

Even amid pandemic, Gianna Centre growing with a little help from its friends

The Gianna Centre for new and pregnant moms is being nurtured by its new neighbours.

In the few short months since the Gianna Centre moved into its new location last fall, the local Catholic Women's League, Knights of Columbus and other volunteers have stepped up to build a flourishing community garden, and to deliver food and clothing hampers to 13 of the Gianna Centre's client families.

"I just feel like we're the new neighbours on the block and you have just welcomed us so beautifully," said Vera Fischer, manager of the Gianna Centre. "I hope it's a long and fruitful friendship. I think that they appreciate that desire. It's mutual."

The Knights and CWL have long been supporters of the Gianna Centre, but it's the local chapters at Assumption and Resurrection parishes that have helped welcome the centre to their new location.

The Gianna Centre, formerly the Edmonton Pregnancy Crisis Centre, moved last November from downtown into the former rectory of Assumption church in the Strathearn neighbourhood.

Almost immediately the CWL and Knights of the twin parishes of Assumption and Resurrection parishes offered to help. Both helped with food and parking at the open house and at the new location's official blessing by Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith.

Local parishioners say they were thrilled when the Gianna Centre moved into the old rectory.



Janet Campbell

“It was so exciting to see something vital happening to a building that was falling into disrepair,” said Janet Campbell, a former pastoral assistant at Assumption church and CWL member. “It’s a key, integral part of the parish community.”

When Fischer planned to start a garden to beautify the Gianna Centre’s front yard, which had been dug up and graded for LRT construction, there was a bounty of support.

Volunteers provided seeds, soil and small plants. And the Knights of Columbus Holy Family Council, which includes Resurrection and Assumption parishes, spent the May long weekend building raised wooden beds. The beds are about two-and-a-half feet wide, run the length of the sidewalk, and include a ledge so the Gianna Centre’s pregnant clients would feel more comfortable.

“They built this amazing garden,” Fischer said. “While they were building, some of the passersby were asking ‘Is this your business?’ and they’re saying ‘We’re just doing this as volunteers for the Gianna Centre. So it became a community thing.”

Gianna Centre clients are growing the garden as part of the nutrition and cooking program.



Volunteers help plant the new garden at the Gianna Centre. Courtesy of Lorrie Deutscher

Once the garden was completed, the Catholic Women's League at Resurrection and Assumption parishes helped plant and continue to maintain it along with Gianna Centre volunteers and clients.

"Realizing who our new neighbour was, we immediately sought out to build a relationship with them," said Lorrie Deutscher, president of the local CWL which has about 70 members both young and older.

"The young ladies that they serve are bringing new life into this world, so we think it's very important that we stand beside them. This is partly neighbours helping neighbours, but it goes beyond that. These girls have chosen new life and so we need to, as Christians, stand beside them through this journey," Deutscher said.



Lorrie Deutscher

“Something like the garden or the hampers is providing the families with nourishment that we’re hoping will fill both their bellies and their souls. We want them to know that we are there with them on this journey.”

The garden is expected to be blessed by Rev. Philip Creurer, the pastor at Resurrection and Assumption parishes, at a later date.

Next came the idea to provide hampers. The Gianna Centre identified 13 families that were in need of the hampers which included food, clothing, pre-natal and children’s vitamins, diapers and toys.

The Gianna Centre shut its doors temporarily as a protection against the spread of COVID-19, but the need was still there for maternity clothing, diapers and other items. The CWL ordered those items online and had them shipped to Deutscher’s house, and then on to the Gianna Centre clients.

Ten volunteers from the CWL, Gianna Centre, and Society of St. Vincent de Paul shopped for the items on June 22, packed them and delivered the hampers the next day. The volunteers wore gloves and masks to protect against the spread of COVID-19.

Volunteers also supplemented the hampers with more items from the St. Vincent de Paul food pantry and the clothing bank at Assumption parish. The deliveries had to be made quickly because the hampers contained meat and other perishable items.

The hampers provided 13 of the Gianna Centre’s clients with three meals per day for a week. The hampers included a book on spiritual reflection, and information on nutrition and meal planning.

“This is not just to get free food and eat it and consume, but to think it through, build your menu, follow the recipes and become more of a self-sustaining family,” Fischer said. “Our whole goal is to build the family, so I think food does that.”

The Gianna Centre has roughly 60 and 100 clients at any given time. With COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing in place, the Gianna Centre is providing its ministry virtually, Fischer said.

Pre and post-natal, spiritual and money management supports are offered through videoconferencing. And new and expectant moms and can pick up a layette – a set of clothing, linens, and sometimes toiletries for a newborn child – or have them delivered curbside.

Fischer said the Gianna Centre is working on a relaunch plan to ease some of those restrictions and allow mothers to come to the centre with social distancing and COVID-19 protection protocols.

While the hampers are a temporary solution, the Gianna Centre has a year-round need for financial help, clothing and volunteers. Fischer noted that help can be done in a remote way. Volunteers at St. Thomas More parish knit blankets or prayer shawls for Gianna Centre clients.

“There are a lot of women, especially women maybe with empty nests, looking for something deeply enriching to do,” Fischer said. “How more enriching would it be to serve somebody who doesn’t have that motherly figure in their lives maybe, or who need to learn a skill or needs to be loved as a mother loves her own child? What a beautiful relationship that could turn into.”

“I can see our women really, really benefitting from the support and the love of the CWL,” Fischer added. “It’s a beautiful thing and it’s really on the spiritual level when you look at it.”

Janet Campbell, of the CWL at Resurrection and Assumption parishes, agrees.

“It’s women from both parishes working together for the betterment of a greater cause, and the greater cause is that of service to community and that vision of what Gianna Centre represents and also the vision of what Catholic Social Services represents: the whole idea that we’re part of the bigger picture and that we each have a little job that we can participate in to make a difference,” Campbell said.

“There is a spirit builder within the agency itself, but the spirit building of the community itself. If we’re talking about Assumption, the loss of its rectory, the loss of its parish office, now it’s alive and reborn in a different form. “

With their new neighbour moved in, the CWL plans to help the Gianna Centre as much as they can.

“What we’re trying to get out to our membership is that volunteers can get involved in so many different ways and whatever a person enjoys doing, likely the Gianna Centre could use you – childminding, storytelling, cooking classes, crafts,” Campbell said. “We’re kind of just on hold waiting and as they open up, then hopefully we’ll start to get involved in even more programs.”