

# 'INCLUSION NEEDS TO BE DEEPER'

CHURCH MAKES MEANINGFUL CHANGES ON WAY TO 'AFFIRMING' STATUS

KATHY YANCHUS

kyanchus@metroland.com

Initially, the congregation's reaction was, "Why?"

"Why are we doing this, we are already welcoming, what is the big deal?" recalled Judy DeMone, co-chair of a committee that has worked over the past two years toward an affirming status for St. Paul's United Church.

"Being welcoming suggests that those on the inside have the power to choose who to accept on the outside. This makes it sound like an act of charity to welcome



Graham Paine/Metroland

From left, Judy DeMone, Thea Sheridan-Jonah, Minister Carolyn Smith and Minister Deborah Laforet were among those who worked to make St. Paul's an affirming ministry of the United Church of Canada.

those who are different," said DeMone. "We have always been a welcoming, friendly church, but being affirming goes deeper and we want to be public, intentional and explicit in our commitment to diversity and inclusion."

DeMone's co-chair, 17-year-old Thea Sheridan-Jonah, said she didn't understand in the beginning that her church was not ready to call itself affirming.

"I go back and notice the little things - the baptism script that laid out one part for a mom and one

part for a dad, the gendered wash-room signs all across our building, the songs that referred to people as just 'sister and brother,' and so many other little actions that we did not understand to be exclusive," said Sheridan-Jonah.

To become an affirming congregation, there is an educational process and several steps to be completed, supported by Affirm United.

"It was an understanding that saying we are welcoming is not enough, putting up a flag or

plaque is not enough. We need to do the real work of allyship and learning, so that every member of our community understands that every person must not only be welcomed, but affirmed and involved fully," said Sheridan-Jonah.

Today, the Rebecca Street church has gender-inclusive bathrooms and Scripture, policies and a website that have been adjusted to omit gendered wording.

"More importantly, we have made connections into our community to people who benefit and need the work that affirming churches do and we hope to continue working with all the people we have connected to," said Sheridan-Jonah.

"St. Paul's is not affirmed, we are affirming. It is a verb. It is something we will continue to learn about, to adapt and grow. We have come really far in two years, but this process is not over - it is just beginning, and we cannot be more excited."

For Sheridan-Jonah, the process was a transitional one.

"I never knew how much I would grow, how much I would learn, and how much I needed

this process. This process was about and for the person who has been excluded from churches their whole life, the person who has never felt safe in churches, who can walk into our church and see a rainbow flag, see our affirming vision statement, inclusive marriage policy and gender-inclusive bathrooms, and know that even if the space is still learning, it is at least trying.

"We needed to understand that inclusion needs to be deeper, it needs to be not only inviting people to the pews on Sunday morning, but inviting them to lead Sunday school, be in choir, come to the Saturday night potluck, and actively change our space to include them."

Part of the church's multifold action plan includes expanding its outreach, said DeMone.

Both co-chairs praised ministers Deborah Laforet and Carolyn Smith, who shared their passion and played an "active and supportive role in our journey," said DeMone.

"I believe this is essential to making this a meaningful change and not just a flag we fly or a plaque on the wall," said DeMone.

AROMA  
KITCHENS & BATHS INC.

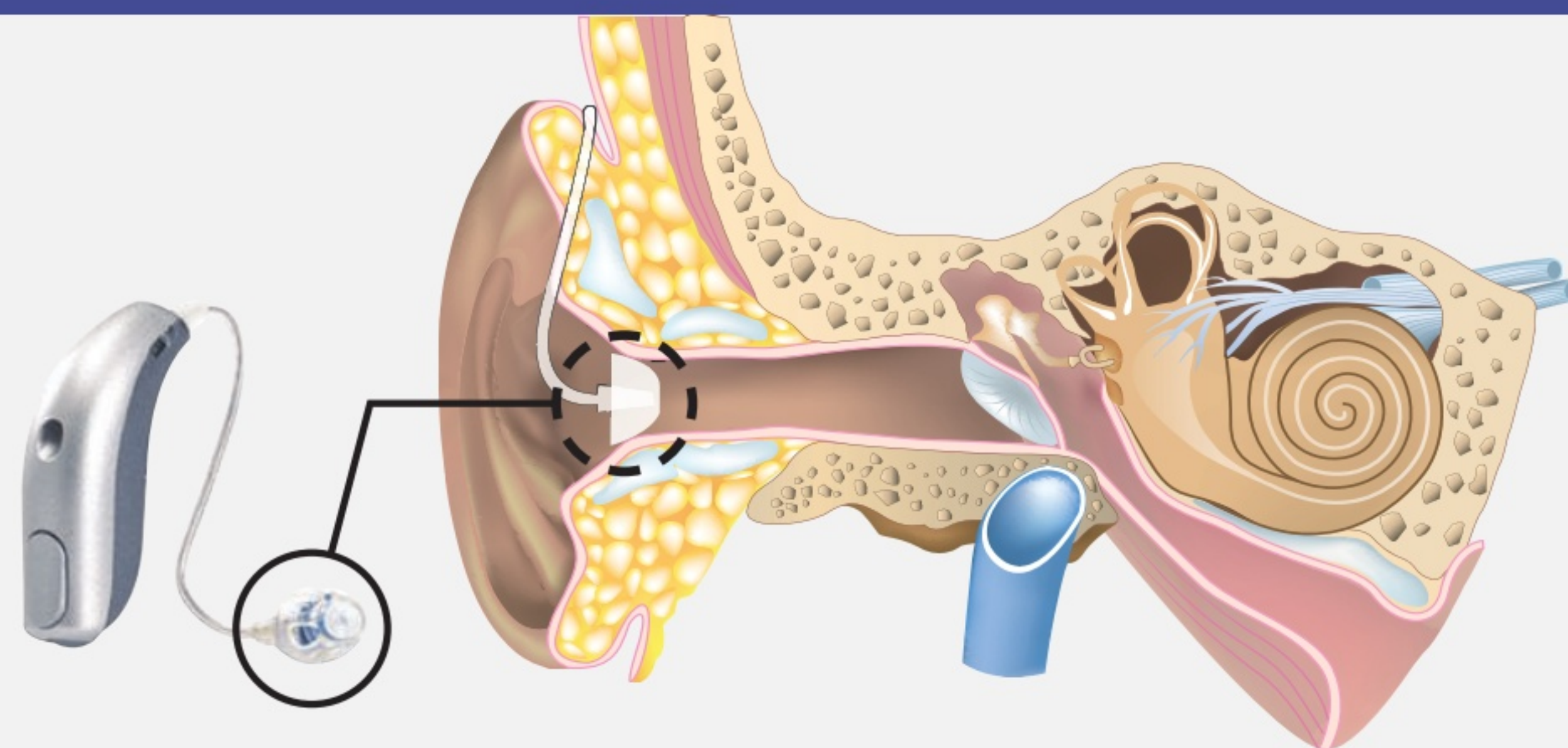


- 25+ Years Experience 100% Canadian Made Cabinetry Quality Craftsmanship
- Custom Made Kitchen & Bathroom Cabinetry
- Closet Systems • Entertainment Units
- Basement Renovations • Full Renovations & More!

Visit Our 6,000 sq.ft. Design Centre:  
Units 2-3, 333 Wycroft Rd., Oakville

905.844.3332 | www.aromakitchens.ca • info@aromakitchens.ca

## WANTED 20 PEOPLE WANTED FOR A FREE HEARING AID TRIAL



### Take the first step towards better hearing.

Schedule an appointment with one of our hearing professionals and try the latest advanced or premium digital hearing aids\* during a **free 14-day trial**. Our hearing professionals will perform a **FREE** hearing assessment and fit you with hearing aids suited to your loss. **FREE trial offer ends February 26<sup>th</sup> 2021.**

**Bronte** | 2419 Marine Drive  
Call Debbie at **1-877-731-8171**

**HEARING SCIENCES**  
Audiology and Hearing Aid Centre

A comprehensive hearing assessment is provided to adults ages 19 and older at no cost. The results of this assessment will be communicated verbally to you. If you request a copy of the Audiological Report, a fee will apply. Child hearing tests are conducted at select locations for a fee, please contact us for more information. Offer not valid in Quebec. [1] <https://www.oticon.ca/hearing-aid-users/hearing-aids/products/opn-s>

Promo Code **NSP-HATL-OAKB**