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NEWS

Team of 100 volunteers makes autism respite care possible for Durham families

FOOTPRINTS 4 Autism always looking for more volunteers

By [Jillian Follert](#) DurhamRegion.com

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When Rose Fahimi was in Grade 9 and looking for a place to do high school volunteer hours, she started helping at [FOOTPRINTS 4 Autism](#).

She's now in Grade 12 and still there.

"It's something that has gone way beyond volunteer hours," she says.

Fahimi is one of about 100 volunteers who make it possible for the local non-profit to support families with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

"Our volunteers are the backbone of our program," says Michele Finney, volunteer services co-ordinator at FOOTPRINTS 4 Autism. "It's the volunteers who connect with the kids and make those one-on-one connections."

Founded in 2004, FOOTPRINTS is a small, grassroots organization that offers respite care on Saturdays for children ages four to 13; an after-school social program for youth ages 14 to 21; and day camps during school breaks.

Finney says affordable respite care is a service that is very much in demand for Durham families with children on the autism spectrum.

The FOOTPRINTS program, which takes place Saturdays in both Whitby and Pickering, provides 3.5 hours of care in either the morning or afternoon for \$24 per session.

Volunteers range in age from 14 to older adults – many are local high school and university students. They connect one-on-one with the children and are supervised by qualified staff.

"What's beautiful about this respite service is that we give parents time to just breathe," Finney explains. "Parents will drop off their child with us and they can do what they need to do. A lot of that includes errands, grocery shopping, personal time. A lot of parents let us know that they use that time to spend with the child's sibling."

Savitrie Rampersad recently started bringing her son Adrian, 10, to the Saturday morning respite care program and says it has been helpful for everyone in the family.

"He looks forward to going every Saturday, he loves going there. The volunteers are great with him," she says.

While Adrian is at the program, Rampersad is able to go grocery shopping, run errands – or even just go to the mall with her teenage daughter.

"I wish I had know about this organization before," she says. "It's wonderful."

For Fahimi, her role at FOOTPRINTS has expanded from helping with Saturday respite care to now co-chairing the organization's social media team.

Her volunteer experience even inspired her to start a program at her high school hosting monthly social lunches for students with special education needs.

"FOOTPRINTS kind of opened up the door for me in terms of volunteering and activism and philanthropy in general," says Fahimi.

Mara Constantin, 16, is a newer volunteer with the organization. She started in the fall 2021 and says it was “pretty daunting” at first, but also deeply rewarding.

“Just knowing you’re doing something that’s really helping people ... I knew immediately I was going to stick with it,” she says.

Constantin says she has quickly learned a lot about autism, including how diverse the spectrum is.

“Volunteering helped me see not everyone who has autism is similar ... autism is something different for everyone.”

Finney describes all the FOOTPRINTS volunteers as “simply amazing” and is especially grateful for the dedication they have shown during two years of pandemic ups and downs.

“They have all been so remarkable. You have 16-year-olds doing front-line work during a pandemic. They are amazing role models.”

FOOTPRINTS 4 Autism is always **looking for new volunteers** who can commit to a minimum of one shift per month for a one-year term.

Email volunteer@footprints4autism.org for more information.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: *National Volunteer Week 2022 is April 24 to 30. This year's theme is "volunteering is empathy in action." In the lead up to this important week, we highlight how the 100 volunteers at FOOTPRINTS 4 Autism make it possible for the local group to support Durham children and youth with autism and their families.*

Jillian Follert has been telling Durham's stories for more than 18 years. She currently writes about education, food and business for Metroland's community newspapers in Durham.