

## Heart of a Caregiver

It's hard to believe it has been nearly two years since The Pandemic changed our world. Monday, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, started normal enough. At 7am three lanes of Main Street traffic alternated between surging forward, and a measured deceleration. My commute to work held a pace not unlike the repetitive stretching and relaxing of a giant rubber band. I sipped my coffee, listened to a morning news cast declaring the novel virus had now become a Pandemic, and speculated how this was going to affect how RSS delivered services.

When I arrived at work, its impact became clear. RSS staff had just become "Essential Workers", complete with identification cards. Our residents were pulled out of all Day Programs, to stay within the confines of their homes until further notice. Several went home with their guardians until the crisis was over. In that moment, no one knew that day the sequestration was going to last for the next 14 months. And that the crisis was going to last even longer.

It was the next morning when I was once again travelling down Main Street at 7am, that I started to grasp how much our world had changed. Yesterday's pulsating throng of morning commuters was replaced by a dismal scattering of perhaps a dozen headlights and taillights. Together, yet very much apart, we ventured with an air of apprehension toward the formerly vibrant heart of our city. My coffee sat in the cupholder unconsumed. The radio was silent. My gaze bounced nervously between the dashboard clock and the nearly deserted street I was on. I couldn't quite process a world where there was not going to be a rush hour.

Like myself, most of our group home staff showed up to work that morning. We didn't know how we were going to staff several dozen people who should've been getting on busses and in cars to go to day programs. In that moment, we didn't know how we were going to occupy our residents' days while being relegated to remain within the confines of our homes. As days yielded to months, RSS staff forged the isolation and uncertainty into a sense of meaning and purpose. We learned about Protective Personal Equipment (PPE), constant disinfection, daily temperature and O2 checks, we learned a lot more about our residents as individuals, and we certainly learned about toilet paper.

In July, 2020 a positive case in an RSS home became our initial trial by fire with Covid 19. This was long before the first vaccine would become available. With all the unknowns surrounding this virus at that time, our staff placed themselves directly in harm's way. Staff donned protective gear, including gowns proudly labelled "Made in China", and isolated themselves for the duration of the outbreak alongside their charges, leaving behind spouses, children, and their worlds to care for our residents.

We learned much from that first outbreak. By rigorously practicing universal precautions and adhering to best practices regarding PPE, not one staff contracted Covid 19. As exposures came into other homes, we refined our ability to assist the brave staff who stood their ground on the front lines with the residents. Stockpiled PPE would be rushed to where it was needed. We learned how medications, groceries, cleaning supplies, and payroll could be delivered to the affected homes with no contact with the occupants. Our duties and routines evolved to ebb and flow with the virus.

While navigating our way through a pandemic has been a completely novel experience for most of us, I've also learned human nature remains constant. Some of our greatest heroes during this time have

been those caregivers from whom I never expected such bravery. The same holds true for a few people who were nowhere to be found when their group homes needed them most. Thankfully, those individuals were the exception, and by and large RSS can take pride in the many Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) caring for our residents, around the clock, every day of the year, in spite of the personal risk involved.

There will always be a crisis, a challenge, lurking in the shadows. Before the Pandemic there was the draconian budget cuts of the 2018 legislature. Before that, there were staffing shortages and changes in leadership. RSS chooses not to be defined by our obstacles, but by our commitment to serve the people we've been entrusted to care for. The heart of a true caregiver holds dear the idea that our residents are unique individuals, worthy of every effort we can make to help them live a full and meaningful life. I am thankful for each and everyone of our true caregivers, and it is those caregivers who inspire me to give my best every day.

Thank you, caregivers.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Calvin Calton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Calvin Calton

Executive Director, RSS