



## SonFlower Stables is life changing

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SonFlower Stables volunteers with founder Mary Howe, and Dream Team Global Tillsonburg fundraising organizers Virginia Armstrong and Irene Hurley. (CHRIS ABBOTT/TILLSONBURG NEWS)



SonFlower Stables in Otterville describes itself as a community of healing, working alongside horses healing humans.

The sunflower - or sonflower - was an ideal choice for the stables, owned by Mary Howe, a grief resolution specialist, because the hub of the sunflower represents community.

"The seeds within represent each and every one of us," said Howe. "One never knows where that seed may fall. And there's hope, because when that flower does grow and bloom, it's like a warrior. And it always turns toward the sun for strength. And that's why the 'SonFlower.'"

Sunflowers were prominently displayed Friday, August 11 at the home of Bob and Irene Hurley on Rhineland Road, Delhi, when Tillsonburg's Dream Team Global, of Max International, hosted a Barbecue Dinner and Auction fundraiser to support SonFlower Stables, a local charity offering a unique blend of alternative methods of healing and grief resolution with equine facilitated learning.

Featuring a live and silent auction, catered dinner (Vivian's Country Cooking in Courtland), educational speakers, and health and wellness vendors, the event raised \$6,000 for SonFlower Stables.

Sharing her passion with so many supporters, said Howe, was surreal.

"It's like someone who has a vision and a dream, and they won't back down - even through every storm of people being negative and knocking you down and taking your sails away. This event has given me back my sails. 'Where there's life, there's hope.' A wise gentleman here said that, and he encouraged me. So yes, this has given me back my sail.

"I'm just in total awe, that people are seeing the need in our community. We have to come together and help one another... I don't want people to stay stuck in that illness. I want them to know there's support, and within that support in the community they can find that life within that hope."

Grateful to Dream Team Global Tillsonburg, and conveners Irene Hurley and Virginia Armstrong, Howe also thanked her passionate and dedicated team of volunteers.

"They're the glue," said Howe. "Without the volunteers..."

"She's our glue though too," said SonFlower volunteer Janet Roelens from Norwich. "I think she doesn't give herself enough credit. I've been telling them 'I'm coming back, I'm coming back, I'm coming back' and it didn't really happen the way I thought it was going to happen. Actually, I'm a lot happier about how it happened."

"This is more of a calling to me than anything because I really want to help people in the same situation," said Shonda Merlot, newly moved to Straffordville.

"The vision," said Roelens, "is unlike any other with equine assisted learning and Mary being a grief resolution specialist. Everyone has grief, we all have grief. She's just like a master at what she does, it's incredible."

"She makes you dig deep," Merlot nodded.

"And while you're doing the work... you're getting the therapy," said Roelens.

"She's non-judgmental, for certain," said Merlot. "We understand that, we get that from Day 1. This is certainly a place of non-judgment."

"A safe place. Very much a safe haven to grow," said Roelens.

"As soon as you get there, it's like your head shuts off," said Merlot. "It's freeing."

"It's a community within a community," said Roelens, who as of August 13 has been sober 365 days.

"Sonflower Stables was instrumental in that early sobriety. By the grace of God, I found it, and I met Mary, and there was something about Mary and it just changed my life. It gave me a place that I can go any time. It's just life changing, it really is."

"I'm a veterinarian technician and I love animals," said Merlot, who has experienced PTSD due to domestic violence throughout her life. "I've always been around animals, grew up in Wyoming, and was just going through a really hard time, and struggles. I'm an American so I can't get a job over here yet... and I couldn't sit at home."

"So I came and volunteered, and bonded with the horses very much. It was amazing going out there on Thursday. I did make it - and they remembered me. It was an amazing feeling."