We are nothing without our volunteers. They are the core of what we do in our member centres. Nominees for the Spirit of Volunteerism Recognition – in memory of Rev. Chad Varah - donate their time and talents in many ways within their centres, including as call responders, mentors, Board members, fundraisers, trainers. This year we have 16 volunteers who exemplify the true Spirit of Volunteerism. The SOV Review Committee is pleased to introduce this year’s nominees and recipients.

Please join us in congratulating this year’s Nominees & Recipients

Josh Adler
DISTRESS CENTRES TORONTO, NORTH

Distress Centres Toronto knows that they’ve got a great volunteer when they say they take “great comfort in knowing that Josh can handle any situation…and he does.” Soon after Josh began volunteering at the Toronto centre, staff saw that he was “a natural” with a gift for emotionally connecting with callers without losing sight of the practical needs of service users. He is very personable and friendly with a warm sense of humour, and treats fellow volunteers and staff with respect.

With almost 600 volunteer hours donated to the centre during his five years volunteering, Josh demonstrates cooperation, creativity, enthusiasm, leadership, flexibility, and willingness to help. He has been a regular call-taker and a volunteer mentor and peer trainer, and Josh also takes calls on the EMS Warm Transfer Line and was selected to take calls on the TTC Crisis Link program. Excellent training for his next professional goal: to become a police officer.

Kristen Carpenter | Young Adult Volunteer
DISTRESS CENTRE NIAGARA

After only one year at Distress Center Niagara, Kristen has volunteered 180 hours in several different capacities. Kristen is skilled, consistent, and reliable on the phone lines, she is always interested in further volunteer opportunities and additional training.

Kristen helps with community information sessions, ASIST, and attends DCO webinars. She completed her DCO Learning Forums training to improve her skills and expand her knowledge.

Kristen is a sincere and compassionate person who has a genuine desire to support callers. She is pursuing a career as a police officer and sees her time with DC Niagara as a way to better her communication and hone her people skills. Staff at the Niagara centre say that Kristen is “a great inspiration to all of us, and a reminder of what hard work, dedication, and compassion can do for our community.”

“Volunteering at Distress Centre Niagara has been extremely life changing for me,” Kristen says, “As much as we help people in distress and/or crisis, they have helped me. Being on the lines and volunteering at events as a Community and Emotional Supporter has helped me become a better person.”

Alycia Clarke
DISTRESS CENTRES TORONTO - DOWNTOWN

Hailing from Edmonton, Alycia spent time in Alberta working for charities like Ronald McDonald House and the YMCA, where she was involved with fundraising to support homelessness and mental health awareness. She studied in a Masters of Counselling Psychology program and began to council people in her community on various issues. Through this work, Alycia discovered her passion for supporting children with mental health challenges. She is now completing a certificate in child and play therapy, and works as a tutor and mentor to young children.

Her work with the Distress Centres began in 2012, and clocking 500 hours between everything she does, Alycia is one of DC Toronto’s most valued and reliable volunteers.
She is known for her warm and friendly personality, has engaging conversations with callers, and takes calls on the PARO Helpline, a service that provides emotional and mental health support to residents, medical students, and their families. With a calm and empathetic demeanor, Alycia was chosen for the TTC Crisis Link program and the EMS Warm Transfer Line, which provides compassionate care and support to suicidal callers awaiting the arrival of an ambulance. Her nominators see her as a strong and deserving candidate for the SOV awards.

Jana Crawford  
DISTRESS CENTRES TORONTO - DOWNTOWN

Jana is an impactful volunteer with a long history of donating time to issues she cares about. She began to volunteer in her last year of university where she acted as a mentor to new students, and did so well that she received the Award for Outstanding Peer Advisor or Mentor.

After graduation, Jana volunteered at the Jean Tweed Centre, an agency that helps women living with addictions, where she helped clients through the recovery process. Here, Jana co-facilitated group discussions about addiction and recovery related topics, such as communication and self-esteem, as well as building life skills. Jana has also volunteered with the Annex Cat Rescue, an organization that facilitates the fostering and adoptions of homeless or abandoned cats.

In the fall of 2012, Jana has volunteered at the Distress Centres Toronto and has given 500 hours of service. Her compassion comes through when she picks up the phone, and she is skilled at recognizing the signs of distress and supports de-escalation. Through her experiences at Jane Tweed and DCO, Jana says that she has learned about resilience and that with the right supports, people can overcome even the most challenging of obstacles.

Christine Cunningham  
DISTRESS CENTRE DURHAM

“Volunteering is such a natural part of Christine that she often extends this genuine kindness and care to our volunteers,” explains Christine’s 2015 SOV nominator.

Christine has volunteered with DC Durham since 2013 and has given almost 300 hours of her time to people in need, callers and volunteers alike. She makes a fantastic Group Leader and many new volunteers feel so comfortable and supported around her, that Christine has developed into a Shift Mentor to support and guide new volunteers who feel nervous on their first few calls.

She loves to give an empathetic ear to callers and values being part of her community. “I am so grateful that I have the opportunity to listen to people’s stories and that they trust me to share how they are feeling,” Christine says.

She graduates from Durham College’s Social Service worker program in April 2015, with career interests in areas of addictions and mental health.

“I love working and volunteering in the community and getting to know the people that I serve through volunteering or social service work,” she says.

Kendra Eaton  
DISTRESS CENTRE DURHAM

In less than two years, Kendra has volunteered 500 hours to her centre’s 24-Hour Helpline alone. Kendra welcomes new volunteers as a Shift Mentor and because of her generosity DC Durham has been able to recruit many new volunteers. She attends orientation sessions, organizes volunteers as a Group Leader, and helps out with social events for volunteers. Kendra is a volunteer that really creates and contributes to the positive environment at the centre.

Her calls are filled with empathy and genuine care for whatever a caller may be going through, but Kendra has experienced “some of the most serious and scary emergency calls out of all our volunteers,” her nomination says. With each of them, she was calm and empathetic, followed centre procedures, and empowered the caller to make healthy decisions.

“To me,” Kendra says, “volunteering means that you’re able to do something that you’re passionate about with no expectation of payment. In the end, the biggest reward (for me) is that I know that I’ve done everything I can to make a small difference in this world even if no one else can see it.”

Jessie Hernder | Young Adult Volunteer  
DISTRESS CENTRE NIAGARA

Jessie is very likeable with a great sense of humour and brings honesty and a positive presence to DC Niagara. On calls, she is empathetic and caring, and is said to do an “outstanding” job on the crisis lines. Jessie is one of DC Niagara’s “most dedicated, helpful, reliable and consistent volunteers.”

Working with volunteers is where Jessie really shines. Now in her second year volunteering, she is a senior trainer and mentor and helps transition new volunteers from in-class training to the crisis lines. Her patience, understanding, and knowledge make her a natural in this role. Before and after her shifts, Jessie takes the time to share ideas and listen to volunteers who need to debrief calls.

Now in her third year of Health Science at Brock University, this long-time dancer and teacher finds interest in the mental health field. Through her experience at Distress Centre Niagara, Jessie has become a part of the Youth Net program through the Niagara Region Public Health, and will travel to Peru as a Student Leader to engage students in health campaigns through Solidarity Experiences Abroad.
Esme Hurst
DISTRESS CENTRES TORONTO – DOWNTOWN

“Esme Hurst is an incredibly compassionate, committed and supportive volunteer that has decided to follow the tragedy of the loss of her 15 year-old son, with a passionate career in volunteering,” writes her 2015 SOV nomination.

What Esme brings to Distress Centres Toronto is truly incredible. She is a grief facilitator in the Survivor Support Program and provides individualized grief support to other survivors of suicide loss. She is often asked to share parts of her own journey from tragedy to healing and willingly offers elements of her survivor experience.

For four of her six years at her agency, Esme has sat on the board of directors; she’s a spokesperson for DC Toronto, and has contributed to the well-being of her centre through involvement on many committees. Of particular note is her work in fundraising; Esme participates regularly in key centre events (i.e. the B.A.D. Ride) and has created her own fundraising events: a golf tournament and an art auction. She also mentors new volunteers, arranges meetings with survivors, and in all her activities she contributes to the well being of the agency.

“Esme does things with a high standard that reflects the importance she puts on her role and the impact it can have on those receiving help.”

Carol Jarvi
SPECTRA COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES

Many years ago Carol saw an advertisement in her doctor’s waiting room for the distress line. She decided to do the training and volunteer for a year. Sixteen years and over 4,000 volunteer hours later, Carol continues in her role and her gentle tone and friendly approach on the phone makes callers feel comfortable.

She joined the organization when it was Telecare Distress Line and has witnessed the spectrum of calls change from lonely and isolated community callers with Telecare, to more demanding challenges as modern life changed. At Spectra, Carol now finds herself taking calls related to mental health concerns, relationship issues, and traumatic life events.

Carol is one of those volunteers whose contributions form the backbone of her organization because she specializes in overnight and holiday shifts. She was recognized last year at a Volunteer Dinner for completing the most overnight shifts. Carol says that this is the time when people who are ill, lonely, or distressed need the phone line. “I feel that when I gift our callers with my time, I am trying to support our communities,” she says.

Staff at Spectra say that “Carol’s support couples compassionate empathy with an approach that encourages callers to empower themselves and make necessary changes toward well-being.”

Roy Purgavie
DISTRESS CENTRE OAKVILLE

In his three years at DC Oakville, Roy “has had a huge impact;” he provides excellent support to all clients, he’s trained in TeleCheck and Crisis Chat, and he’s taken on the extra leadership roles of Trainer and Mentor. Roy also freely volunteers his time to help with events and fundraisers, including the centre’s 2013 and 2014 golf fundraisers.

“Volunteering at Distress Centre Oakville has been a most humbling and rewarding experience for me,” Roy says, “more rewarding than any other type of volunteering I have done.”

In 2013, Roy suggested an idea for a Mentor Program for new volunteers and helped create the program with trainers and staff. The training program was put in place last spring, and since that time, the program has expanded and has received a lot of positive feedback from both new and long-term volunteers. Roy is an excellent unofficial ambassador for the centre raising awareness with friends and colleagues, encouraging them to join the volunteer team.

Roy has also co-facilitated workshops and his creative approach has generated positive feedback from volunteers. Together with his co-facilitator, Trish Feehan, Listening Without Judgement includes a set of humorous role plays, where the facilitators act out all the wrong things to do when responding to calls – very popular with volunteers!

Taimour Salama
DISTRESS CENTRE DURHAM

When Taimour began to volunteer with DC Durham in the Fall of 2013, it was clear that he was truly passionate and committed to helping people in a significant way. In just over one year, Taimour has donated over 500 hours to Durham’s 24-Hour Helpline. This doesn’t even include all the time he has volunteered for centre events like RibFest, Walk for Suicide Awareness, and all the volunteer social events he enjoys. Taimour is one engaged volunteer!

Along with his work in these areas, Taimour also generously donates his time to support the Online Chat and Text program, and helped demonstrate the texting system at the Distress Centre Ontario Spring Conference.

He is a role play trainer and, as a new member of DC Durham’s Mentor Team, Taimour looks forward to welcoming new volunteers to the centre, and mentoring and supporting them on their first calls and shifts.

“There’s no better feeling knowing that I’m a part of a group of people that care so much about the well-being of others,” he says, “I love volunteering with Distress Centre Durham and truly enjoy being part of such a great community.”
Brian Sequira
SPECTRA COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES

Brian has volunteered at Spectra Community Support Services for three years and within his time there, has demonstrated his compassion towards everyone he comes into contact with: callers, staff, and fellow volunteers. He’s a reliable person, always willing to go the extra mile to help the agency in any way he can.

As a regular facilitator at Information Sessions, Brian encourages potential volunteers to get involved with Spectra and support their community. He is considered a “great asset” to Spectra, and tries to cover as many shifts as he can during the Christmas holiday period because he knows that callers are waiting for his listening ear.

Atif Siddiqui | Young Adult Volunteer
SPECTRA COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES

This new Canadian has spent 470 hours of the last three years donating time to Spectra and supporting his community while he finished his BA Honours in Political Science at York University. Atif is in his second year as a Volunteer Mentor and has volunteered over 50 hours to offer insight and support to new volunteers as they adapt to the helplines themselves and support vulnerable populations in Peel. Atif loves to help people get through their day and let them know that there are people who care.

“Atif is integral to our community,” Atif says, “It provides non-judgemental listening and empathetic support to people of every age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality.”

Communication is important to Atif and he likes to communicate with many diverse groups of people. “Spectra allowed me to express myself the best way I know how – through communication,” Atif explains, “Communicating with people is a skill which I am constantly improving each time I am on the lines.”

Atif also volunteers at Safe City Mississauga where he raises awareness about making the city a safer place to live. He visits public school open houses to communicate to children and parents about bullying, vandalism, and educational programs.

Avinash Sudama
DISTRESS CENTRES TORONTO - SCARBOROUGH

Avinash is a father of three, has a Diploma with Honours in Community and Justice Services, and a degree from the University of Ontario in Criminology and Justice Services; he is a long-time volunteer in his community where he began to donate time first to Variety Village, and now to the Toronto Distress Centre in Scarborough.

He takes calls on the distress line, and “through his soothing, comforting voice and his gift of emotional stability, Avinash is able to provide a sense of hope and empower callers during their time of need and desperation,” his nomination says. He gives callers a sense of purpose and allows them to have a voice and acknowledge their ability to effectively handle life’s difficult situations themselves.

In 2012, Avinash became a part of his centre’s mentoring team as a shift supervisor, and has mentored many new volunteers with “professionalism and expertise.” He’s so good at what he does and creates such excitement among fellow volunteers, that it’s no wonder new volunteers book their shifts in advance just to work with him.

Telecheck Volunteer Team
TORCHLIGHT - WELLINGTON, DUFFERIN COUNTY

Telecheck’s daily call-out check-in is delivered 365 days a year by a team of dedicated volunteers who provide the utmost in active, compassionate listening to make a difference in the lives of community members who receive daily calls to support their safety and sustain independent living.

Volunteers on the Telecheck team range in service from a year to over ten years, and the team is motivated to develop and support a second afternoon/evening shift in addition to the existing morning shift so the service is expanded to people 55 + who wish a daily call-out. This year alone, Telecheck made 25,000 calls and has been recognized by the Central West Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) with funding to support the extended coverage.

“Our TeleCheck volunteers make their contribution an integral part of their lives and consider their commitment to the program and the people we support of long-term and ongoing importance — ensuring that the time and effort they give to the program is a priority for each and every one of them.”

Amy Vandewouw | Young Adult Volunteer
TELEPHONE AID LINE KINGSTON (TALK)

In her 5.5 years volunteering at TALK, Amy has racked up an incredible 700 volunteer hours, a total surpassing every other active volunteer (by 200 hours!). Amy is a multiple recipient of TALK’s “ABCD” (Above and Beyond the Call of Duty) award, equivalent to a Volunteer of the Month award. She was also Kingston’s Executive MVP for 2014 that recognized her work and dedication to her centre.

Amy has accepted multiple leadership roles at TALK; she is a “back-up” member who provides support to distress line volunteers during high-risk suicide calls, and made significant contributions in her role as TALK’s Coordinator of Quality Assurance where she was instrumental in updating her centre’s policies for handling suicide calls and implementing the changes to TALK’s volunteer base.

In this role, Amy completely revamped suicide policies, heavily influence by the ASIST manual, and created an intervention process for volunteers to follow – a long overdue change. She ran the affiliated training sessions to educate current volunteers about the new intervention strategy, and made herself available to answer any and all questions about these new policies.