said one cannot compare one disability to another as they are never the same, even if a diagnosis is the same. She said each individual is different and Cassie's Place strives to cater to everyone no matter where they are at. Street said it is a lot of work, but absolutely rewarding — she loves what she does.

"We had an individual at our program... he barely spoke," said Street. "Since coming to our program, his parents contacted us and said he's a completely different person. He'll ask how we are in the morning... ask if he can have a cup of coffee, then go and make coffee with another peer."

Street said at Cassie's Place the goal is to help each individual participant reach their best potential. Sassine said it's a place where everyone can feel safe, be treated equally, and be involved.

Those looking to get involved with Cassie's Place — whether it's as a participant, volunteer, donor, or sponsor — can visit [cassies.place](http://cassies.place) online, call 647-220-4232, or search for Cassie's Place on Facebook and Instagram.

Detailed information about Cassie's Place's programs and services can also be found on its website.