

Offering Hospitality during the pandemic: StFX Wellspring Centre

The walls of the sunbathed former chapel at Wellspring Centre, on the second floor of Morrison Hall at StFX University, are decorated with inspirational stories about the centre from students and Sisters. It is clear from these stories that, for the last 25 years, Wellspring has been offering an oasis experience on campus. Students describe it as a safe, calming, and peaceful space to relax, study and socialize – be with friends and meet new people. Many mention the welcoming kitchenette with cookies and fresh coffee and tea, comfy couches and chesterfields for napping, warm afghan blankets, cozy slippers... a home-like experience created by the Sisters of St. Martha who are running the Centre.



Sisters Catherine Arsenault and Theresa Parker

In the academic year 2020-2021, things are different at Wellspring. The centre is open 9-5 daily, but the afghans and slippers are locked away, kitchenette is not accessible, and socializing cannot really happen with all the COVID-19 protocols and restrictions in place. Yet Wellspring, with its 41 study pods, remains a place of hospitality and welcome. The students cherish their time there – this has not changed even during the pandemic.



Thanks to the efforts of the Marthas, the Wellspring Advisory Committee, and university administrators, the Centre could open in October 2020 – with a new set of rules as dictated by NS Health Authority. The space was rearranged to accommodate social distancing, its capacity lowered, and occupancy monitored through a guestbook to provide contact tracing. It is thoroughly cleaned and sanitized daily, no food or drinks can be served, handwashing protocols are in place, and mask wearing is obligatory at all times.

Sisters Catherine Arsenault and Theresa Parker, who are in charge of the Wellspring Centre during the COVID-19 pandemic, make sure students observe social distancing and wear masks. Both find the lack of kitchenette challenging, as it provided a wonderful space for good conversation where they would be able to chat with students coming for a refill, to warm up their food or snack on the goodies. They miss seeing student faces and the usual social activities of the Centre. None of the after-hours activities such as tutoring, or group meetings are possible this year. Wellspring is much quieter, and, because of that, students focus more on studying separately.

With smaller university enrollment this year, students taking many online courses and living in separate rooms, the Centre sees about 20 students daily, much less than usual, and almost no faculty.

Claya Way-Brackenbury, a StFX student, appreciates the home-like atmosphere of Wellspring Centre where she comes to study almost every day of the week, even though she has her own room in the residence. She has been a regular visitor before the pandemic too and she agrees things are different, mostly in terms of the social aspect of the centre. She understands that Sisters may feel limited in terms of their ability to give to students within COVID-19 guidelines, but, for her, the overall cozy and comfortable vibe is still very much alive at Wellspring, despite the restrictions. Spending time in this comfortable space, gives her perspective and calms her down whenever she feels stressed out. Claya also thoroughly enjoys her interactions with the Sisters, welcoming contact with older people on a campus full of youngsters.

Shauna Graveson, another StFX student, has only discovered Wellspring this year, so she doesn't know what it was before the pandemic. But when she compares it to



Claya Way-Brackenbury studying at Wellspring

other study spaces on campus, she appreciates the relaxed atmosphere where even the strict pandemic rules such as social distancing and mask-wearing, feel more natural than elsewhere. She gets away from the activities of her residence to enjoy the dynamics and comforts of Wellspring.

Despite the challenges of staying open during COVID-19, Sr. Catherine and Sr. Theresa, much like the students, are very happy that Wellspring Centre is open this year.

“The Wellspring is a treasured destination on the StFX campus where students enjoy warm hospitality in a comfortable, calm and safe space where they feel cared for and welcome. StFX students have shown incredible resilience during this global pandemic, however, the Wellspring and the Sisters of St. Martha provide all who enter that friendly support and encouragement that we can all benefit from in difficult times. We are all very grateful for the Sisters’ dedication, service and kindness”.

~ Elizabeth Yeo,
Vice President Students, StFX

