

## **Finding meaning and purpose in the transition from client to volunteer**

John, who lives in Oakville, Ontario, is a 62-year-old retired bachelor of French Canadian and Metis descent. Born in the UK, John came to Canada as a young child. Since arriving in Canada, he has lived in a number of places, at times crossing the 'pond' to return to England for a period of time.

After attending Seneca College in Ontario, John began a long and rich history working with a number of airlines in a number of roles.

During these years, John encountered a number of challenging situations, including stressful work he did related to 9/11, other airline emergencies, and losing both his parents within two years of each other. These challenges were exacerbated by three significant medical issues that John experienced. The cumulative effect of these challenges left their mark and John eventually went into the shelter system when he had to quickly find a place to live. He eventually found housing in Oakville and describes himself as a 'couch potato' who didn't get much exercise.

John recognized that he needed a 'soft sell', a little push to re-engage with life! That nudge came from a case manager at the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), who was familiar with the value and benefits of social prescribing and referred John to the Links2Wellbeing social prescribing project offered by the Sir John Colborne Centre where Jolaine Montgomery, Assistant Programmer, Recreation and Culture, works with the Town of Oakville.

The rest, as they say, is history! Jolaine, acting in the role of a 'Link Worker' or 'Community Navigator', connected John with many programs and he has now been involved with two Seniors' Active Living Centres (SALCs) – Iroquois Ridge Older Adults Centre and Sir John Colborne Recreation Centre for Seniors – for almost 1 ½ years. As a client referred to the centres, John, who loves card games, initially started by joining the euchre program. Jolaine adds that John fit in with the euchre group immediately and will now be teaching others how to play a variety of card games. Jolaine has watched John thrive after the initial struggles he experienced before coming to the centre; she said he has been welcomed by the group and is forming lasting friendships.

John loves cards but his real passion is history. John quickly transitioned from client to volunteer who is now giving talks on Indigenous topics such as respecting Mother Earth, prayers, sweat lodges and pow wows. John said that people have questions but might feel that they are walking on eggshells. To address any potential hesitance, he is committed to creating a learning environment where people can comfortably ask him whatever they want!

**Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario**  
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When asked about the impact of social prescribing and what messages he would like to convey to readers, John had this to say – the social aspect of the centre’s programs is what got him out, but his praise for the staff is what really grabbed the writer’s attention. John said that the staff are sincere enough to respect your space but also know when to give you a little push to become involved. In addition, from a caring perspective, the staff also check up on John to ask him how he is doing. What really struck the writer was John commenting that it is a balance of support and independence offered by the centres that have had a lasting impact on him.

In addition to John, Jolaine has supported other individuals who have been referred to the centres through social prescribing. Asked about the source of social prescribing referrals, Jolaine said that, to date, referrals have come primarily from CMHA, one from a chiropractor, and a few from solo physicians. Outreach to, and engaging with, primary health care providers is an ongoing challenge, but it is changing and evolving as the program matures and expands outreach efforts to new groups.

When asked about the impact of the social prescribing program, Jolaine’s response is consistent with John’s. She believes the ultimate impact is that people feel they belong and that they are welcomed into programs where they can experience a sense of community. Participants come to know they matter, that people care and are there to support them if they run into life issues.

These relationships don’t happen overnight. It takes time to build trust. Some of the tried and true ways that Jolaine uses to build trust are to start with a welcoming phone call, providing a potential participant with a picture of what the centre offers. That phone call is followed up with an email about the programs. Sometimes it requires following up several times before an individual feels ready to join a program. Both John and Jolaine commented on not forcing people.

It isn’t only clients who benefit from the Links2Wellbeing program! Being involved in the Links2Wellbeing Social Prescribing program has added meaning to Jolaine’s job and has increased her job satisfaction. Jolaine says she loves making people happy, feeling welcomed and connecting with one another.

In addition to hearing from John and Jolaine, Julie Pennal, Program Supervisor, Senior Services, Town of Oakville, was able to offer an agency perspective about the Links2Wellbeing program. Julie said that any opportunity to support their community is an opportunity they want to engage in. They are proud to be a Links2Wellbeing partner and to work with community agencies and health care providers to bring programs and services to those who need them and can benefit from what they offer.

Julie said that the demand for social prescribing is gaining traction. Taking that first step can be hard but the individuals who have done so are finding joy, friendship, and community from their brave choice to walk through the doors.

While it isn't easy to quantify intangibles such as the value and impact of social prescribing, Julie's hope is that the pleasure both staff and centre members have received from new members is equal to the joy and connection that they have received from making the decision to join.

If you drop into Iroquois Ridge OAC or Sir John Colborne Centre, you might be lucky enough to meet John who will happily teach you a new card game or teach you something new about many Indigenous topics!

For more information about the Links2Wellbeing social prescribing project, a unique partnership between the Older Adult Centre's Association of Ontario (OACAO) and the Alliance for Healthier Communities, funded by an anonymous donor, please contact Dena Silverberg, OACAO Links2Wellbeing Project Coordinator at [dena@oacao.org](mailto:dena@oacao.org), or visit <https://www.oacao.org/programs/links2wellbeing/>