

# A Very Special School

## Learning to strive at the Galileo Adult Education Centre

Tucked into the heart of Montreal's northeast-end is a school that is breaking boundaries and creating opportunities for adults with intellectual and physical challenges. The Galileo Adult Education Centre is a home away from home for the 93 students and staff who are part of its Social Integration Services Program (SIS). Martina Schiavone, who has been principal of the school for the past six years, says most of the students and staff at Galileo have an Italian background. It's quite obvious - from the cannoli-laden platter in the conference room, to the tricolore hanging in the entrance, to the smell of pizza baking in the school's kitchen - that Italians are running the show here. "This school is more than a place where I come to work everyday; it's my home," explains Schiavone. "My students are like my kids. My teachers, janitors, secretaries are my family. I want to make sure that all those who come here are fed, are happy and that their hearts are taken care of."

It's a grand mission - but one that Schiavone and her staff are succeeding at against all odds.

The students enrolled in Galileo's SIS program range in age from 21 to 65 years old, and they each face unique challenges, including Autism, Down syndrome, Aphasia and Sensory Processing Disorder, among others. The staff here is tasked with teaching more than just ABCs and 123s - they are working to help their students attain the basic social skills that will enable them to live their best lives. One of the classrooms is equipped with a washer and dryer so students can learn how to do laundry; there are oversized images of dollar bills and coins tacked onto a bulletin board so students can learn how to count money; there is a pet therapy room where students can interact with animals. The staff even took some students on a field trip to New York City two years ago - a first travel experience for many of them. "We are always trying to do more for our students here, to push the boundaries because we know that they are capable," says Schiavone, 41. "Sometimes, even their parents don't know how capable they are. But we know that if we just expose them to new things, if we just believe in them, they come out of their shells and they are so happy and proud."

Art is also a big aspect of the curriculum at Galileo. Anna Persichilli is an art teacher at the school. Today, she is showing her class an image of a Mondrian painting and asking them to discuss what they're seeing. She says it's a way to get her students, many of which have a hard time verbalizing emotions, to

express their feelings. One student says the painting makes him feel bored, another says it makes her sad; others are correctly naming the primary colours in the painting - an achievement in itself. "I am teaching my students college and university level material but I just come at it from a different angle. It's a way to teach them about history and art, and it also helps them relate to the artwork," explains Persichilli, 43. "My biggest frustration is when people treat my students like children because I know that they can grasp complex ideas and concepts. They just need to be given the chance."

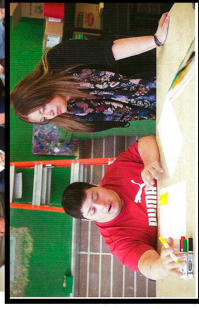
Paola Guiducci has been attending the Galileo school for more than a decade. The 33-year-old is bright and bubbly and she loves to read. She lists participating in the school play as one of her biggest accomplishments. "I was narrator in the school play and my parents and my brother, Dario, came to watch. They were so proud of me," she says, beaming. "It made me feel proud and happy that I did it."

Guiducci was born five weeks premature and had to undergo numerous brain surgeries and have a shunt placed in her brain after contracting bacterial meningitis in the hospital. But despite the intellectual and physical difficulties she faces, Guiducci's mother, Olga Pazzia-Guiducci, attests to the leaps and bounds her daughter has grown in recent years at Galileo. "Paola is a lot more confident now. It's a real comfort knowing that she's there because when our kids reach a certain age, there are less and less services available for them," explains Pazzia-Guiducci, 60. "Places like Galileo are amazing because they make us feel like our kids belong somewhere. We are working hard to plan a future for Paola, and I am so glad the people at Galileo are there to support us."

The strong Italian community-oriented atmosphere at the school is also very encouraging for parents like Pazzia-Guiducci. "Many of our parents are older Italians who have trouble speaking French and English," explains Persichilli. "The fact that I can call a parent and let them know, in Italian, that their child didn't eat today or is having issues at school, this makes them feel comfortable. They feel like their child is in a good place, that they're home." Persichilli says students will often call her during the summer break and ask her to accompany them to concerts or trips to La Ronde. "It's easier because we're all Italian...but sometimes it's like Sunday lunch where everybody is screaming at each other," she jokes.



LIFE & PEOPLE



Anna Persichilli and Chiara Parisi with student

Speaking of lunch, the Galileo kitchen is the heart of the school. It's a bright, state-of-the-art facility equipped with stainless steel appliances and an enormous lunch counter. It's a welcoming hangout for students and staff at all hours of the day. Ralph Canella and Dieter Baape are two of the facilitators who help run the kitchen and regularly churn out homemade pizza, bread, pasta and other dishes. "Our students love being in the kitchen," says Canella. "It gives them some working skills; they learn how to chop and clean, how to interact with others in a working environment. The goal is to give them skills they can use to get a job."

“The students at the Galileo Adult Education Centre, most of whom are Italian, are learning to break boundaries.”

But there is much more than cooking and cleaning going on in the kitchen, according to principal Schiavone: "We have students in other areas of the building who are new immigrants to Canada learning how to speak English, and when they smell what's coming out of the Galileo kitchen they all gather here. Our students are learning how to interact with people and welcome them into their home."

Teacher Anna Persichilli adds, "Some of the students in the other areas are Syrian and they offer to teach us how to make couscous and we show them how to make gnocchi. It's amazing to see."

Despite all the boundaries that are being broken at the Galileo Adult Education Centre, there is one hurdle that many students have yet to overcome: getting a job. Schiavone says most employers are reluctant to hire people with intellectual and physical delays. "It would be great to see business owners in the Italian community give our students a chance. They are able to do remarkable things, given the opportunity."

**For more information about the Galileo Adult Education Centre check out their website at [www.gaec.ca](http://www.gaec.ca).**