

CFUW Burlington known for its education and advocacy focus

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The Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) Burlington is closing in on its 60th anniversary.

Burlington was a small town of approximately 10,000 when the local chapter of university-educated women formed as an offshoot of CFUW-Hamilton in 1957. Since that time, the organization has maintained a strong presence in the city - current membership is 140 - particularly through its education and advocacy efforts.

The club's mandate is to empower women and offer friendship opportunities through its many interest groups, special events and advocacy on local, national and international issues of social, economic and political concern.

"When I joined, most of the members were stay-at-home moms and that's why I joined because I needed a little mental stimulation," laughed Marianne Singh-Waraich, an educator who has taught at the high school and college level. "I joined because of the book group and then I discovered there were many more aspects to CFUW than the book group."

The book group has enticed many women to join, but they remain because of the myriad of possibilities within the club, said Deborah Harasym, regional director of the Ontario South District of CFUW (which includes clubs between Mississauga and Niagara).

"You join the book group, then the next thing you know you're on the program committee, three years later you're president," said Harasym, who comes from a business background. "You get very, very involved. You make lots of fabulous friends and you couldn't even imagine leaving after you've been there for a while."

When longtime CFUW member Pat Duxbury moved to Burlington she received a Welcome Wagon gift basket, which included a card from CFUW.

"I didn't know anybody here and my husband and I worked out of town," said the retired RN. "So I joined and it didn't matter if the house was coming down around me on the evening of the book group, I made sure I got there once a month."

Many of those early friendships have continued for 40 years, said Duxbury, publicity convener for CFUW Burlington.

"There are so many different things you can join and if you have busy years you can scale down your interest groups," said Singh-Waraich, who today is the CFUW Canadian delegate to the UN Commission on the Status of Women and convener of the resolutions committee with the International Foundation (IFUW).

CFUW welcomes members' suggestions for new groups to the long list of current ones - which generally meet once a month - and include everything from photography and travel, to Nordic pole walking and a beer and books group.

The organization also hosts special events to support its major education component, which is the annual presentation of 10 Leadership Awards and two Achievement Awards, as well as financial contributions to CFUW's national scholarship program.

"Scholarships were established to encourage academic achievement and leadership skills among female students graduating from the public and Catholic high schools in Burlington," said Linda Heaver, a former high school principal who is a CFUW scholarship foundation trustee and school board liaison officer.

"We strive to make those (scholarships) \$1,000 for each student, said Duxbury.

To raise funds for its 60th anniversary scholarship fund, CFUW Burlington will host Shine On, a diamond anniversary concert on Saturday, April 9 at 7:30 p.m. at St. Christopher's Church on Guelph Line.

Tickets are \$25 and are available from any CFUW member or from Different Drummer Books.

In total, local and national CFUW grants amount to almost \$1 million in scholarships every year, said Harasym.

"Personally, I have a very strong interest and belief in the difference education can make," said Heaver. "That was one of the things that really attracted me to CFUW is that it supports women in a way that women have not always been supported and aren't in most parts of the world today."



Deborah Harasym, Marianne Singh-Waraich, Linda Heaver and Pat Duxbury of CFUW Burlington.

Harasym believes the education and advocacy components are what differentiate CFUW from other clubs.

“I think that’s one of the attractions, because you can join a book group in a lot of places, but you can’t do those other things, and it gives you a sense of purpose and accomplishment,” said Harasym.

The change in CFUW’s membership criteria within the last five years allowing women without a university degree to join, has also been instrumental in maintaining membership, said Duxbury.

Membership is now open to those who are in a profession that now requires a university degree, those with other qualifications who support the policies and objectives of CFUW and fulltime post secondary students.

“We realized education had changed. Education is a huge focus for us but we realize that’s its bigger than university education,” said Harasym.

Whereas in the early years, most members were either nurses or educators, professions among members are much more diversified today because of the opportunities that women have had in the interim, said Singh-Waraich.

Throughout its almost 60-year history in the city, CFUW has been instrumental in a number of community institutions such as the literacy council and a controversial birth control clinic in the 70s. Today, CFUW also runs all-candidates meetings for every provincial and federal election and most recently its “very active” advocacy group presented to provincial committees on Sexual Violence and Harassment, and Wage Equity.

The club has also sponsored a Syrian refugee family.

“Fellowship is a mainstay of our club,” said Duxbury. “Our current 12 interest groups are a source of fun and fellowship where friendships and contacts are made with women of all ages, current residents and newcomers to the community. And that’s what makes people stay is the friendships, the networking, the support.”

For membership information, visit cfuwburlington.ca .

Meetings are held the fourth Wednesday of the month at the Art Gallery of Burlington.

CFUW Burlington is a chapter of the Canadian Federation, which has more than 9,000 members across the country, and is the largest member of the IFUW.

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