

L'Arche: A place to call home

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SAINT JOHN – Kristina Lynn Cooper doesn't speak but her facial expressions convey all she needs to say.

The 31-year-old Saint John woman, who has an intellectual disability, answers yes to questions with an eyebrow raise. A sharp turn of the head is a firm no. But mostly, she wears a broad grin that denotes a peaceful, happy soul.

It hasn't always been that way.

Cooper lived in a nursing home in the Sussex area for seven years until she moved in 2010 to L'Arche, a non-profit residential care home that's part of an international network of communities for people with intellectual disabilities. At the nursing home, she lived with as many as 75 other people, most of whom were seniors.

In her early to mid-twenties at the time, she was the youngest person living at the nursing home and there were no programs specifically designed for



Kristina Lynn Cooper has blossomed after coming to L'Arche, a home for people with intellectual disabilities.

PHOTO: CINDY WILSON/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

someone like her. Aside from her mother coming for trips, she had only one outing per month that was organized by the facility.

Cooper, a woman who is barely four feet tall, became depressed and withdrawn. She rarely smiled and never laughed.

"I saw her regressing," said her mother, Karen Cooper. "Sometimes I would cry all the way there."

She had been told the nursing home was the only place for her. It was located about 90 minutes away from her Saint John home.

"It just wasn't the right fit for

Kristina," she said. "She was so far away. She was cared for very well. I can't complain about that, but she wasn't nurtured."

Three and a half years after she moved to L'Arche, located on the city's

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west side, Cooper is involved in various community organizations and attends Key Industries, which provides programs to empower people with a disabilities, two days a week. She visits her mom's home on Wednesdays and Sundays, swims at the Aquatic Centre and attends other community events throughout the week. One of her favourite activities is grocery shopping each Monday, when she helps push the cart and choose her favourite snacks. She loves chocolate.

At L'Arche, Cooper lives with four other adults, all of whom have intellectual disabilities. Three assistants also live in the home, which opened in 2005 after the Roman Catholic Church donated it.

Cooper, who loves country music and the colour yellow, is thriving in this home-like setting, which fosters a family atmosphere and connections in the neighbourhood and the broader

community.

Here, she's known as a social person who loves being around others.

"She's more like the old Kristina," remarked her mom.

When the Telegraph-Journal visited the home on Wednesday, Cooper appeared relaxed as she sat on the couch cuddled up with her mom, who was visiting.

Live-in assistant Gray Gillies played the guitar and sang as Cooper held a set of wrist bells.

Gillies, who has been a live-in assistant for eight years, described her work at the home as a "way of life" and not a job.

"The people I live with (here) are my other family," she said.

Gillies said her position at L'Arche provides her with as much or more enrichment and growth as it does for the residents. She described L'Arche as a home that she firmly believes is making the world a better place.

"Everybody deserves to be in a place

where they belong, where they can flourish," she said.

And L'Arche is that place, she said.

"Our life is simple – it's not always easy, but it's simple" said Gillies.

The L'Arche home in Saint John is one of 29 communities of L'Arche located across Canada, from Cape Breton to Vancouver Island, but it's the only one in New Brunswick. The organization was founded in 1964 by Canadian humanitarian and social visionary Jean Vanier, and now there are L'Arche homes in 40 countries around the world.

Each community is operated with a combination of government money and fundraising support.

The operating budget to run the Saint John home is about \$200,000 per year, 60 per cent of which is funded through the province and the remainder through fundraising efforts. A number of city churches also support the L'Arche home.

Jocelyn Worster, L'Arche Saint John's

executive director, said the organization hosts about eight fundraisers in the community each year, including bowling tournaments, breakfasts and concerts. One fundraiser is taking place on March 15 at O'Leary's Pub.

She would like to increase the visibility of L'Arche in the community so that more people with intellectual disabilities know about the home and the network of community programs to which it has access.

She said the hope is to eventually open another L'Arche home for others in the Saint John community.

"We'd like to be known as more than a home," she said.

Worster said the connection to the community is an important part of the lifestyle at any L'Arche home.

As a mom, Karen Cooper said she can't provide enough praise for L'Arche and the home it provides for her daughter.

"To me, it really means a quality of life for Kristina," she said.