

BACKYARD BONFIRES HELP THE LONELY MAKE FRIENDS

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Quick, how many friends can you name?

If you are having trouble filling more than one hand, you aren't alone.

Studies show we are more lonesome than ever - especially youth, seniors and males - and most of us are reluctant to talk about it.

But Innisfil resident Severino Lunardon wasn't going to let that happen to him.

After six lonely winter months, he decided to start hosting weekend bonfires. He opened his home to anyone in the community who wanted to come by.

He and girlfriend Rose Crispo knew no one, aside from a few neighbours.

"I literally started a fire one night and said come by," he said, posting the invitation on social media. "One person shows up, the next time they will bring somebody else and they meet three people who they didn't know before."

At any given moment, 35 to 40 per cent of people are feeling lonely, York University clinical psychologist and contract fac-

ulty member Dr. Ami Rokach said.

You can feel lonely in a crowd, or in an intimate relationship. Unlike solitude - which feels welcome and recharging - loneliness is not welcome, it zaps your energy and life satisfaction, Rokach says.

"Something I've gotten into the habit of doing is reaching out," Crispo said. "It doesn't seem scary. I complimented a girl at the coffee shop as she was getting my coffee ready. We started a mini conversation."

Unfortunately, many adults have social anxiety and unlike kids in school, they have almost forgotten how to engage in conversation to make new friends, Crispo said.

"It was how we felt for the first six months when we knew no one. Where did we lose that ability to talk?"

Lunardon said when a stranger attends one of his community bonfires, instead of focusing on topics they can't agree on, he finds common ground.

That's how he met Tia Silva, who stopped by one day and they struck up a conversation about their dogs.



Janis Ramsay/Torstar
Innisfil friends Helder Silva (left), Severino Lunardon, Tia Silva, Rosa Crispo and Isabella Silva (front) met while having a backyard bonfire.

She was quiet at first, but soon gained confidence and was able to let her personality out.

"We're too confident speaking on social media today, but we're scared to talk to somebody face to face," Silva said.

But Lunardon also said without today's technolo-

gy, he wouldn't have been able to make those connections.

Now, friends are offering to cut his grass, pile wood or bring meat for the grill - the way a real neighbourhood should be, he said.

Close friends are less common than they used to

be, according to researchers at Duke University and University of Arizona.

And that has Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. David Williams concerned.

"The time to act is now," Williams said in his 2017 annual report. "Loneliness and social isolation are se-

LONELINESS SERIES

This is the first in a four-part series examining why we are lonelier than ever and what we can do about it.

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rious public health problems that cost us all. They affect our productivity, health, well-being - even how long we live."

Human beings are hard-wired to connect and a lack of connections can increase your risk of dying early by 50 per cent, Williams said.

Loneliness has about the same negative impact on health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, is twice as deadly as obesity and increases the risk of dementia by 64 times.

And it's getting worse thanks to smaller, more spread-out families, high divorce rates and single-family households, more work and time pressures, financial constraints, longer commute times and technology that competes for our attention, he said.

Lunardon believes the way around that is to take a moment of motivation and start conversations with other people.

"Surround yourself with love and positivity and even the dark days are better then what they usually would be," he said.

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE AS A VOLUNTEER CAN BRING FRIENDSHIPS

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Eleanor Alexander believes in making a difference in her community.

With strong political and environmental views, Alexander started volunteering when she first moved to Barrie 12 years ago.

But there was another motive behind her method.

"For me, volunteering was about the need to meet people," she said. "My dad lived here but I didn't know anybody else."

Alexander helped launch the Sunnidale Park community garden with Living Green Barrie and also started attending meetings about electoral reform.

"I consider myself fairly lucky, because I've met a lot of people," Alexander said. "I originally met Louise (Gravelle) through the Green Party and then at Green Drinks Barrie, which is a networking group for people interested in the environment."

Gravelle also moved to Barrie a dozen years ago and looked for volunteer opportunities. One of them led to love through picking up garbage.

"It's about finding like-minded people who can engage your brain," Gravelle said. "It's also about getting out."

Gravelle didn't want to sit at home on the couch, so she volunteered to use her skills to make a difference.

While collecting trash from Sunnidale Park, Gravelle met Lee Miller.

"Initially I volunteered to give back to the community," Miller said. "I was searching the event



Janis Ramsay/Torstar

Barrie friends Lee Miller (left), wife Louise Gravelle and Eleanor Alexander all met while volunteering in the community.

listings in the Barrie Advance and saw a community park cleanup at Sunnidale Park."

Miller also volunteered with Kempenfelt Community Players and a local Scouts group.

Through cleaning up the environment, he struck up a friendship with Gravelle and they started meeting monthly for drinks.

After a year of talking about cycling, books and more, Gravelle asked Miller out for dinner. They later married in 2017 and

have volunteering to thank for the matchmaking.

With Simcoe County growing, there are several volunteering opportunities.

And bringing the information together in one website is Tandempark.

Created by entrepreneur Liam Squires in 2016, the business matches volunteers with opportunities.

Whether it's the Terry Fox Run, Urban Pantry, or Theatre by the Bay, there are many list-

ings to browse.

"You wouldn't normally see those opportunities in the same corner of the web," Tandempark founder and CEO Liam Squires said, adding he's just pitched his business at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities conference.

So far, Tandempark has helped connect more than 1,700 volunteers with 30 different organizations in the community.

Squires said people have an internal desire to feel like they

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belong to a group.

For him, it's important to have people to turn to.

"I need a strong circle of friends - not a big circle, but I need to know I have a few people that I can be vulnerable with," he said. "Without that, I think it negatively affects your feeling of self-worth."

Without a sense of community, of contributing, or a sense of purpose, people can feel meaningless, he said.

"I think that's why volunteering is so important, to build that sense of purpose and you are doing it alongside people who want to do the same."

Alexander knows some people might be too shy to make new friends and her solution is to find the most outgoing person in the room.

"If someone is more introverted, stand next to them and say you're new. They will connect you with new people," Alexander said.

And Miller recommends volunteering at an ongoing event, not a once-a-year project.

"Volunteer with a group of people who share your interest. You're going to find lots of common ground," he said.



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FROM SKATES TO STICKS, TAKING A FEW LICKS IN THE NAME OF FRIENDSHIP

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When Chantal Keating turned 40, her family doctor told her she better start getting into shape. "I was told I needed to do something more athletic than driving my kids to hockey," she said. That prompted her to search for a sport to enjoy.

"I was at Kempenfest and saw some roller derby girls. I thought, I know how to roller skate. I can do that."

So in 2012, she signed up for training with the Renegade Derby Dames.

"My family said, 'You can't do that,'" Keating said. "I felt like I had to prove it to my family."

Not knowing anyone else, she admits she was outside of her comfort zone when first walking into the arena in New Tecumseth.

"I was wearing a Warrior Dash T-shirt and had someone come over to talk to me about it," she said. "It's about finding that common ground."

That broke the ice and Keating started learning skills and making new friends.

One of them was Alison Kelly, who joined in 2011, wanting to do

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something for herself.

Kelly had played co-ed softball before and was intrigued by the idea of roller derby.

"I went to check it out and someone walked right up to me who said, 'You look normal,' and we started chatting," Kelly said.

When Keating joined a year later, the pair became quick friends.

After a few years skating together, both women had to bow out of the sport, but it allowed them to forge a lasting friendship.

Now on Thursday nights, they stay in shape with a Pound class at the Allandale Recreation Centre.

"You have to find something you're interested in, whether it's a sporting interest or a hobby like photography," Kelly said. "Find



Janis Ramsay/Torstar

Friends Chantal Keating (left) and Alison Kelly met while playing roller derby and workout together. Here, they take part in a Pound class at the Allandale Recreation Centre.

something and jump in to join."

But both women agree they learned more than athletics by participating in a sport.

"Derby is good for the sisterhood, bonding and sharing. I haven't skated in three years and I still stay in contact with (Keating)," Kelly said. "I learned I was stronger than I realized - emotionally, physically and everything about me. Derby and the team also helped me get through my separation and divorce."

The desire to belong and feel connected doesn't just fulfill a primal urge, it affects our physical and mental health, our sense of well-being, even how long we live - Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health David C. Williams

wrote in his 2017 annual report.

When people are struggling with loneliness, they don't need prescriptions for treatment as much as they need help connecting with people and groups in their community, Williams wrote.

"It's crucial for communities to provide opportunities for newcomers to become connected and develop social capital."

It also helps if people have a common interest, such as mothers with young children, people with the same cultural background or an interest in arts or sports, Williams said.

One barrier to making friends is it usually costs more to be socially connected, such as through

fitness programs or concerts, he said.

However, Williams recognized the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit for its part in fostering no-cost activities after it held a series of active transportation workshops, which in turn led area municipalities to develop active transportation and trail plans.

"Some are now creating trails connecting to schools, way-find projects, cycling lanes, road diets, transit initiatives and more," Williams noted. "Some have been designated age-friendly, youth-friendly, walk-friendly and bike-friendly communities. All this activity is the result of community engagement."



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SAME-SEX LOVE AND LONELINESS

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Chrissy Comeau hasn't lived in Simcoe County long, but her bold personality has helped her make new friends.

Comeau is a lesbian who isn't shy about her true self, but even with her gumption, she has faced challenges in developing friendships.

Comeau moved here from Kitchener two years ago and was almost shocked to see how isolated Barrie's gay community was.

"I was almost afraid, seriously. This doesn't seem normal to me," she said.

With a background in helping youth, she started volunteering with the Gilbert Centre's teen program, and on its reception desk. She also found her way to Barrie Pride events and now sits on the organizing committee.

"I never really said to myself, 'I'm going to meet some gay friends today' - you just kind of do. When you start dating somebody, you also meet people through them," she said. "With gay men, it's definitely a lot easier - even in 2019 and with the LGBTQ community more accepting, it's still easier for men."

Comeau also learned

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about other Pride-friendly groups through a yoga class.

"I learned about this group called Generous Spaces, which is a safe space for members of the LGBTQ community," she said.

It's a faith-based group and Comeau has found good friends there, convincing them to enter the Rugged Maniac Obstacle Race and Mud Run with her later this summer.

But Comeau also knows if you aren't outgoing, it is tough to meet friends and allies.

Some gay groups are cautious about who they let in, Comeau said.

"There is a lot of drama in this community. Personally, I don't like the drama. We don't have use for it. That's why I like the Generous Spaces group."

She also said heading to



Janis Ramsay/Torstar

Chrissy Comeau has met friends from the LGBTQ2 community by volunteering with Pride-friendly events and activities.

a gay bar isn't at the top of her list.

"Gay bars are usually geared towards men. Once girls have a girlfriend, they don't go to a gay bar anymore," Comeau said.

According to a 2018 government of Canada study, members of the LGBTQ community, particularly older members, are at risk of being socially isolated.

"Due to a history of discrimination, exclusion and fear of stigmatization, not all LGBTQ seniors wish to come out openly or be included in the LGBTQ com-

munity," Dr. Marie Meulieu wrote in the report. "In fact, many LGBTQ people have grown older convinced that it is better to keep their sexual orientation or gender identity a secret (or to be "invisible") to assure their well-being."

In 2014, only three per cent of Canadians aged 18 to 59 self-identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

While society's views on same-sex relationships have progressed since it was decriminalized in 1969, many adults who lived through that discrimina-

tion are still dealing with the scars and are cautious about interacting with others.

Add to that fact many gay or lesbian couples never had children and may have lost family ties, it isolates them even further. And if someone from the LGBTQ community is not in a relationship, they can be living alone.

"When social isolation is combined with health problems, LGBT seniors are at higher risk of being institutionalized quickly, which is likely to increase

their isolation," Beaulieu noted.

On the other hand, some LGBTQ adults may have also built resilience as an activist in their communities and have access to appropriate services.

Beaulieu said it is important to work collectively to foster welcoming and inclusive environments.

"Individuals and organizations that wish to counter the social isolation of LGBTQ seniors should also pay special attention to people who are experiencing loneliness."

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