

Welcome Wagon lends a helping hand to new residents

By Jasen Obermeyer

Orangeville's Welcome Wagon helps new residents integrate into the community and prepare for a baby, and despite a rainy/cool summer, they're still seeing new faces move in.

According to their website, Welcome Wagon is a Canadian-owned, free service for families experiencing a lifestyle change, founded in 1930.

Orangeville's Welcome Wagon has been around for over 50 years, helping people who are new to the area, who are expecting a baby, whether it's the first or not, as well as planning a wedding.

The Orangeville organization currently has three representatives, who also visit newcomers to Mono, Amaranth, Shelburne, and East Garafraxa.

Michelle Whyte, one of the representatives, says they hear about new people in the community through word of mouth, along with keeping track of For Sale and Sold signs, and see if the home buyers are new to the area.

She says that on average, they deal with about 40 new homes a month, though the volume has been increasing, and their busiest months are during the summer, from June to August. However, despite this lacklustre summer, Ms. Whyte says it hasn't stopped people from moving to Dufferin County. They still move, it's just not as pleasant.

She explained that some of the challenges Welcome Wagon faces are the weather, especially during the winter, as visiting people in the more rural, isolated areas of the County can be a bit difficult, as well as the language barrier, as more diverse people move in.

Everybody has still been so receptive and invited us in, and they still want to ask questions.

Ms. Whyte says the process involved in helping someone adapt to the community includes bringing them a community package, and giving them information on community services. The information provided varies; if the homeowners have kids, they bring information on schools or doctors, or the library.

Welcome Wagon partners with several local businesses, giving the homeowners a gift certificate to bring awareness for the new resident, and they have 40 businesses in their new community package.

Ms. Whyte says operating in Dufferin County has been great, as many people who moved from the city don't know or understand how the area operates. But they warm up to the Welcome Wagon, and reception has always been good.

She has been doing this job for 17 years now, and though each new resident is different and asks various questions, she leaves every house feeling the same way, knowing she helped someone adjust to a major or difficult change in their life.

The local Welcome Wagon doesn't do bridal showcases any more, or baby showers, but still do baby programs, which involves giving the new parents a baby package, as well as helping them find programs, schools, and services for them.

Asked how one can become a representative, Ms. Whyte said one needs a car and a computer, but most importantly, must have an approachable personality. They have to be outgoing, a people person.

She says she owes the continued success of the Welcome Wagon to her other two representatives, Marian Pilatzke, and Andrena Lusty. We make a fantastic team, and that's the key to why we're so successful and have been for so long.

For more information on the organization, visit their website, at www.welcomewagon.ca