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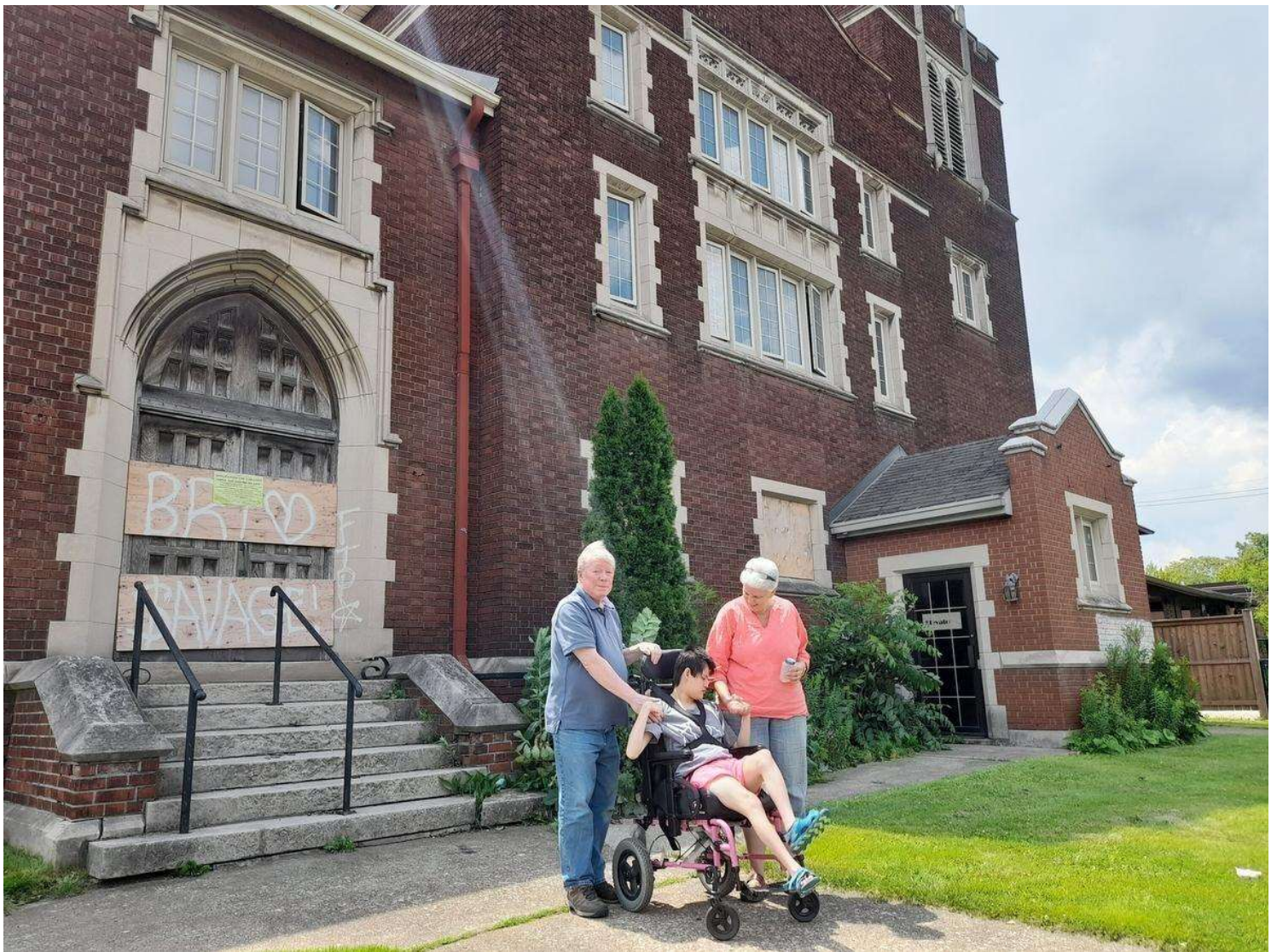
HAMILTON REGION

A place for Kira to call home: Charity plans to turn Hamilton church site into special-needs residence

Parents of adult children with disabilities in the lurch when it comes to supportive housing

By Teviah Moro Spectator Reporter

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Dr. Kerry Beal and husband, Gary, with their daughter, Kira, support Luso Canadian Charitable Society's plan to transform a boarded-up church at 922 Main St. E. into supportive housing.
Teviah Moro / The Hamilton Spectator

One day, when Dr. Kerry Beal was offering COVID-19 vaccines on Barton Street East, she stumbled upon a revelation for her special-needs daughter.

She wandered into the Luso Canadian Charitable Society and witnessed its day program for people with developmental and physical disabilities.

It seemed a perfect fit for Kira, now 22, who needed somewhere stimulating and safe to spend her time now that she was no longer in school.

“This is exactly what we had been looking for,” Beal recalls.

And it has worked out well for Kira, who has been in Luso’s warm embrace since winter.

“They truly love her. I mean they take such good care of her,” says Beal, who’s lead physician of the Shelter Health Network in Hamilton.

But as she and her husband, Gary, age, they worry about the future.

Where will Kira — who's nonverbal, uses a wheelchair, can't stand up and must be fed — live when they're not around anymore?



Dr. Kerry Beal and husband, Gary, with their daughter, Kira, support Luso Canadian Charitable Society's plan to transform a boarded-up church at 922 Main St. E. into a special-needs residence.

Teviah Moro/The Hamilton Spectator

“Every parent of a child like ours has to eventually figure out what’s going to happen,” says Beal, 66.

Others with children at Luso are in the same boat, but their options are limited, says executive director Jacinta Ribeiro.

“Many families are stranded without housing supports that can care for their sons and daughters as they age.”

But Luso, which serves about 80 people, has found a solution in an old, vacant church it purchased on Main Street East just west of Balsam Avenue.

The plan is to refurbish the former Trinity Baptist Church, which dates to 1924, and construct a six-storey, 30-unit supportive-housing building on an adjacent parking lot.

The blueprint, drafted by local firm Cianfrone Architect Inc., calls for space on the ground floor for the day program with the wheelchair-accessible apartments for 45 residents on the floors above.



Luso Canadian Charitable Society plans to incorporate a vacant church at 922 Main St. E. into a new supportive-housing building for residents with special needs. The blueprint calls for space on the ground floor for the day program. Wheelchair-accessible one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments with kitchenettes are on the floors above.

Cianfrone Architect Inc.

“The structure of the church is sound,” said Angelo Cianfrone, noting a dining area is planned for the sanctuary, while the basement has a small gym that can be used for activities.

Luso, a charity with Portuguese-Canadian roots that has operated in Hamilton for 20 years, goes before the city’s committee of adjustment Thursday to ask for land-use changes to allow the project to move forward.

A budget has yet to be set, says Heather Grand, chief executive officer of Luso, which also offers services in Toronto and Mississauga. But with a price tag expected to run “at least \$12 million,” the plan is to tap all levels of government for funding.

The hope is to open the residence’s doors in two years, Ribeiro says.



Luso Canadian Charitable Society plans to incorporate a vacant church at 922 Main St. E. into a new supportive-housing building for residents with special needs.

Cianfrone Architect Inc.

“It’s sort of an aggressive timeline, but we have families in such a desperate need that we want to work as hard as we can.”

Some parents resort to sending their children outside of the city to live in residences, while others end up in nursing homes prematurely.

Yvette White says her daughter, Sarah, 30, has learned many life skills during her time at Luso’s day program.

“The next step, as parents, we’ve got to think about the future,” White said. “And what if something happens to me or my husband? Then what?”

For Beal, caring for Hamilton’s homeless population during the pandemic was one of those “oh-my-God moments” that placed the uncertainty of her daughter’s future in sharper relief: “What’s going to happen if I croak?”

Kira doesn’t speak, but her parents know what she enjoys. Food and music are on the list.

“She really, really likes the water,” adds Beal, explaining her daughter, whom they adopted as an infant in Vietnam, gets a kick out of floating around in a life jacket.



Luso Canadian Charitable Society plans to incorporate the vacant former Trinity Baptist Church at 922 Main St. E. into a new supportive-housing building for residents with special needs.

Cianfrone Architect Inc.

Every day, they lift Kira out of bed and into her chair for breakfast. They pack up her lunch and other items before taking her to Luso on Barton.

After a stimulating day, they have dinner together and watch TV. “She’ll laugh at anything that we’re laughing at pretty much,” Beal says.

So life goes on, but she and her husband, who’s five years her senior, are “no spring chickens,” Beal points out.

She figures the time to move forward with another arrangement for Kira will likely come when they can’t lift her anymore.

In the meantime, they’re holding out hope that Luso’s plans come together.

“It would be a place where she can go and live, and she can be cared for, for the rest of her days. That’s exactly what we need and what all parents of kids like ours need.”

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**Teviah Moro**

Teviah Moro is a reporter and editor with The Hamilton Spectator and thespec.com. He lives in Hamilton's east end and joined The Spectator in 2011 after working at other dailies in Ontario. Moro covers a variety of topics, including housing, homelessness and politics. He is also Friday night assignment editor. Moro is an Ontario Newspaper Award winner and National Newspaper Award finalist.

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