



MP Phil McColeman with "The left side of 60."

# Advocating for the needs of young residents

By Drew Tapley

**T**hey call themselves 'The Left Side of 60,' says Sandy Croley referring to the 20 per cent of younger residents under the age of 60 at Fox Ridge Care Community in Brantford, Ontario.

Sandy is the executive director of Fox Ridge, and actively supports the needs of this demographic in her resident population as young as 37 years old. But major differences in acute care, social interests and privacy requirements are proving hard to meet within the same resources.

An article in the *Toronto Star* on July 9, 2017, reports how thousands

of residents under 65 are living in long-term care throughout Canada, as young as 21 in one instance, with the average age of an Ontario resident being above 83.

Long-term care communities like Fox Ridge, which does not operate a wait list and is owned by Sienna Senior Living, have been designed specifically for seniors. This presents a challenge for people like Sandy and her team when it comes to the physical, emotional and social needs of much younger residents.

Despite their health issues, The Left Side of 60 do not consider themselves to be in the final stages of life, dealing

with end-of-life conditions that seniors cope with. They have a combination of complex mental and physical illnesses, including Huntington's disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, and multiple sclerosis – which require 24-hour care.

"If their needs were not as complex, they could probably get the services they need in their own homes," said Sandy.

Food preference is one of the many differences they have to manage at the care community.

"We make high calorie food because seniors generally eat less," explains Sandy. "I think a lot of our younger folks gained weight because of this.

Plus, they want to eat at different times of the day."

To get around this, they started a food committee comprised of residents under 65 to review menus and make suggestions and choices. The dietary staff then incorporate these decisions into a menu tailored to their requirements.

Heat regulation is another issue with menopausal women under 65 living with a majority of older residents who prefer much higher temperatures. For now, they are managing this using air conditioners. Other matters, however, require a bit more creative thinking.

Fox Ridge maintains a busy social calendar for seniors, which is not always suitable for younger residents.

“We do special programming because they don’t want sing-alongs. They want to have a cook-out and drink beer,” says Sandy. “So, that’s what we did – organized a cook-out for them with one of our PSWs and his friend playing live music.”

Many from this group would like to go back into the community and hold down jobs, but their health won’t permit it. Leonard is the exception. The residence helped him secure a paid position at Baskin Robbins, which he’s held for several years.

Josh would like to start his own 3D printing business, but a few obstacles stand in his way. At 37, he is the youngest resident at Fox Ridge and a graduate in graphic design. He has Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, and was living independently until a series of infections and a dramatic weight loss required that he move into Fox Ridge in January 2016.

“Living in long-term care has allowed me to regain my health,” says Josh. “My appetite is back to normal and I’m on a steady weight gain. I am the healthiest I have been in a long time, and have been receiving excellent quality of care.”

## ‘THE LEFT SIDE OF 60’ REFERS TO YOUNGER RESIDENTS LIVING IN LONG-TERM CARE.

With Sandy’s help, he has been campaigning for funding to finance his own room to set up the computer equipment he needs to start his business. Due to the progression of his disability, he says that working on a computer is the only type of work he is able to do.

Josh’s campaign was the catalyst for the younger residents to form a committee, becoming The Left Side of 60.

“That started the ball rolling,” says Sandy, “with Josh and me writing to organizations to get funding for his own room. Privacy is also important to these young people in their thirties and forties because some of them are still seeking romantic relationships.”

She speaks for this unique group at lots of committees in the wider community, and says she’s received great support from Sienna’s head office in advocating for the younger residents.

Room allocation is another issue.

“Everyone says to put all the young people together. But this doesn’t work,” says Sandy.

One reason she gives is that younger residents have a lot of electrical and manual equipment, including comput-

er devices, which compete for space. To help meet one of their needs, she has installed WiFi so they can use their laptops and smartphones to maintain contact with the outside world, which is essential for them.

“Instead, we try and pair a younger person with an older person, and often find that the younger resident becomes a caregiver. We have a 25 per cent turnover rate in the resident population each year at a minimum, which can result in compassion fatigue for younger residents.”

In an effort to combat this, they have introduced a quarterly program to celebrate the lives of residents who have passed away. Many of the younger residents participate by doing readings and handing out flowers to family members. A social worker is also on staff to assist with personal bereavement and compassion fatigue.

Using a system of intergenerational occupancy can make nighttime routines difficult when younger residents want to stay up late and are sharing a room with a person up to fifty years older than them, in some cases.

Despite all of these lifestyle differences, Sandy insists that there isn’t any animosity across the age gap. She cares for the needs of all residents at Fox Ridge, which includes helping the younger ones get their voice out there and heard by the right people. Their goal is to change public policy to help themselves and thousands of residents like them under 65 in Ontario and throughout Canada.

One way Sandy has chosen to channel their efforts is by inviting the MP and MPP for Brant district to come for lunch and give the residents a direct platform to address their concerns. During these lunch meetings, each resident presented a different agenda, such as ODSP funding, increased privacy, and suitable lifestyle choices. And it looks like they have made an impact. Sandy recently received an invitation to connect with the Office of the Ontario Minister of Health & Long-Term Care, and continue the conversation.

Above all things, The Left Side of 60 has one primary request, inclusive of all others. It is for a living environment that is neither a hospital nor a long-term care home – but somewhere in between, specialized to the needs of much younger residents, with staff trained in complex and acute medical diagnoses. **LC**