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“PHENOMENAL” TURNOUT WELCOMES CLARA



A huge crowd of up to 1,000 people turned out Sunday to welcome Canadian Olympian and six-time medalist Clara Hughes to Deep River Sunday night. Hughes was visiting as part of her “Clara’s Big Ride” to spread awareness of mental health issues. For more, see pages 4-5. Photo: Terry Myers



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A handful of supporters lined Highway 17 in Point Alexander Sunday to welcome six-time Olympic medalist Clara Hughes as she neared Deep River for a stopover on her "Clara's Big Ride." Deep River was day 108 of her 110-day journey around Canada.

Photo: Steve D'Eon

Community welcomes 'Clara's Big Ride'

"THIS IS PHENOMENAL"

BY TERRY MYERS

"Totally inspired" - and totally inspiring.

A huge crowd - estimated at close to 1,000 people - turned out Sunday night to welcome six-time Olympic medalist Clara Hughes to Deep River's Riverbank Park.

The visit was part of "Clara's Big Ride," an 11,000 km cycling odyssey around Canada that Hughes began in Toronto back on March 29.

After a journey that has taken her to the east coast, west across Canada's north, south again to Vancouver, and then across the Rockies and prairies back to Ontario, the stop in Deep River was the end of day 108 of Clara's 110-day ride, and she arrived in town after cycling 177 km from North Bay in temperatures that hit 33C.

The purpose of Clara's ride has been to help erase the stigma around mental health issues, and she declared herself "totally inspired" by the welcome she received at the waterfront.

"This is phenomenal," she said, looking out at the hillside covered with supporters.

"This is so beautiful, and what have we come here for? It's not the Olympics, it's not me - it's this.

"This is community, it's joy, it's struggle, it's the human condition.

"This is so beautiful and I am going to cry."

Hughes said every community on her journey has been "so special."

"We've seen how people everywhere have come together for mental health, but I have to say, you guys have blown everything we have seen out of the water," she said.

"We've been on the receiving end of incredible energy and support (throughout the ride), but I don't think in my wildest dreams I could have imagined rolling into Deep River and seeing all of you."

In a 40-minute appearance, Hughes was charming, funny, engaging and completely passionate about the cause behind her ride.

She said her Deep River welcome made her feel "totally, utterly, completely" inspired to "never ever stop" to pursue her dream of a Canada where mental illness is dealt with openly, that "there is a Canada that doesn't stigma attached to mental illness, that there is not a person struggling in silence."

"This is the most beautiful display of humanity I've seen in the last 108 days, and I am so thankful you have given it to us."

"Please know that this is not something that affects people from a certain part of town, or a certain kind of personality, or a colour of skin, or colour of hair.

"This affects so many of us, and you are not alone.

"So many people are dealing with this and not talking about it," she said.

Hughes urged anyone struggling with a mental health issue to talk about it.

"You don't have to get in front of a whole crowd - it can be just one person - it can be anyone."

As the spokesperson for the "Bell Let's Talk" campaign

for the past four years and throughout her ride, Hughes has been open in speaking about her own struggles with depression.

She said "movement" and exercise is one of the ways she deals with her issues.

"It changes the tone of my brain every single day."

But some days her goal is just to get up and take a shower, "because I know that will make me feel better." Hughes said talking to someone about your personal struggle "gets it outside of yourself."

"I can tell you, the first time I talked about going through depression, it was so liberating," she said.

"So you can turn what you think is a weakness into incredible strength by opening up, even if it is to just one person."

Hughes' appearance at the waterfront was the end of a day of activities, including displays on services available for those struggling with mental health.

Hughes said she hopes the community continues to show its support for the cause.

"You don't need me or us to come into your community for this to happen, for this incredible energy," she said.

"This whole thing here, this is what starts to erase the stigma and the judgement that happens when someone is struggling to deal with mental illness.

"It is understanding, it is education, it is connecting, it is compassion, it is patience and it is togetherness and it is community.

"This is the most beautiful display of humanity I've seen in the last 108 days, and I am so thankful you have given it to us.

"Please don't ever stop coming together," she said.

"When you come together, you can do anything and when you come together, there's not one person who feels that they're alone."

Hughes thanked Shawna Babcock and Susan Patterson, the community champions for “Clara’s Big Ride” and principal organizers of the day’s events.

“This is because of you, because of the circle of strength you created to bring this community together,” she said.

And Hughes was thanked in turn for her visit by Mayor David Thompson, who said the need for mental health services in Renfrew County is great.

“Our friends and neighbours at CFB Petawawa deal with mental health issues every day,” he said.

“But here amongst us as well, many of our families, including my own, deal with the daily struggles of mental health.

“Through the courage of Clara and her ride, we are lifting the stigma and making it a conversation, and for that I thank you.”

Hughes spoke briefly to the local media after her appearance, saying again that she was inspired by the welcome she had received.

“At this point in the ride, when I am exhausted, covered in heat rash, I don’t know how I’m going to pedal my bike tomorrow - and I don’t want to leave because there is this incredible warmth here.”

What would she say to those who still struggle to find the strength to come forward for help?

“Don’t try to do it alone, don’t try to get better alone, don’t think you can,” she said.

“I tried and I lost two years of my life.

“Nobody can get through it alone, so please know that there is help, there is hope and there is someone you can talk to and that is the first step.”

In her own journey, Hughes said it has been her husband Peter who has been her greatest support.

“He is the most incredible person I know,” she said.

“He’s had patience with me, he’s always had confidence in me and he has always encouraged me to get help.

“To this day, including many days on this ride, there are times when he’ll say you need to talk to your psychologist.”

Hughes said that help and support is “something I’ll need for the rest of my life, and I’m OK with that.”

“I didn’t win Olympic medals alone and you don’t do this (ride) alone either.

“Struggle is struggle and you need help to get through it, including someone like me or anyone else who’s had success who struggles.

“Because no matter how many medals I’ve won, it’s not going to help me if I go into that dark place, believe me.”

Hughes continued her “Big Ride” Monday, riding to Arnprior before heading into Ottawa Tuesday.

“I am no different than any other Canadian”

Clara Hughes spoke on the importance of breaking the stigma around mental health issues and her welcome in Deep River during her appearance at Riverbank Park Sunday:

I’ve gone through it, my family has gone through it, my sister and my father.

It’s something that is my home, not just hits close to home, and I am no different than any other Canadian.

This is something that affects every single one of us, not just the one out of five who struggles but the four out of five who care about the person who is struggling and sometimes don’t know what to do.

Today you’ve been able to find out what’s available in this community, what is available in terms of resources, what is happening to help people, and we have learned a little bit about that too, and I can tell you we are totally, totally inspired by your lead.



Clara Hughes and “host” Derek Forgie speak at the Deep River waterfront Sunday.



MEDAL LOVE: Six lucky youngsters got a chance to see what it felt like to wear one of Clara Hughes' six Olympic medals during Clara's visit to Deep River's Riverside Park Sunday night. And, how does it feel? "I want one," said Kaitlyn Grozelle.

Photos: Terry Myers