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INSPIRATIONS

Promoting inclusion and mental well-being / Promouvoir l'inclusion et le mieux-être mental



AN ADULT EDUCATION CENTRE'S
ENTREPRENEURIAL PROJECT

ALL ABOUT GLIMMERS



Trouve ta voie participants enjoy a drumming workshop in July 2023 with the Zuruba Afro-Brazilian percussion troupe. See p. 19. Photo: Josiane Beauchamp

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Editor's message

Recently, an email arrived in my inbox with the title, "Music in Bloom." It conjured up a beautiful sensory mix of vibrant springtime colours in the purple crocus and bright yellow forsythia and sounds of spring like birdsong and rain. With this Spring edition of *Inspirations* comes our own focus on music integrated into our positive mental health section. Readers can learn about the benefits of music and the joys of a drumming workshop. Danika Swanson's mindfulness series continues with a focus on music, and the work of a musical trio makes up our Awesome series.

We would like to introduce our newest columnist, Jimena Marquez, who comes to share her informed viewpoints as project development officer with the English Montreal School Board to support Indigenous students in schools. In this edition, she writes about the importance of interconnectedness between animals and humans in Indigenous cultures.

This Spring, we invite you to participate in a readership survey. The data collected helps guide us to the kinds of content readers are interested in and ways we can continue to grow our positive mental health and well-being section. On p. 41, you will find out how you can participate.

As always, at our core, we strive to offer real and straight-up stories about people in the special needs community doing amazing things. Read about a summer arts camp that is expanding its programming for neurodiverse individuals, the growth of mobile working groups in adapted workspaces, a high school student with brittle bone disease who has found a passion in debating – and more.

Enjoy this edition.

— Kristin McNeill

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Collaboration and creativity drive this edition of *Inspirations*

This winter and spring we have been hosting two interns from Wagar Adult Education Centre's Computer Graphics program. Michelle Perron-Elgee and William Brinkman-Smith are creative, independent and always ready to pitch in. Over the past five months, they've produced multiple ads (many of which you will see in this edition) and flyers that have been posted on our social feeds. They've been instrumental in the creation and uploading of our new mental health and well-being directory, and updating our special needs database. We extend a big thank you to Michelle and William, and the whole *Inspirations* team for their outstanding work in creating this edition. Please check out our new mental health and well-being directory, hosted on our website. If you have a resource to share, let us know at info@inspirationsnews.com.

— Wendy Singer, managing editor



INSPIRATIONS

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'Student Whisperer,' Anna Gualtieri

by *Randy Pinsky*

Anna Gualtieri is known as the "Student Whisperer" at L.I.N.K.S. High School. Fiercely devoted to her students, Gualtieri was recognized as this edition's Difference Maker, an honour initiated by local fashion designer Simon Chang to recognize those in the special needs community who have gone above and beyond in their work.

One of Gualtieri's most popular initiatives is the Beauty Corner, where students can access free personal hygiene items such as toothbrushes and soap, and be surrounded by supportive messages of self-care and self-worth.

Principal Maria Caldarella announced Gualtieri's award before her students and colleagues at a surprise ceremony on March 26, attended by Chang and his business partner, Faye Swift. Chang was impressed with the idea of a Beauty Corner and, intrigued, wanted to see it for himself. "I was so touched, I did not see that coming," laughed Gualtieri.

L.I.N.K.S. is an alternative high school for students with mild to severe intellectual disabilities, providing them with individualized learning programs to thrive as contributing members in society.

Gualtieri's Beauty Corner walls are covered with affirmations such as, "I am smart, I am worthy, I am valued." Since starting this project, she has noticed an improvement in her students' confidence and self-worth.

"My goal is for them is to love who they are. If they walk away in June saying, 'I like' or 'I love myself,' then I've done my job," she said.

A teacher for almost two decades, Gualtieri returned to L.I.N.K.S. in 2017 after several years at John Grant High School. She has a knack for finding unconventional ways of helping her students develop skills and independence. One of the most popular extra-curricular clubs she animates is the S.A.S.S.Y (Student Advocacy Speaking for and Supporting You) student council. In her own classroom, Gualtieri ends the week with the highly anticipated Funny Debate Fridays. "Last week's topic was 'is a hotdog a sandwich?'" said Gualtieri. "They have a great time making up arguments and trying to convince the other side." Debating helps students frame their thoughts and respond quickly – critical skills the school encourages.

In the nomination, Caldarella stated, "Anna is a pillar of strength here at L.I.N.K.S. She helps our students become better versions of themselves."

Growing up, Gualtieri struggled with self-love and acceptance, so she says she can relate to her students who struggle with similar issues.

She is also a teacher in the Work-Oriented Training Path program in which students gain employment experiences through placements, while working towards receiving a PreWork Training Certificate from the Ministère de l'Éducation. This year, Gualtieri's students are working at the new student-run café Pause for Positivity, where

they develop marketable skills such as food prep and customer service. (See story, p. 34.) "Their specialty is grilled cheese sandwiches," she observed. "That's very popular among the clientele."

Student Riccardo Junior Celli congratulated Gualtieri on the award, saying, "You are truly the most amazing teacher ever. When I had Ms. Anna for my teacher, she changed me in a way where I was very shy. Now I can look at people while I speak to them and [have]...confidence...I want to say a big thank you."

Gualtieri's devotion to her students extends beyond the walls of the school to include holiday food drives, field trips and soccer games. Her healthy living approach is key for helping them "feel good and confident about themselves," as stated in the nomination.

"Anna Gualtieri's kindness, compassion and love has had a truly transformative impact on my son since he came under her care and guidance," shared parent Aidan Stewart. "Words can't describe how grateful I am for the awe-inspiring work she has done to help him – and countless other children."

In reflecting on this year's Difference Maker, Chang commented, "I am so impressed by Anna's devotion to her students and how she has been making a difference in their lives for so many years. Walking into the Beauty Corner that she has created is inspiring...What fortunate students they are!" ■

As a first step in supporting the Beauty Corner, Damar International donated furniture to enhance the space.

Nominate your Difference Maker at info@inspirationsnews.com.



From left, Ammi Moreno, Ahad Asif, Simon Chang, Jeth Anderson-Stewart, Anna Gualtieri, Kellie-Anne Labonté and Maria Caldarella celebrate the Difference Maker award at L.I.N.K.S. High School on March 26. Photo: Wendy Singer



From left: Valeria Szabo, Audrey Riley, Louise Panet-Raymond and Simon Chang get together prior to Art By The Water for a pre-event interview with City News at Chang's showroom on Chabanel St. on April 18.

Sensory bin project at Wagar supported by Art By The Water, Simon Chang

by *Wendy Singer*

Art By The Water is a yearly art exhibition held at the Beaconsfield Yacht Club that provides local artists the opportunity to show and sell their paintings.

The inaugural event in 2008 was such a success, with over 200 people in attendance and 40 paintings sold, that founder Audrey Riley and a few artist friends knew they had to continue. Art By The Water celebrated its 15th anniversary on the weekend of April 26 with an exhibition that included the works of 15 local artists.

“We started with six artists and now have expanded to include guest artists adding more variety every year. Our 15th show is extremely special to us, and I am so very proud of accomplishing a strong, friendly, popular art show,” said Riley, who works closely with her team of Valeria Szabo, Leslie Portsmouth and Michael Yeomans.

Each year, Art By The Water chooses a charity to be the recipient of a portion of proceeds from sales and donations received at the exhibition. This year's beneficiary is the Simon Chang Foundation for Change (SCFC), in celebration of Chang's 50 years in the fashion industry.

A few years ago, Chang visited Art By The Water. “It was so special just to know he was a visitor. I later picked up a copy of *Inspirations* and read about him. I was very interested in his foundation,” said Riley.

“Partnering with Simon Chang is extra special for us.”

Funds raised will support a large-scale sensory bin project at Wagar Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) under the leadership of Louise Panet-Raymond, Melanie Shields and Dominique Forgeard, all teachers in Wagar's Transition Program. The project is being championed by the school's administration team.

Sensory bins include a multitude of tools, such as stress balls and kinetic sand, which can help students self-regulate and concentrate. Other positives include reducing stress and anxiety, and improving fine motor skills, coordination and dexterity.

This sensory bin project was started two years ago at the EMSB's Parkdale Elementary School by teacher Cynthia Yee and behavioural technician Natalina Melillo. They guided their special needs students in the creation and assembly of sensory bins that they then gifted to all classrooms in the school. The SCFC was instrumental in supporting this project, which is now being replicated at Wagar on a larger scale with Yee's mentorship. It is anticipated that Sarah Kadoch, occupational therapist, and Natasha Glazer, Autism Spectrum Disorder consultant, both with the Student Services department of the EMSB, will also consult on this endeavour. “This project will help our students develop

John Caboto Academy welcomes neighbour Simon Chang

by *Wendy Singer*

John Caboto Academy (JCA) of the English Montreal School Board is located near Chabanel St. in Montreal. It is mere blocks away from Simon Chang's showroom, where he has worked for the majority of his illustrious 50-year career as a fashion designer.

This school year, Chang has proudly assumed the role of JCA's arts consultant. On regular visits, he encourages students with their various projects from sketches to creating pencil cases and to experimenting with different recipes in cooking class. Chang is always received with the warmest of welcome from students and staff alike.

Under the leadership of teachers Alba Cano-Juarez, Khalida Smahi, Jessica Attardo and Martine Brosseau, this budding initiative continues to grow with each of the designer's visits.

Chang has been impressed with the collaboration he sees in the classroom and how the students so easily help one another. “There's a friendliness at John Caboto that I really like,” said Chang.

On a visit to the school on March 28, Chang attended Smahi and Brosseau's Club les petits artisans, where he admired the pencil cases the students were sewing made with fabrics donated by Damar International, a Chabanel-area textile importer. “The students are encouraged to really think about their projects and have their own point of view. Every creation is unique,” he said.

Chang also helped create a delicious smoothie in Cano-Juarez' class and sat in on a Green Team meeting. ■

Stay tuned for more collaborations and art inspiration to come!



Students in Khalida Smahi's class at John Caboto Elementary School consult with Simon Chang on their pencil case project on March 28. In front: William. Back, from left: Smahi, students Jaden, Mahid, Emma, Hannah and Layla surround Simon Chang, third from right.

important work skills while still being in the supportive environment of Wagar,” said Panet-Raymond.

It is anticipated that the sensory bins will be distributed by Wagar students to elementary schools in the next school year.

“The teachers are very dedicated and I'm sure the students will greatly benefit from the bins. I think it is wonderful that Wagar students are involved. It's a win-win for everyone,” said Riley.

“Audrey and the Art By The Water team put together a magnificent exhibition for their 15-year anniversary,” said Chang. “I am honoured that they chose my Foundation for Change as the recipient of their raised funds. I'm also grateful to everyone who came out to support the 15 artists and, in turn, the sensory bin project that will benefit so many Montreal-area students.” ■



The healing role of animals in Indigenous holistic wellness

by *Jimena Marquez*

Within many Indigenous cultures, there is a central idea that links being in good health and being in harmony with all living beings. It is encompassed by the expression “all our relations.” This phrase refers to the notion that within Indigenous worldviews there is an essential interconnectedness that exists between humans and more-than-human beings (animals, plants, minerals).

Regarding animals, there is also a sense that they are equitable partners; being animated by spirit and having intelligence, they can communicate and act as agents of healing. Despite cultural loss, despite residential school trauma, Indigenous peoples of today continue to have a special relationship with nature and regard many animals as sacred and use their “healing gifts” in traditional healing ceremonies.

This holistic approach to healing and the central relationship that Indigenous peoples have to the land and to its inhabitants is unfortunately often disregarded and absent from contemporary health care services.

To explore the relationships between humans and animals, a research team from the University of Regina and Saskatchewan – Angela McGinnis, PhD.; Adela Tesarek Kincaid, PhD.; M.J. Barrett, PhD. and Corinne Ham did a research project in collaboration with the Community Elders Research Advisory Group from the Beardy’s & Okemasis’ Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. Their article, “Strengthening Animal-Human Relationships as a Doorway to Indigenous Holistic Wellness,” was published in the journal *Ecopsychology* in 2019. The research included an animal-human relationship workshop, which allowed Indigenous participants to discuss their unique relationships to animals.

Even if some of these relationships have been weakened due to colonization, the workshop allowed participants to relearn

community-relevant stories of human-animal relationships. The findings from this research are not generalizable to all Indigenous communities, but they do underline a larger interconnected worldview in which the teaching, all our relations, is still strongly related to a holistic concept of well-being.

Some of the most interesting results from this workshop showed the different roles that animals still play in the lives of Indigenous peoples. They are messengers, providers, guides, protectors and healers. Some of the workshop participants shared how animals communicate messages to them in various ways. Sometimes in dreams, they will instruct them on how to do certain things. Sometimes odd behaviour will be a warning to people. They also shared their belief in how animals look out for humans, how they share their bodies and provide energy and the materials needed for ceremonies, and willingly sacrifice themselves. The workshop results also identified animals as more than emotional companions, but as wise beings able to offer life-guidance and healing, supporting people in their challenges. In this regard, certain animals are seen as teachers, which means they teach values like love, courage, humility, respect and truth through their behaviour.

Maintaining and cultivating good relationships with animals is essential to achieve what Anishinaabe people call, *mino-bimaadiziwin*, the “good life.” This good way of life encompasses mental, emotional and physical well-being, and what this research confirmed is that for Indigenous peoples, animals play a central role in maintaining wellness at all levels. ■

Jimena Marquez is project development officer - Indigenous Student Support at the English Montreal School Board.

A decade welcoming children of different abilities at summer arts camp in DDO

by *Anita Szabadi-Gottesman*



Caroline DiNunzio, adapted services director at the DDO Centre for the Arts, has developed a fully integrated summer camp arts program for neurodivergent children and children with disabilities. Photo courtesy of DDO Centre for the Arts

For over 30 years, the Dollard des Ormeaux Centre for the Arts (DCA), part of the DDO Civic Centre, has offered a fine arts summer camp for children from the age of four to 14. Managing director Patrick Charron saw the growing need to provide fine arts activities for neurodivergent children and children with disabilities, and for the past 10 years, the camp has been developing an integrated approach for a wide variety of special needs campers.

The father of an eight-year-old autistic son, Charron recognizes the cognitive and behavioural challenges that children on the spectrum are faced with and has seen the camp fully integrate neurodivergent campers. “Every year our program and its reputation grow,” he said.

The comprehensive programming is an integral part of the summer Fine Arts Program. “The participants have their own resource room, their own tools, their own staff of social integrators and are led by a special education technician with many years of experience,” said Charron. “The resource room, aptly named ‘The Nook,’ has

become a beloved gathering place for all our campers, where they can relax, regroup and refocus.”

At the helm is Caroline DiNunzio, adapted services director, who has been part of the camp staff for nine years. She is also a special education technician with the Lester B. Pearson School Board. Through her expertise, the DCA has made the neurodiverse offerings an essential part of its summer camp programming. “My job is to create a safe atmosphere for all our campers. This includes Social Emotional Learning training for the staff to foster emotional literacy and self-regulation through mindfulness for our campers,” said DiNunzio. She said that art should be a safe place for everyone. “Our camp allows everyone to express who they are, as they are.” ■

For more information:
www.centreatsdollard.com.

Awesome musical trio

A song to get us through challenges

by *Sue Montgomery*

A Kirkland resident, whose son is living with autism, has helped compose a song with the help of her three children and her brother's band as a way to connect people through music and help them with life's challenges.

Nicki Cunningham was inspired by her son, who was diagnosed with autism in Grade 6 and is now 19 years old. "I was trying to understand the world through his eyes," she said. "He was really suffering and couldn't verbalize what he was feeling."

The song, called "Daily Dose," was re-released on YouTube in 2022 as the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were waning. "At the time, I also noticed friends experiencing their own challenges with their children with various conditions and kept this in mind when writing the lyrics," Cunningham said.

"These things don't go away. Flexibility is key. You're going to have to work with it and modify things. You have to ride the waves."

The song was repurposed to help with fundraising for Autism Speaks Canada 2023.

Whether it be obsessive compulsive disorder, dyslexia, Tourette syndrome, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or

anxiety, the video is beautifully shot with a message that we are all yearning for connection. We need to breathe, work together and be able to put these conditions and diseases behind us, the lyrics say.

"The song is intended for anyone who can identify with life's challenges, [like] a sudden onset diagnosis of illness such as cancer, decline in cognitive abilities, dementia, divorce or sudden loss," said Cunningham.

The main voice on the video is Montreal singer Megan Griffin, who sings in Cunningham's brother's band, Oliver Forest. That brother, Josh, produced the song. Her other brother Shawn, along with her childhood friend Christina Thompson, make up the harmonies in the choir sound.

"I wanted to focus on something people could hear, feel emotionally on the inside and be touched or moved enough to share with others," said Cunningham.

All three of her children (she also has two daughters, aged 16 and 21) were involved in choosing footage for the YouTube video and providing feedback along the way.

The result is a gorgeous montage of people dealing with various issues and their accompanying frustrations, with a message of hope and overcoming challenges together at the end. ■

| [Click here](#) to watch "Daily Dose."



From left: Megan Griffin, Mark Bergman, Josh Cunningham and Nicki Cunningham at the 2023 Autism Speaks Canada Walk at Dawson College on June 11. Photo: Kevin J. Rafferty



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- Elizabeth Bruni



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Huntingdon teachers create computer refurbishing program

by *Nicole Proano*

Huntingdon Adult Education and Community Centre teachers Michael Werenchuk and Kathleen Hackett did not anticipate the sweeping impact of a computer refurbishing program when the idea first took off two years ago. Now, with truckloads of e-waste saved, a classroom of students equipped with computer refurbishing skills and nearly 300 laptops redistributed to community members for free, the program has made a wide-ranging splash throughout the town an hour south of Montreal.

It is this work that earned Werenchuk and Hackett this edition's *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award.

The program at this New Frontiers School Board (NFSB) school started as a computer recycling activity that Werenchuk introduced into the curriculum for the Social Integration Services (SIS) Program for adults with special needs. Werenchuk developed learning and evaluation criteria based on the activity since it calls on a number of competencies like problem-solving, communication and fine motor skills. Using old computers from the school, Werenchuk had his students disassemble the devices and sort the parts for recycling.

The activity began transforming when Hackett got involved by reaching out to local businesses to donate their old computers. Laptops viable for refurbishing started



Huntingdon Adult Education and Community Centre's computer refurbishing team at the centre on April 26. From left: Teacher Kathleen Hackett, students Amélie Schillaci, Christopher Deschamps, Sheldon Goundrey, Stephanie Latreille, Caleb Abbott, Jeremy Caron, teacher Michael Werenchuk and student Gerry Caravias. Photo: Laurie Finlayson

streaming into Werenchuk's classroom, so they launched into fixing and cleaning them using online resources for guidance. Once restored to working condition, Hackett organized to have them given away for free to students in need. "We do live in an economically depressed area," Hackett said. "And it's always shocking how many students need these laptops."

Supportive of the initiative, the NFSB has been sending Werenchuk computers since 2016. It encourages all of its schools to send old laptops, printers and desktops to Werenchuk's classroom to keep the program growing. "We'd either like to teach other school boards how to do this or do it for them," Werenchuk said.

While internet access is becoming increasingly crucial in the digital era, this is even more true for rural areas, like Huntingdon. From doctors' appointments to driving lessons, options are limited in the country, and having a computer and internet access makes a world of difference. "It can be a lifeline for people that need a homework machine," Werenchuk said. "They're

really designed for getting your stuff done online... Whatever kids need for basically working."

With no formal background in IT or tech, Werenchuk and Hackett are simply motivated by taking care of their community. "It's the joy of the people who get [a laptop]," Hackett said. Meanwhile, the SIS students, who Hackett said have taken ownership of the computer refurbishing program, take great pride in their work as well. "They know what they're doing," Hackett said. "They see [the good that] they're doing, and we give them credit for it." ■

Nominate your Entrepreneur at info@inspirationsnews.com.



Studio J dancers take to the stage

On December 17, Studio J dancers, led by last season's *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award recipient Jodi Thiboutot, took to the stage in front of a cheering audience in the auditorium of St. Thomas High School in Pointe-Claire. From left, Emily, Emma and Chiara are seen performing a dance number to the song "Timber" by artists Pitbull and Kesha. Studio J is planning performances for June and December (To read about Studio J, see p. 10 of our Fall 2023 – Winter 2024 edition). Photo: Richard Tremblay

JEM Workshop broadens services with mobile working options

by *Nicole Proano*

A new service is being planned by JEM Workshop to deploy its employees offsite to clients who require work be done on their premises. JEM, one of the province's accredited adapted companies, employs a workforce of people with diverse abilities and offers packing services for startups and companies across a range of industries. For many years these services have been offered solely from their physical workshop located in Montreal near the Town of Mount Royal. Come springtime, the plan is for JEM employees to be deployed offsite as Mobile Working Groups upon request.

JEM's executive director, Maia Cooper, says that as an adapted company there are certain standards that must be maintained. Companies accredited under the Conseil québécois des entreprises adaptées receive funding from Quebec's Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity. (See story, same page.) These companies must submit annu-

al reports that show how they meet wage, safety and other regulatory standards.

Cooper explained that the shift in funding from the Social Services Ministry to the Labour Ministry for companies like JEM marked a turning point in the provincial shift away from what is referred to as Sheltered Workshop Programs, described by Cooper as "the old model" and one that has historically been described by some as "exploitive." While these programs offer employment to people with disabilities, they provide less than the legal minimum wage or do not offer vacation pay and other benefits and may not meet basic standards for workplace safety.

Adapted companies, like JEM, are held to a different standard. It is a workplace feature that is not lost on JEM employees, like Diane Moore. "People around here are nice; the staff is supportive," Moore said. "They will tell you what to do, but they'll also let



JEM employees, from left: Leslie Perryon, Penny Maria Lee, Andrew Blankfort and Mindy Grill pack and assemble products in the factory on January 30, 2024.

you work in the way that works for you."

To maintain that standard while offering Mobile Working Groups services, JEM vets the physical work locations employees are deployed to and offers sensitization training for partner companies. Cooper says that if they're sending JEM employees offsite, the company needs to make sure their partners' sites meet the standards as well.

Cooper said that while JEM offers business solutions to companies that want quality and affordable packaging services or labour to achieve their own business needs, they never waver from their social mission, which is to employ and train a diverse workforce. ■

Journées portes ouvertes à la grandeur du réseau d'entreprises adaptées

par *Wendy Singer*

Le Conseil québécois des entreprises adaptées (CQEA) a été fondé en 1982 afin de regrouper les entreprises adaptées et faire en sorte qu'elles disposent des outils nécessaires au maintien et à la création d'emplois adaptés pour les personnes ayant des limitations physiques, intellectuelles ou liées à la santé mentale. Le réseau du CQEA, qui compte 36 entreprises adaptées réparties dans 15 régions du Québec, emploie plus de 4 000 personnes avec limitations.

Du 24 au 26 octobre, les entreprises membres du CQEA ont accueilli le public dans le cadre des premières journées portes ouvertes du CQEA à l'échelle de la province. À Montréal, Atelier JEM était parmi les entreprises participantes qui ont ouvert leurs portes au public désireux de se renseigner sur leurs activités. En périodes de pointe, les effectifs d'Atelier JEM ont atteint 92 personnes, dont les deux tiers à temps plein. L'entreprise s'appête à lancer un nouveau service. Plutôt que de travailler

à l'atelier comme c'est présentement le cas, les employés et les employées se rendront dorénavant sur le lieu de travail des clients. (Voir l'article ci-dessus.)

À l'heure actuelle, une équipe de 13 personnes encadre le personnel dans ses tâches d'emballage et de distribution des commandes, notamment l'assemblage manuel, comme le collage et le collationnement, jusqu'à l'utilisation d'équipements plus complexes.

« On gagne à appartenir à un réseau aux côtés d'autres entreprises unies par une mission commune », de déclarer Maia Cooper, directrice générale d'Atelier JEM. « Quel que soit votre rôle, on trouve au sein de toutes les entreprises sociales quelqu'un dont le rôle est similaire. Nous échangeons les meilleures pratiques et apprenons les uns des autres à gérer des défis particuliers et à partager nos réussites. »

« C'est en quelque sorte la direction à suivre alors que nous passons du statut

d'organisme communautaire à celui d'entreprise sociale », explique Daniela Cymberknop, coordonnatrice du marketing et du développement pour le compte de l'organisme.

À l'occasion de sa journée portes ouvertes, JEM a accueilli des clients, des partenaires, des intervenants et des intervenantes, des familles ainsi que des amis et amies qui ont pu visiter les installations pendant que les membres du personnel s'affairaient à leurs tâches. D'autres entreprises membres du CQEA ont, quant à elles, choisi de concentrer leurs efforts sur la promotion de leurs activités auprès de nouvelles recrues potentielles.

« Dans le contexte actuel de pénurie de main-d'œuvre, il était d'autant plus important de tenir cette année la journée portes ouvertes afin que les personnes en situation de handicap qui souhaitent intégrer le marché de l'emploi puissent entrer en contact avec les entreprises et se

renseigner auprès de ceux et celles qui y travaillent. C'est l'occasion pour la clientèle et les partenaires de constater par eux-mêmes les bienfaits du choix responsable qu'ils font », s'est exclamé Stéphane Thériault, directeur général du CQEA.

Selon M. Thériault, le principal atout d'une collaboration avec une entreprise sociale réside dans la qualité du travail.

« Nos travailleuses et nos travailleurs sont fiers et attentionnés, et les entreprises ont développé au fil des ans un souci de la qualité des produits et services qu'elles offrent. » ■

Le processus d'embauche de JEM comporte un comité d'embauche, en partenariat avec Emploi Québec et le Service externe de main-d'œuvre. Pour en savoir davantage sur le CQEA, visitez le www.cqea.ca ou faites parvenir un courriel à s.theriault@cqea.ca. Pour l'Atelier JEM, visitez le <https://jemworkshop.org/fr/>.

Translated from English by Manon Bourassa.

An employment program for people who are visually impaired

by *Samara O’Gorman*



From left: Mazen Karim, SmartLife Coach; Eitel Houedakor, Bilingual Technology Consultant of the Come to Work program; and Sarah Aziz, Bilingual Program Lead of the Come to Work program, all at CNIB, take part in a cross-organization symposium on September 20, 2023. Photo courtesy of S. Aziz

In 2018, CNIB, previously known as the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, celebrated 100 years of service. Shortly after, the Come to Work program was introduced as an innovative way to promote employment and empower those impacted by blindness to build meaningful careers.

“Visual loss is not black and white,” said the program lead, Sarah Aziz. “The majority of people who are legally blind do have some vision left.” She believes that everyone deserves equal opportunity, and that those impacted by sight loss still have the potential to be very successful.

Over 1,200 Canadians have joined the program since its inception, including young adults starting their employment journeys and experienced workers seeking out new endeavours. On the employer side, more than 150 companies across the country have partnered up, ranging from private to public, large to small.

Aziz remarked that with technology, people who are blind or visually impaired can still work the vast majority of jobs. “Contrary to popular belief, there [are] actually very few careers that people who are blind or visually impaired cannot do,” she said. She focuses on workshops with the talent pool,

eligible to those identifying as a person with sight loss living in Canada.

Aziz also focuses on résumé-building, working with individuals based on their specific situations. When it comes to getting a job, she reinforces the argument that “It often doesn’t have to cost the employer anything extra – it’s all about awareness and making an accessible environment.”

This led Olivier D’Anjou, a Come to Work talent pool member, to find employment at L1 Scientific, a software solutions company. He stated that the program’s workshops and individual sessions helped him with employers and helped him view his visual impairment as a strength rather than a limitation. The company even offered him an extended contract. He urges others who are visually impaired not to be discouraged.

According to Jennifer MacNeil, manager of Talent Pool Cultivation at Come to Work, CNIB, the unemployment rate for Canadians with sight loss is 14.5 percent, three times higher than Canada’s general unemployment rate.

“This program should last for many, many years. More people should know about it,” said D’Anjou. ■

For information: cometowork.ca and cnib.ca.

Neuro Plus élargit les domaines d’emplois pour personnes neuroatypiques

par *Olivia Integlia*

Neuro Plus est une entreprise sociale unique en son genre. Cette entreprise, fondée en 2021 par Pierre Bissonnette, Martin Prévost et Bruno Wicker, concentre ses efforts exclusivement sur l’embauche et l’accompagnement de personnes atypiques.

Située à Outremont, Neuro Plus recrute un bassin diversifié d’employées et d’employés à la grandeur de Montréal, notamment des candidates et des candidats atteints d’un trouble du déficit de l’attention avec ou sans hyperactivité, du syndrome de Gilles de la Tourette, de troubles d’apprentissage tels que la dyslexie et de l’autisme, explique Prévost.

« On recrute des personnes neuroatypiques. On apprend à les connaître, on évalue leur situation, leurs besoins et leurs forces. Ensuite, on les jumelle avec des clients pour combler leurs besoins en main-d’œuvre », ajoute-t-il.

Après avoir contribué au succès d’une entreprise de services informatiques employant des personnes autistes mais dont la mission leur semblait trop restrictive, messieurs Bissonnette, Prévost et Wicker ont fondé Neuro Plus. « On a élargi l’éventail de la population que l’on choisit d’aider et on a étendu les domaines d’emplois à tous les champs de qualification dans lesquels les gens possèdent une spécialité », de préciser Prévost. Aujourd’hui, l’équipe de Neuro Plus est fière des occasions d’emploi offertes, entre autres, en comptabilité, dans les affaires et en traduction.

Dès qu’une personne à la recherche d’un emploi est sélectionnée par un employeur partenaire, l’équipe de Neuro Plus l’encadre étroitement en l’accompagnant à l’entrevue, en lui procurant du soutien le premier jour de travail, et en planifiant des suivis réguliers, explique Prévost. « [On] les aide à bien fonctionner dans leur travail, à avoir de bonnes communications et de bonnes relations au travail. »

Il arrive même que le soutien offert par Neuro Plus dépasse le cadre du travail. « On aide dans les domaines où on est capables de le faire et si on ne peut pas, on va aider la personne à trouver une ressource », dit Prévost. Il explique que des facteurs externes, comme un déménagement, l’accumulation de contraventions, la déclaration de revenus, constituent des exemples pouvant causer du stress chez les personnes atypiques et nuire à leur rendement au travail.

Petit à petit, Neuro Plus envisage de prendre de l’expansion, confie Prévost. L’entreprise espère rencontrer davantage de clients disposés à ouvrir leurs portes à des candidates et des candidats neurodiversifiés. Il exprime également le souhait que les employeurs se montrent de plus en plus réceptifs à la neurodiversité, brisant du coup la stigmatisation liée à l’embauche de personnes atypiques. ■

Olivia Integlia est étudiante en journalisme à l’Université Concordia.



Les cofondateurs Martin Prévost, Pierre Bissonnette et Bruno Wicker lors d’un événement en juin 2023 sur l’inclusion des personnes neuroatypiques en milieu de travail. Photo courtoisie de M. Prévost

Summit School expands its employment training programming

by *Paul Karwatsky*

In April, Summit School launched a new employment training advocacy campaign designed to help bridge the gap between education and employment for neurodivergent students. The program is described as an initiative aiming to set new standards for neurodiverse student workforce training and integration.

The Empower Initiative is a strategic expansion of Summit's internship programming, which includes internal opportunities at its downtown Transitional Educational Career Centre (TECC) campus and partnerships with more than 50 businesses in Montreal. It's part of the school's innovative approach to education and its dedication to equipping students with skills they can use beyond the classroom.

"I've learned essential life skills like budgeting and how to navigate public transportation," shared 18-year-old Alessia Iglie, who

has been attending Summit for more than 10 years. "It's more than just education; it's about preparing for real life."

The program offers a wide range of internships, providing hands-on experience in fields such as culinary arts, video game design, administrative work, retail and even dog grooming. Through these opportunities, students like Iglie have the chance to explore various careers and find their passion. "Working with Chef on Call, I've gained pretty valuable experience focusing on a specific trade, which has sparked my interest in becoming a cook's assistant," she said.

Jesse Heffring, director of Development for Summit School, explained the program's core objective: "The Empower Initiative is not just about job training; it's about building confidence, independence and paving

the way for our students to lead fulfilling lives."

Corporate partners have also lauded the initiative. Warren Williams, co-founder of Las Fincas Coffee, one of the program's partners, observed, "Caroline [one of the school's many onsite job coaches] made the integration process seamless for us. Summit's model of offering on-site job coaching for all its internships, as part of their partnership with businesses like ours, was a game-changer. They really find the person who is the right match for the business' needs." ■

Paul Karwatsky has two children on the autism spectrum, is co-founder of Aura Strategies and works with Summit School.



Alessia Iglie shows off her creation, in the fall of 2023, as part of her work with Summit Flora, Summit School's work-oriented training program for students. Photo courtesy of Summit School

Live captioning web tool available free for those with hearing loss

by *Sue Montgomery*

A free online tool has been developed that enables people to generate live captions, as well as to share them. The shared captions can be accessed on any device with a web browser. Created by teachers Chris Webb and James Petersen, the tool is especially useful for students with hearing loss - an estimated one in eight under the age of 18.

Called Zip Captions, it was launched in July 2023 and is accessible for anyone who uses the Google Chrome or Safari web browsers.

Webb, a teacher at Lester B. Pearson School Board's John Rennie High School, was inspired by a student who had hearing loss and was outspoken about what was lacking for people in her situation. He sought

advice from Tracey Green, an Itinerant Education Specialist at the Montreal Oral School for the Deaf, who was born with hearing loss and uses hearing aids.

Green commended the creators for consulting potential users instead of "dreaming up something in a sterile environment."

The website can benefit many people, including those with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or who are struggling to understand French or English. But for those with hearing loss, it empowers them, said Green. "This fosters autonomy and independence, so you don't have to ask for help all the time."

For example, John Rennie has a 460-seat auditorium where assemblies, theatre, and award presentations take place. While equipped with microphones and a Wi-Fi-based assistive listening system enabling people to stream sound to their phones,

it wasn't ideal. In this situation, there is a time lag between when the speaker says the words and when the sound reaches the listener, explained Webb. And, audience members with hearing loss were often too far away to lip read.

As part of an innovation accelerator program run by Dell, Webb and Petersen developed the website that allows people to type in a code on their devices and read along with what is being said up on stage or in front of the classroom.

The live streaming is available in several languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Polish, with 200 users recently registered. "It's about trying to achieve a universal design so everyone can benefit," said Webb. "It's interesting to see people find different uses for it." It could be used at conferences and is already being used in some places of worship. ■



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The practice – and beauty – of ‘glimmers’

by Janet Silverstone Perlis

Throughout the day, our nervous system is continuously filtering input from our environment and experiences. To help protect us, our internal “smoke detector” interprets this information as cues to help us differentiate what is safe and what is a threat. When we perceive something as a threat, our bodies react in ways that prepare for danger. But we also know our bodies react in different ways when we perceive something as safe and calming, and the mental health professional community is giving increased attention to this positive type of trigger, known as “glimmers.”

First, let’s look more closely at triggers. When we perceive a threat, our automatic nervous system is activated, creating an extra release of adrenalin and cortisol, which in turn, prompts a cascade of changes in our body, including elevated heart rate and blood pressure – and a state of increased vigilance. These reactions are part of our survival mechanism to help us defend ourselves against stressors and dangers.

This response is extremely helpful if we are, in fact, in danger and need to react in the moment. Registering something that we perceive as a threat will bring about the same alarm reaction. These are the cues we refer to as “triggers” and may prompt the fight-flight-freeze response, a series of physiological changes, amongst other things, that can cause anxiety and influence our moods and mental state.

Now, onto “glimmers:” This is a positive psychological reaction that cues us to feel safe, calm and connected. “Glimmers can help calm the nervous system and return us to a regulated state,” explains Abby Rawlinson, a registered therapist with the

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. They can help us counteract the negative fallout that triggers elicit in us.

The term glimmers was first described in the book *Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation* (2018) by Deb Dana, a clinical social worker and trauma specialist. She based her work on that of Dr. Steven Porges, who wrote about the Polyvagal theory.

Glimmers are activated by our sympathetic nervous system, which regulates our body’s response to a stressful situation, infusing us with a sense of calm. “You feel something happen inside. There is an energy that happens around a glimmer and then your brain marks it as well,” Dana said in a *USA Today* article in 2022.

Most importantly, glimmers can help us increase our ability to manage the stress and strain that is associated with our triggers. Glimmers are micro moments that begin to shape our system in very gentle ways. Recognizing those small positive moments experienced repeatedly can have a major impact on helping us self-regulate and calm in the face of stress. “This shift...can have a beneficial impact on our mind and health.” (Sara M. Moniuszko March 2022 *USA Today*.)

As glimmers are more subtle than triggers, it is helpful for us to pay attention to these mini-positive moments.

Glimmers are specific to each person and do not require making a major change. It is just noticing and bringing to awareness experiences, feelings or interactions that can help us feel centered again.

How to find your glimmers

The key is to highlight the small things that can evoke a sense of calm in you. It is capturing the tiny and pleasant moments that are unique to each of us in our everyday lives. It can be as simple as noticing a beautiful flower as you walk in your neighbourhood, listening to the sound of rain dripping on leaves, smelling some-

thing tasty cooking in the oven, exchanging a smile with someone who passes you on the street, unexpectedly having someone engage in a kind gesture.

Often people find that glimmers involve one or more of our five senses.

1. **Hearing:** Sounds through music, songs, nature (bird calls, the ocean), children’s laughter
2. **Touch:** Specific textures, repetitive moments, snuggling under a blanket, being in water
3. **Sight:** Looking at pictures
4. **Smell:** Exposure to a scent that is calming or nostalgic
5. **Taste:** Comforting or familiar flavours associated with positive memories.

Bringing glimmers to children

Glimmers help bring us back to a feeling of safety and calm in our body. Parents can help evoke glimmers in their children by making positive connections for them, for example, connecting with the outdoors and experiencing a moment of beauty that nature provides, such as finding a rainbow after the rain or watching the sky during sunset. These can become moments of wonder for children and are true examples of glimmers. Connecting with children through music can be uplifting for them and bring them a feeling of calm. Hugging a pet can elicit a glimmer. Saying kind words or smiling at children makes an interpersonal connection that elicits peace. Engaging in traditions and rituals, such as baking or helping with chores can provide a sense of accomplishment - another type of glimmer. ■

To learn more about glimmers on Deb Dana’s website: www.rhythmofregulation.com/glimmers.

Janet Silverstone Perlis is a psychologist with the Student Services Department of the English Montreal School Board.



Prevention Promotion website

A new website created by professionals in the Student Services department at the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) in September 2022 is a trove of information on resources related to mental health. Prevention Promotion, intended for educators but available to everyone, is a one-stop place for anyone passionate about improving mental health and building positive environments in schools. The site offers a comprehensive list of resources by category: mental health, violence prevention, scholarships and mentorships, academic support, as well as EMSB internal resources and dozens of community groups.

- Sue Montgomery

C.A.F.E. service for families in crisis

A service for families with children aged 0-17 who are in serious crisis is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. C.A.F.E. (Service Crise-Ado-Famille-Enfance) is aimed at avoiding placement with child protection services by having a team of social workers and educators work with families. The C.A.F.E. website outlines some suggested steps for someone in crisis, starting with calling 811 or contacting their local CLSC. The service, offered by the Integrated Health and Social Services University Network for West-Central Montreal (CIUSSS West-Central Montreal) provides a social worker to provide advice, answer questions or suggest useful resources. In some situations, a social worker will visit the site of the crisis, such as a school or home, to try to find an appropriate solution.

- Sue Montgomery

Learning how to access mental health care in Quebec

by *Stephanie Paquette*

Discussing mental health is as important as ever. No one is immune to mental health problems, and a staggering number of Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. The Canadian Association for Mental Health estimates that by the time Canadians reach 40 years of age, one in two have, or have had, a mental illness.

Mental illness impacts more than 6.7 million Canadians and is being touted as the hidden epidemic of the modern world. Accessing mental health services in Quebec is fraught with systemic barriers that prevent timely and culturally relevant support.

Learning where to access and how to navigate the Quebec health and social service network removes the barrier to mental

health care that so many Quebec citizens desperately need.

As a social worker, I offer mental health support and am a strong advocate for individuals and families who would benefit from mental health services. Breaking down barriers to care requires a multi-layered approach that includes creating strong relationships and partnerships with the health and social service network, sharing pertinent information with providers and shouldering some of the weight that accompanies the stigma that hinders access to care.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of services to help guide you on your journey to mental wellness:

1. Search for mental health resources in Quebec using your postal code: <https://sante.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoire-ressources/sante-mentale/>
2. Quebec governmental mental health

support and resources:

<https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/mental-health/finding-help-and-support-for-mental-health/finding-mental-health-help-and-support-resources/>

3. Family doctor wait list for Quebec: <https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/finding-a-resource/registering-with-a-family-doctor>
4. Aire ouverte for young people aged 12-25. Access to nurses and social workers: <https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/finding-a-resource/aire-ouverte-services-for-young-people-aged-12-to-25>
5. Find your local CLSC with your postal code: <https://sante.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoire-ressources/clsc/>
6. Speak with a nurse or a social worker 24/7. The social worker can help make the CLSC referral with you: Dial 811

7. Suicide Prevention Centre of Montreal: <https://cpsmontreal.ca/en/> or call 1-866-277-3553/text 535353

8. Mental health services in Montreal: <https://amiquebec.org/>

9. Free helpline and web service connecting you to community and social services in Greater Montreal, in over 200 languages: Dial 211 or type 211 into your internet browser.

The path to care may have peaks and valleys and taking early action to access support systems can help reduce the severity of an illness. If you or someone you know is experiencing an emergency, please contact 911 or go to the nearest emergency room at your local hospital. ■

Stephanie Paquette is a social worker in the Student Services Department at the English Montreal School Board.

Partnering school and community to make high school experience positive

by *Sue Montgomery*

Community Learning Centres (CLCs) are community schools that involve educators, local community members, families, and students in improving conditions for student learning and healthy development. Their mandate is to provide valuable learning experiences that enhance educational outcomes and student achievement by fostering relationships between schools and their communities.

At the moment, CLCs are in high demand to help students deal with anxiety, chronic stress and other mental health challenges.

The idea is to partner with local community groups that can offer students various ac-

tivities ranging from improv to meditation. There are about 90 schools participating in the network, with each school board having about 10 CLCs.

CLCs are funded by the federal government through the department of Canadian Heritage to support minority language education. The English Montreal School Board has four single site CLCs located in two high schools and two elementary schools. Ramona Potesta, who is wrapping up her first year at Laurier Macdonald High School as the Community Learning Centre director, said the initiative is essential, especially for students still dealing with the fallout from Covid-19.

“More and more we hear how important it is to take care of your mental health,” said Potesta. “You hear so many stories of kids not coming to school because they are so anxious for whatever reason; they don’t feel confident, they have PTSD from something

that happened in their personal life that’s impacting their ability to come to school.”

Each school adapts to the needs of the population and according to what community organizations exist in the neighbourhood. But students also suggest activities that would motivate them to attend school. At Laurier Macdonald, students suggested a greenhouse, an idea that was scaled down to building bleachers decorated with greenery to take advantage of the school’s large yard and provide seating for outdoor classes.

Speaking from her own experience and having heard colleagues from elsewhere say the same, Potesta said that while all students can benefit from support, the most challenging group has been this cohort of Secondary 3 students as they started high school online during the pandemic. “We’re doing everything in our power to really get them to be encouraged.”

Some of the programs already in place at the school are two girls’ groups: one that works with Pact de rue and the other with NAOS Jeunesse. They hold workshops on meditation, talks about inequality, and invite guest speakers like small business owners. For boys, there’s Camp Lift which focuses on social and emotional learning.

There is also art therapy, an improv club and a musical band, which is led by an instructor from Soul Station Orchestra.

“If these kids don’t have many friends, let’s do something to make their high school experience a memorable one,” said Potesta. “Or at least one thing in high school that you can look back on and say ‘that workshop we had in Secondary 1 was life-changing.’” ■

Mental health care crucial for young people

by *Tania Piperni*

There has been a rise in mental health distress in our society, especially in the youth population.

Research psychologist Jean Twenge provided some statistics on the Ezra Klein Show, *New York Times* podcast in May 2023: “Between 2011 and 2021, the number of teens and young adults with clinical depression more than doubled...between 2007 and 2019, the suicide rate for those in their early 20s rose by 41 percent. And the suicide rate for 10 to 14-year-olds...tripled and it nearly quadrupled for girls.”

To comment on this alarming trend, we spoke to psychiatrist Dr. Julian Z. Xue, lecturer at McGill University, owner and director of Libera Clinic, and consulting psychiatrist at the English Montreal School Board.

According to Dr. Xue, clinics in both the private and public sectors are overwhelmed with patients requiring mental health support. Traditionally child psychiatry training is a family-centric practice focussing on therapy for children and their families; however, the current practice is trying to keep up with the volume of needs, thus focussing more on diagnoses and initializing medication. As a result, the therapy

portion moves onto the shoulders of social workers, who in turn have a higher volume of clients.

Why such a rise? Has the stress always been there? Is a shift in our social-political environment making people more fragile? Is social media a problem? It is unclear what precise factors are making clinical pressures so huge.

Previously it was rare for a 12-year-old to show signs of mental health stress yet now children as young as 8 are starting to display self-injurious behaviours such as cutting. “It is a very different world. The culture and practice of psychiatry has really changed, and psychiatrists are feeling the pressure,” explains Dr. Xue.

One hypothesis based on his clinical experience is perhaps that, as a society, people are more encouraged to talk about their distress in a way they did not in the past. For example, mental health is discussed on social media, blogs and ad campaigns. However, the medical services are not prepared to address this increase in demand that this openness is bringing forward.

Dr. Xue further explains that in the history of psychiatry and mental health, the distribution of disorders has changed over time. Previously, people with a cluster C

personality type of disorders, those defined as more repressed pathologies, often did not seek out help. Such conditions include obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD), some types of attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) and a variety of personality disorders. “Today the epidemiology is different, more expressionist. It is the same level of pathology but more externalized onto society, which may affect our rates.”

Neurodiversity has many forms. Some neurodivergent people can lead fulfilling lives by developing adaptive coping strategies in a society that may not be accepting of their needs. However, this does not correspond to Dr. Xue’s clinical reality with people in great distress and who are struggling to function in society due to diagnoses such as OCD, anxiety or depression.

When asked about the rise of ADHD, Dr. Xue explains that cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), family therapy, changing the milieu and adding supports can be very helpful for youth. It can get more difficult as patients get older, however, and medication can help. He does not typically prescribe medication to patients younger than 14 years old but says stimulants can be transformative for young adults. Thus, treatment and medication work - the only obstacle is getting a proper diagnosis.

“It truly takes a village to raise a child,” he said, “More specifically, we need a highly functioning society to have flourishing human beings in it because psychiatry and mental health is not the only answer. The epidemiology of all of it is a question for every citizen, in terms of being invested in civil society and politics so that everyone has a say in what is going on. Families who have extended family support, access to social services and therapies, and school support do better in society. So, we must re-examine our social-political structure as citizens. It is this generation of young people we are helping that will need to create solutions to see us out of this.”

For individuals wanting to seek mental health help, consult mental health organizations, social workers in the public sector (CLSCs), family doctors or private sector therapists such as psychologists and psychiatrists. In most schools, students can seek help from school psychologists at the elementary level and guidance counsellors at the high school level. ■

Tania Piperni is an autism spectrum disorder consultant at the English Montreal School Board. She has a Master of Education in Educational Psychology from McGill University.

Westmount High promotes healthy relationships through sexuality education

by *Jordan Stoopler*

Much like English Language Arts, mathematics and science, sexuality education plays a prominent role in Westmount High School’s curriculum.

The English Montreal School Board high school has developed a multi-pronged Sexuality Education Plan in consultation with teachers, staff and the school’s Governing Board and in accordance with a mandate issued by the Ministry of Education. The workshops, totalling over 60 hours from Secondary 1 to 5, are led by teachers, behaviour technicians, the school nurse or, at times, via outside community resources.

“The Quebec Sexuality Education Plan, when properly implemented, can make a large impact on students’ relationships with themselves and others.” said Samantha Page Smith, Spiritual and Community Animator at Westmount High. “It’s put together really well, and it is nice having the school’s support.”

Smith leads the Emotional & Romantic Life as well as the Identity, Stereotypes and Roles, and Social Norms workshops for all six groups of Secondary 3 students during their English and physical education classes, respectively.

“In the Healthy Relationships workshop, we start by comparing and discussing what

makes a healthy, unhealthy or abusive relationship,” said Smith. “We continue by reflecting on how each of us expresses and receives love in different ways - and not just with romantic partners, but with friends and family members as well.”

The topic of breakups is also a popular one amongst students.

“For teenagers, your first breakup can be very intense,” said Smith. “And I love that the workshop doesn’t just focus on being in a healthy relationship but also addresses how to end a relationship in a healthy way, including where and when to seek help from other adults in their life when needed.”

Smith, who has been giving these workshops for four years, says the workshops often strike a chord with students.

Despite a few students who don’t take it seriously and a few giggles along the way, Smith said students seem mostly grateful to be able to discuss the topic. “I’ve had students tell me that the workshops sometimes make them rethink their current relationship and consider whether it is unhealthy or abusive,” said Smith. ■

Sleep disorders: What they are, how to assess them and what to do

by *Dr. Reut Gruber*

This is the second article in our series with Dr. Reut Gruber about sleep. To read the first one, see p. 17 of the Spring/Summer 2023 edition, "Sleep for success."

Sleep disorders are conditions that interrupt and degrade sleep and are common in children and teens. Younger children with a sleep disorder may seem overactive and irritable rather than sleepy. Adolescents who are excessively sleepy might look and feel depressed or anxious. It's important to examine the extent to which unhealthy sleep may contribute, exacerbate or even cause daytime challenges such as hyperactivity, inattention, low mood.

How can you tell if your child suffers from a sleep disorder?

Here are some questions you can ask yourself:

- ▶ Does your child have a hard time staying awake, even if they slept through the night?
- ▶ Does your child doze off when they are inactive but should be staying awake? For example, while watching a movie?
- ▶ Is your child's mood low, but you don't know why?
- ▶ Is your child irritable and reactive for no apparent reason?
- ▶ Is your child forgetful or has difficulty focusing?
- ▶ Does your child snore most nights?

These are all possible signs of an undiagnosed sleep disorder.

Sleep disorder can mimic the symptoms of other disorders, like depression, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or a cognitive decline, and therefore may be difficult to diagnose. If these challenges sound familiar and you don't know what's causing them, you may want to consider having your child's sleep assessed.

Common sleep disorders

These include:

- ▶ Insomnia: difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep throughout the night combined with daytime impairments.
- ▶ Circadian rhythm sleep disorders: problems with the brain's biological clock.
- ▶ Sleep apnea: a medical condition in

which a person stops and starts breathing repeatedly throughout the night.

- ▶ Restless legs syndrome: a condition that causes an uncontrollable urge to move the legs because of an uncomfortable sensation.
- ▶ Narcolepsy: a neurological condition characterized by sudden attacks of sleep during the day and overwhelming daytime drowsiness, even though the person is getting enough sleep at night.

Diagnosing sleep disorders

Different sleep disorders require different evaluation methods and treatments. Suspected sleep apnea or narcolepsy should be assessed in a sleep clinic. A sleep specialist will review the patient's symptoms and ask them to undergo a sleep study (called polysomnography). The study records data about brain wave changes, eye movements, breathing patterns, blood pressure, heart rate and rhythm, and leg movements.

Insomnia and biological clock issues should be assessed by a behavioural sleep specialist who will take a detailed history of the problem and monitor the patient's sleep for about two weeks. This could involve using a sleep diary and a sleep watch that objectively records bedtime, wake-up time and the amount of time it takes to fall asleep.

How are sleep disorders treated?

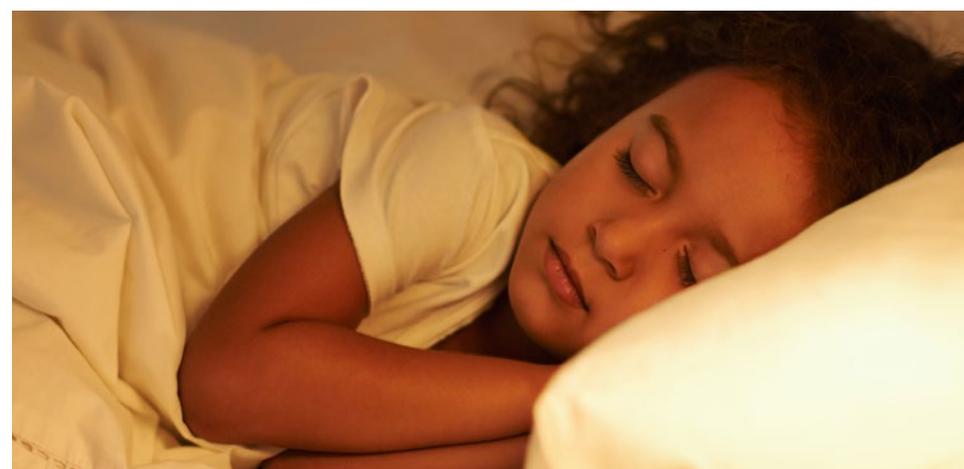
Sleep disorders like insomnia can be resolved by changing specific behaviours and thoughts. Treatment involves counseling and education and, in some cases, lifestyle changes.

Some sleep disorders require medical care such as medication (for example, narcolepsy) or sleep-specific devices or, in some cases, surgery (sleep apnea).

These general approaches apply to children and adolescents with or without additional challenges such as intellectual disability, ADHD or autism spectrum disorder.

Who is (and isn't) qualified to help diagnose and treat sleep disorders?

Various healthcare providers can help address sleep problems, including:



▶ Sleep physicians: medical doctors who are trained in sleep medicine and are licensed to practice by a medical board.

▶ Family physicians, general physicians, pediatricians and psychiatrists. Licensure for this practice is provided by a medical board.

▶ Clinical psychologists: some (but not all) of these mental health experts have expertise in behavioural interventions for sleep disorders. They must be fully licensed to practice independently.

It's important to note that certifications from institutes or organizations that aren't part of a professional association usually aren't regulated. Some people who offer services for evaluation or treatment of sleep disorders, like sleep coaches or consultants, might not hold a professional license to practice as a health care provider. For more information, please visit The Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine's position statement on sleep coaching.

How can you help your child improve their sleep?

It's always helpful to practice healthy sleep habits.

- ▶ Follow a consistent sleep and wake schedule.
- ▶ Engage in moderate to vigorous exercise during the day for a good sleep.
- ▶ Decrease emotional stimulation before bed.
- ▶ Disengage and calm down.

If you're concerned about yourself or a family member's sleep, consult a primary care provider or a sleep expert so they can provide you with the support you need. ■

Reut Gruber is a scientist, licensed psychologist and sleep expert. She is a full professor in the department of psychiatry at McGill University; director of the Attention, Behaviour and Sleep Lab at the Douglas Mental Health University Institute; and diplomate of the American Academy of Cognitive Therapy.



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Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton students come together in music therapy

by *Jordan Stoopler*

In her nearly five years working as a certified music therapist at the Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre (LLMRC), Tiana Malone has worked with countless children at Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools with visual, speech and motor impairments.

“The idea behind music therapy is that we are giving them another avenue to engage in their therapy goals that may be more accessible to them than other means,” said Malone. “For many of the kids who can’t speak or formulate a sentence, finding an access point for communication and for interaction through non-verbal means can be empowering.”

While Malone works out of LLMRC, she is employed by the CIUSSS du Centre-Ouest-de-l’Île-de-Montréal, with the rehabilitation centre being a member facility of the CIUSSS since October 2016. Malone says this one-of-a-kind partnership has enabled the long-standing music therapy program at the schools to prosper, as music stimu-

lation gave way to music therapy. Weekly group sessions are conducted in conjunction with the centre’s physical and occupational therapists, kinesiologist and speech language pathologists, among others.

“We are all working together in different ways to achieve the goals the students have either set for themselves or with their families and rehab/education teams,” she said. “My way is through musical means.”

Students may listen to music, play musical instruments, create and write their own music or even record or perform music for others. For those with visual impairments, one way to help them reach their vision goals is to teach them how to manipulate various instruments or by activating them using switches. “What we do in music therapy is individualized to the person I work with,” said Malone.

Despite students’ challenges and varying individual needs, music has united them. Philip E. Layton students have served



Working their moves in their *Barbie* movie-themed song and dance, from left: Samantha Quinn, kinesiologist; Tiana Malone, certified music therapist; and Arlene Rosenberg, physiotherapist, all at the Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre. Source: Still photo taken from YouTube video, “Back to School Barbie.”

as peer role models for pre-kindergarten classes at Mackay, allowing them to “demonstrate their knowledge and social skills,” according to Malone. She says it has also allowed the younger students, who are sighted, to learn about visual impairments.

“It gave them a different perspective on how they might have to communicate with someone who can’t see and practice their communication skills,” said Malone. “I’ve seen both relationships grow as well in the schoolyard in the way they communicate with each other in the school setting. Some

of my favourite moments have been connecting the kids with each other in different ways, building relationships and connections with their peers through music.”

The Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre, Mackay and Philip E. Layton school staff have created yearly “back to school” music videos to welcome back students each fall. Their most recent one played off the 2023 *Barbie* movie. Search for “Écoles Mackay et Philip E. Layton 2023 - Back to School Barbie” on YouTube. ■

Music: More than just a passion

by *Jordan Stoopler*



Manoli Katalifos, left, at the piano with Emily Curtis, his piano teacher and assistant director of Pedagogical Services at Giant Steps. Photo courtesy of Nick Katalifos

Manoli Katalifos has long had a fascination and love for music, particularly classical music.

“There has always been a connection there,” says his father Nick Katalifos. “He would stop everything when he would hear a classical piece. At 4-5 years old, he could hum pieces by Beethoven, Mozart and Bach from memory.”

Now in his early 20’s and attending the adult education program at Giant Steps School (a partnership with the Adult Education and Vocational Service Department of the English Montreal School Board), Manoli, who is on the autism spectrum, is taking weekly piano lessons, which he has been doing for the past six years under the tutorship of Emily Curtis, the assistant director of Pedagogical Services at Giant Steps. Curtis first met Manoli while working on a research project at the school that would ultimately serve as the basis of her Master’s thesis at Berklee College of Music in Boston.

“As a high school music teacher, I had noticed that many autistic students who struggled in other subject areas were incredible in music,” she said. “They had exceptional abilities, and I wanted to learn more about the science behind music perception and cognition in relation to autism.”

For Manoli, being pitch-perfect is a must. His father says even the slightest off-note would make him upset. Curtis says it is not uncommon for autistic individuals to have particular sensitivities to pitch or rhythm.

“There is a high correlation of perfect pitch and autism far beyond what we find in neurotypical populations - a gift that can bring with it challenges, but also contribute to exceptional musicianship,” she explained.

Curtis says music is a “strength-based” discipline and builds on the interests, passions and talents of students like Manoli.

“He loves music and sitting down at the piano,” said Curtis. “He is capable of learn-

ing music just like any other student would want to learn. In a lot of areas of life, he’s defined by autism and what that means in terms of what needs to be adapted. It’s not the case for him with music. It is a strength of his, and it is something he loves to do.”

Katalifos says Manoli’s personality has emerged through music. He happily holds impromptu concerts on the family piano when friends and family stop by for a visit, with a signature bow at the end of each performance. He is amazed by his son’s improved communication skills through music, as showcased by his relationship with his music teacher.

“Playing piano gives him a lot of joy and he takes great pride in it,” he said. “He has a special bond with Emily. He is able to connect with another person and learn from her. He is driven and focused on what she is telling him. It is remarkable to see that connection.” ■

Music and mindfulness

by *Danika Swanson*

One of the wonderful things about mindfulness is that we can bring our attention to any activity we do throughout our day. As the theme of music is woven throughout this issue of *Inspirations*, the practice we'll introduce here invites us to bring our attention to music.

Mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, to the present moment, with kindness and curiosity. In previous editions, we've focused our attention on various things including the breath, sounds, sending kind thoughts, emotions, and body sensations. For this practice, we'll explore what it is like to focus our attention on listening to music.

As I have written before, ample emerging research suggests that practicing mindfulness increases well-being and decreases stress and anxiety, supports academic success and enhances emotional skills of children and teens (and their grown-ups too!). The practice of mindful listening, which involves deep focus, may particularly benefit attention and executive functioning. Music has also been shown to enhance well-being and reduce stress, among other benefits to the brain and body. Regardless of the myriad potential benefits, this

practice offers a moment for you and your child, or you alone, to slow down, be present and enjoy some good music.

You could try this practice to start your day, before bedtime, during the transition from school or work to home (you could even try this in the car before heading into the house) or anytime you (or your child) are stuck in a moment of intensity or need a break. Wherever you are, try to minimize distractions. You can listen via earbuds, headphones, a speaker, etc.

Practice

Pick a favourite piece of music or ask your child to choose a favourite song or piece of music. You can pick anything, but it can help to start with an instrumental piece.

Find a comfortable position. Take a few slow, deep breaths. Bring your attention to your body. Notice any points of contact with a surface – your feet on the floor, your back against a chair, the support of the floor or bed if you are lying down. Scan for any areas of tension. See if you can let them release.

Let your breath return to its natural rhythm.

Then, play your song of choice. If you are comfortable, let your eyes close or gaze softly downward. Listen to the music; try

to listen with your whole body.

As you listen, notice:

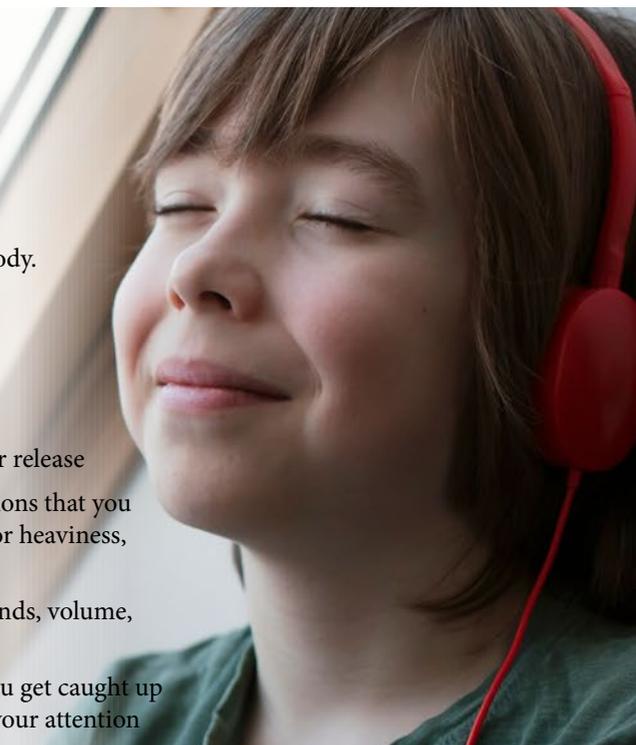
- ♪ Thoughts that arise
- ♪ Memories that pop up
- ♪ Emotions that surface or release
- ♪ Body or physical sensations that you feel – energy, lightness or heaviness, tingling, etc.
- ♪ The music – tempo, sounds, volume, intensity, notes, etc.

If your mind wanders or you get caught up in a memory, gently bring your attention back to the music.

If you feel like it, and your location allows for movement, let the music move you – sway your body, tap your toes or dance around the room!

When the song ends, return to stillness and notice how you feel. What was it like to listen to music mindfully, with your whole body and full attention? What did you notice when you took time to listen rather than just “hear” the music? ■

Danika Swanson is the consultant for the Spiritual and Community Animation Service of the English Montreal School Board and was trained by Mindful Schools to teach mindfulness to elementary and secondary students.



Resources

- From the website Greater Good in Education:
 - “Mindful Music Moments” practice that includes Dvorak’s Symphony No. 9
 - “Listening to Music Mindfully,” which encourages students to practice mindful listening with their whole bodies
- “Mindful Music Moments” playlist from The Cleveland Orchestra on YouTube
- Some tips from the Minnesota Orchestra in the article “Music and Mindfulness: Listen to Music, Mindfully”
- From the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, an article entitled “Using music for mindful awareness of emotion”

Trouve ta voie: Finding a voice through art and music

by *Randy Pinsky*

“There is always a way,” says Annick Mailloux, percussion instructor and project coordinator at l’Académie des arts Trouve ta voie, an adapted arts organization in the Town of Rosemère. Its name alludes to the centre’s mission to help individuals with all abilities find both their voice (*voix*), and their path in life (*voie*) through performance and visual art.

The organization was started in 2013 by founder Joëlle Doré-Hébert, inspired by an adapted art school in Turkey, Düşler Akademisi (Dream Academy). Ten years later, Trouve ta voie is a hub for families in the Laurentian region, providing free

music and art opportunities, and a summer day camp for individuals on the autism spectrum, with attention deficit disorder, physical or intellectual challenges.

Partners include the Minister of Culture and Communications and Canadian Tire’s Fondation Bon Départ, however most of the funding is raised through the organization’s annual end-of-year performance, showcasing student talents and providing them with a year-long objective. “Ils m’ont vraiment flabbergastés,” recounted Mailloux.

Quebec singer Mario Pelchat, known for his duet with Celine Dion, and the uncle

of autistic participant Gabriel, has been the academy’s spokesperson since 2015.

Most of the programs are free thanks to a partnership with Tim Hortons Smile Cookies initiative. In May, Mailloux led over 120 volunteers in hours of baking at the 24 participating shops, bringing in a record \$81,333.

During the holiday season, Trouve ta voie hosted its fourth Semaine Art et Différence des Laurentides, where students exhibited their work and learned from professional artisans, hosted by disabled Quebec rock singer Martin Deschamps. “We always

try to get someone who can speak about living a full life in spite of challenges,” said Mailloux.

She can relate to struggles her students experience as she herself is dyslexic. “I tell them, ‘your situation is not an excuse. There is always a solution.’”

Mailloux’s experience at Trouve ta voie has taught her to never underestimate her students. “They brought me back to the essence of life.” ■

For info: www.trouvetavoie.com.

Autisme Montréal focuses on informing

by Anita Szabadi-Gottesman



Autisme Montréal provides varied programming for children and young adults with an autism spectrum disorder.

Since its establishment in 1981 as a non-profit organization, Autisme Montréal has continually focused on improving the lives of individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as those of their family members. “Autisme Montréal’s primary mission is advocacy,” says Electra Dalamagas, clinical supervisor.

Upon receiving a formal diagnosis of a child on the autism spectrum, parents are often left confused and unsure about next steps. Autisme Montréal hopes to act as a clearinghouse for information. “We provide a wealth of information,” explained Dalamagas. “Our staff will start parents on the road to access any and all resources and information to help with their child’s journey.”

The organization is funded through provincial and federal grants, and subsidies and private donations.

Autisme Montréal’s efforts extend to informing and raising awareness about ASD, the diversity of the individuals and families involved and defending the individual and collective rights of people with ASD and their families. Its dedicated staff provide moral support to people with ASD and their families and develop individual and group support activities, alongside leisure activities.

“We realize that it is very difficult to navigate the many challenges parents face,” said Dalamagas. “We guide them as to how to tap into the help that they need [to help them to stay] informed about ever-changing health and social services, education options, waiting lists, etc.” Changes happen so often with regards to government services that Autisme Montréal prioritizes helping parents understand and navigate them. The gamut of services includes information relating to public and private therapies, access to government grants and specialized therapies available in the Montreal area.

Autisme Montréal also provides much needed programs and services such as weekend or holiday season respite for parents or caregivers, specialized summer and spring break day camps, and swimming lessons in collaboration with the city of Montreal. For adults with intellectual challenges, Autisme Montréal runs several leisure/socialization activities every month.

“Autisme Montréal is a true community organization,” said Dalamagas. “We help unlock the doors and help you walk through them. Information is key.” ■

For info: www.autisme-montreal.com.

Mackay students venture out to see what’s new at All Access Life

by Leslie Levinson

In mid-March, one of the Augmentative and Alternative Communication classes from the Mackay Centre School had a chance to visit Brad Heaven and Danny O’Connor, co-founders, at their All Access Life office in the West Island. We were so excited to see all the adapted equipment and toys they had that we could try out.

Brad greeted us and showed us what he can control using his eyes and smart technology. He locked and unlocked his office door, and demonstrated how he could manoeuvre a robotic vacuum cleaner.

Then they showed us the adapted toys we could play with. There was a motorized Hot Wheels character in a wheelchair that we could move and spin using switches.

The best part was playing video games with our friends using the Xbox adapted controller. My students were so excited to be active participants in a video game instead of just passive observers. It was very powerful for the students to see someone like them – someone in a wheelchair and who

uses alternative means to communicate and access technology – be able to play games and control things in the environment. For the parents and adults who accompanied us, it exposed them to the possibilities of what their child could do in the future.

Here’s what the students had to say:

Bennett: “I am so excited. I want to play video games with my brother.”

Maurice: “I was so happy to play video games.”

River: “I like going to see Brad.”

Aiden: “I want more. I want to go back. I want to play with my brothers.”

Adhen: “I liked racing Aaron wheels, the Hot Wheels guy.”

All Access Life is a non profit, which offers a website providing information on the latest trends in adaptive products. ■

Leslie Levinson is an Augmentative Communication teacher at the Mackay Centre School.



Students from an Augmentative and Alternative Communication class from Mackay Centre School visited the offices of All Access Life on March 12. Photo courtesy of All Access Life.

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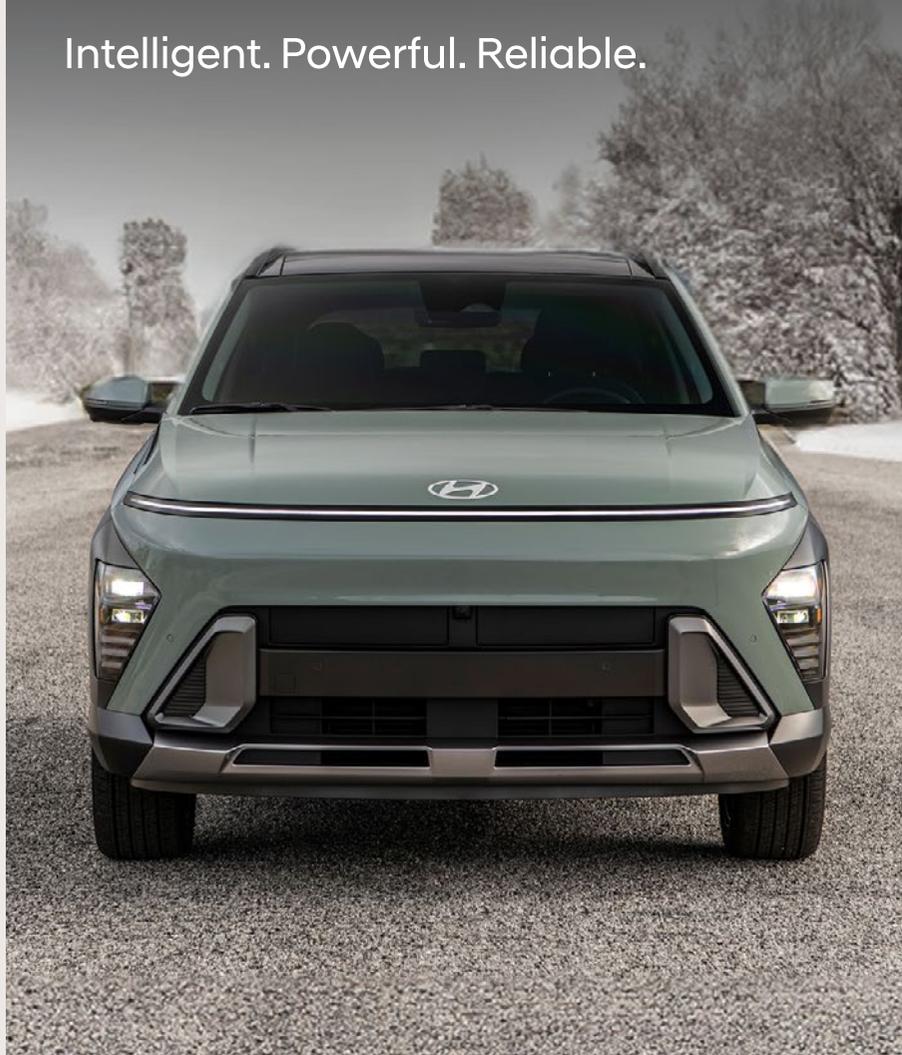
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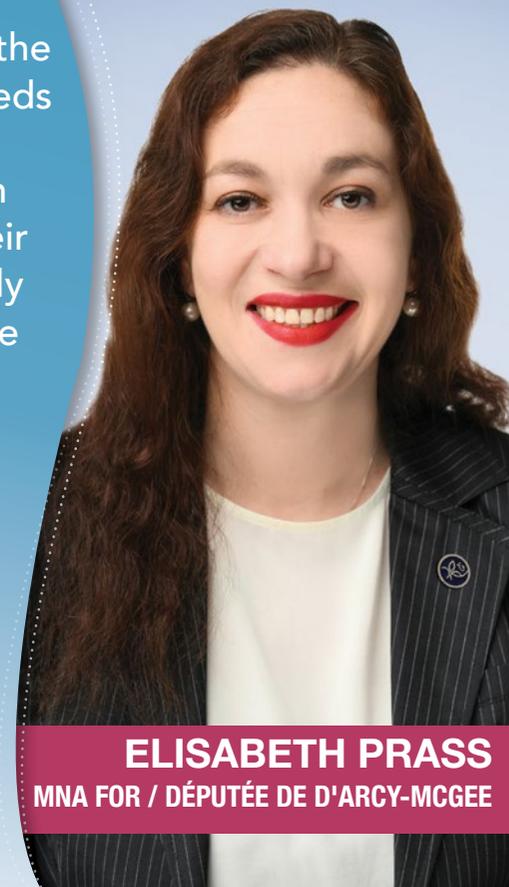
As the MNA for
D'Arcy-McGee and as the
mother of a special needs
child, I have so much
respect and admiration
for the schools and their
staff who work tirelessly
to help our kids achieve
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MNA FOR / DÉPUTÉE DE D'ARCY-MCGEE





Services éducatifs / Educational services

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Early Intervention / Ages 0 – 3

This age is key to engage and develop the brain's neural pathways that are so important to spoken language. Families are coached weekly — in their home or at daycare — on how to help their child listen and speak. With the use of hearing technology, such as hearing aids or cochlear implants, and intensive auditory stimulation your child's capacity will bloom.

Préscolaire / 3 à 5 ans

Votre enfant jouera et apprendra avec des camarades entendants dans un cadre préscolaire naturel et dynamique. Nous proposons des séances individuelles quotidiennes qui se concentrent sur le développement de l'écoute et du langage parlé. Nous assurons également un suivi étroit de la technologie auditive de votre enfant. Les frères et sœurs sont les bienvenus.

Preschool / Ages 3- 5

Your child will play and learn with hearing peers in a natural and vibrant preschool setting. We provide daily one-on-one sessions that focus on developing listening and spoken language skills. We also provide close monitoring of your child's hearing technology. Siblings welcome.

École primaire / de la 1re à la 6e année

Nos petites classes suivent le programme scolaire québécois avec des spécialistes en français, en musique et en activité physique, avec un accent particulier sur l'apprentissage de la lecture. Chaque élève bénéficie d'un plan d'intervention individuel répondant à ses besoins spécifiques. Nous continuons de développer les capacités d'écoute et de langage parlé de votre enfant tout en optimisant sa technologie auditive. Notre objectif est de combler l'écart linguistique afin de préparer votre enfant à rejoindre le milieu scolaire régulier.

Elementary school / Grades 1 – 6

Our small classes follow the Quebec curriculum, and include French, music and gym, with an extra emphasis on literacy. Each student has an individualized education plan (IEP) to address their specific needs. We continue to develop your child's listening and spoken language skills while optimizing their hearing technology. Our goal is to close the language gap in preparation for your child to join the mainstream.

Soutien aux élèves en vue de leur intégration en milieu scolaire régulier

Lorsque le moment sera venu, nous aiderons votre enfant à intégrer son école de quartier. Nous nous rendons actuellement chaque semaine dans plus de 100 écoles, anglophones et francophones, pour soutenir plus de 150 élèves présentant une perte auditive. Nous travaillons en partenariat avec l'équipe-école pour permettre à votre enfant d'apprendre aux côtés de ses camarades.

Student support for mainstream schooling

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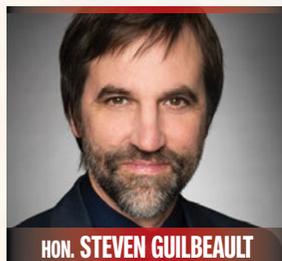
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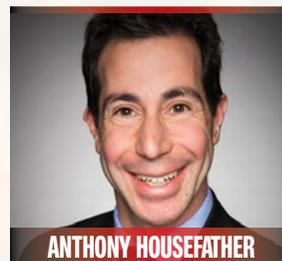
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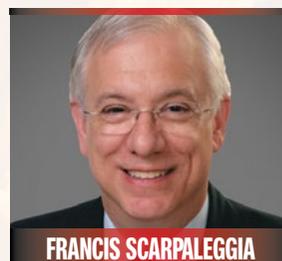
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A look at the journeys of two Peter Hall students

by *Randy Pinsky*

William

For Kahnawake resident Rebecca Scott, enrolling her 7-year-old autistic son William in Peter Hall School three years ago was both the best - and most difficult - decision she ever made. While she wanted to keep him in the community, she realized he would have the best chance at a school adapted to his needs.

While doctors predicted he would struggle with basic tasks and interactions, William, who is non-verbal, is now more communicative, using pictograms or his iPad, and is more social - "a goofy child with a contagious smile," shared educator Menna Shawki.

With greater familiarity with routine, "his anxiety level [has] dropped, and his confidence increased, resulting in a lot more engagement and cooperation," observed Shawki. "He now identifies as part of the group."

Due to Peter Hall's signature close collaboration between parents, teachers and support staff, goals are reinforced, and challenges addressed.



From left, William and his siblings Kalem, Lila and Kallie at the family's recent trip to Walt Disney World. Photo courtesy of R. Scott



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"Things we were told he would never be able to do, he's doing now," observed Scott, such as riding his bike and being more autonomous.

As a team, the family and educators are helping William reduce self-aggressive behaviours when frustrated, and working on taking turns, self-regulating and eating with others. He now has a greater capacity for waiting, as was evidenced in a recent family trip to Walt Disney World in Florida.

Scott finds comfort in the Māori word for autism, "takiwātanga," or "in his/her own time and space," an approach echoed by Shawki. It was in fact at Disney that William decided he was ready to become toilet trained; something had clicked.

He is one of a handful of children bussed in from Kahnawake in Peter Hall's new Indigenous student program. The family is excited to promote the CTV News and photo campaign on autistic Mohawk community members they are part of, showcasing the diverse faces of autism as well as the challenges in accessing specialized services. The exhibit was being planned for World Autism Month in April and at the Iroquois museum in Howes Cave, New York in October.

"Advocating is a passion of mine," said Scott. "I really believe there is an ability to [every] disability."

Pato

A work visit to Montreal four years ago for Paola Lavín Gonzalez led to the discovery of Peter Hall School in Ville St. Laurent. The family ended up relocating so that her son Patricio (Pato) could benefit from the individualized services offered there. "Peter

Hall has been life-changing for us," she shared. "It went beyond our expectations."

Pato is now 9 years old, and his mother has witnessed noticeable improvements in his communication skills, emotional regulation and adaptability.

Gonzalez empathizes with families who find themselves feeling hopeless upon getting an autism diagnosis. She has been very grateful for Peter Hall's approach of creating individualized plans for each student, drawing on insight from educators, the family and specialists and culminating with a community of critical support.

The Seesaw app has also been an invaluable tool for the family, "creat[ing] a powerful learning loop" between the involved parties, as described on the site, and updating all on goals and setbacks.

For instance, Pato recently changed medication and was sluggish during the transition. His teacher quickly noticed and inquired through the app if he had slept well, "even before I had dropped off the other two kids at school!" said Gonzalez. This attentiveness to behaviour changes has been a great help in Pato's progress, particularly for primarily non-verbal autistic children like him.

"Pato has a lot of potential and learns quickly," said educator Sukyung Cho. A mischievous child, "he will jump around until I do the 'teacher glare,' then sit and try again after a while," she laughed. Cho has noticed he has improved in expressing frustration in more socially appropriate ways and communicating his needs and preferences. For instance, never a fan of boots, he can now indicate when the laces are too tight rather than experiencing severe dysregulation as before.

Cho has also observed that Pato is calmer and more able to focus since the winter break. He understands the sequence of activities and frequently refers to the visual schedule in the classroom to see "what's next."

Gonzalez describes Peter Hall as "a golden piece for every family who has the opportunity to go there." ■



Pato surrounded by his family, from left: dad Marcelo, siblings Rebeca and Philippe, and mom Paola Lavín Gonzalez. Photo courtesy of P. Lavín Gonzalez



by *Mike Cohen*

Report on Parliament

New speaker of the house talks accessibility

The massive ongoing renovation of Parliament Hill, centered on revitalizing and reworking Centre Block, is expected to take until at least 2030 and cost up to \$5 billion to complete. For now, our federally elected officials have taken up residence in the Sir John A. Macdonald building across the street.

I had the good fortune to interview the Honourable Greg Fergus, installed last fall as the new Speaker of the House of Commons. He told me that he is committed to ensuring that the new facility will be fully accessible.

In terms of accessibility upgrades, there will be new grab bars, tactile indicators like braille signage, touch-free door openers, lower reception counters and modified listening devices inside the chamber for those with hearing impairments.

“As Speaker, I am proud to work with a team of diverse employees who do the important work of keeping the House of Commons running smoothly,” Fergus stated. “Our Institution wants everyone in the workplace to have a voice and contribute in their own way to excellence. All our activities and services must be accessible, so that everyone can participate fully. To become more accessible, the House of Commons is working to raise awareness, remove barriers and promote inclusion in the workplace.”

Fergus made it clear that he is not waiting until 2030 to see that improvements in these areas are made. The team at the

House of Commons, he maintains, are committed to meeting all obligations under the Accessible Canada Act, including its regulations and standards, and to being a leader in accessibility. His goal remains to provide an accessible and secure built environment to Members of Parliament, their staff, the administration employees and the Canadian public and visitors.

The Speaker emphasized that closed captioning is available, live and on-demand, for the Chamber and for televised or webcast committee proceedings at <https://parlvu.parl.gc.ca/Harmony/en>.

“I have two constituency offices, and, from the moment I was elected, I ensured that they were both fully handicapped accessible,” he said.

Fergus was born and raised on Montreal’s West Island. He has represented the constituency of Hull-Aylmer since 2015.

Minister Khara attends launch of business disability network

As celebrations for International Day of Persons with Disabilities were held around the world last December 4, the Minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities Kamal Khara attended the launch of the Canadian Business Disability Network, hosted by Manulife Canada, and said it “is a true testament to the government and Canadians’ commitment to building accessible businesses.” ■

Mike Cohen is manager, Marketing and Communications with the English Montreal School Board, an elected city council member for the city of Côte Saint-Luc and takes an interest in federal politics.

« T’engages-tu? » : un balado essentiel sur l’autisme et le marché du travail

par *Emmanuelle Assor*

Bonne nouvelle pour les jeunes autistes en âge de travailler et leur entourage! Une série de balados très intéressante vient d’être lancée sur le thème de l’insertion des autistes dans le marché du travail. Si bien nommé « T’engages-tu? », ce balado concerne non seulement les autistes qui désirent trouver un emploi, mais aussi les futurs employeurs qui aimeraient embaucher des personnes ayant un potentiel incroyable et des défis particuliers.

Pour que naisse « T’engages-tu? », il a fallu beaucoup de financement du gouvernement du Québec, des idées innovatrices, du travail, des recherches et des rencontres. Derrière ce projet, on retrouve la superbe équipe d’Intégration-Travail Laurentides, un organisme dont la mission vise l’intégration, le suivi et le maintien en emploi de diverses clientèles. Dorénavant disponible sur Spotify et Apple, « T’engages-tu? » se décline en 12 épisodes de 30 minutes, menés avec la belle énergie et l’expertise de Guylaine Guay, conférencière, animatrice et mère de deux jeunes autistes.

« T’engages-tu? » donne ainsi la parole à toutes sortes de personnes concernées

par l’autisme et par les avenues de travail proposées à cette population au profil différent. Au cours des épisodes, on y entend des parents, des enseignantes et enseignants spécialisés, des intervenantes et intervenants variés provenant du milieu de l’éducation et de la santé, ainsi que des employeurs ouverts à la diversité. Le balado sert aussi à partager des conseils judicieux et à nous inspirer avec des témoignages de réussite d’inclusion professionnelle.

Lors de la soirée de lancement du balado, le 22 février 2024 au Cabaret C à Laval, une centaine de personnes étaient réunies pour souligner et répandre la bonne nouvelle. Plusieurs personnalités, dont madame Kateri Champagne Jourdain, ministre de l’Emploi et ministre responsable de la région de la Côte-Nord, se sont succédé au micro pour partager leur enthousiasme face au projet. Enfin, pour clore le tout, un jeune autiste devenu pâtissier après un stage a témoigné de sa passion envers son nouveau métier. À ses côtés, son père très fier et son employeuse ravie. Celle-ci a fait l’éloge de son apprenti et a expliqué qu’une fois la période d’adaptation passée, tout le monde a apprécié la présence d’un autiste en cuisine qui concocte de si délicieux desserts! ■



Lors de la soirée de lancement du balado « T’engages-tu? », le 24 février au Cabaret C à Laval, de gauche à droite : Kateri Champagne Jourdain, ministre de l’Emploi et ministre responsable de la région de la Côte-Nord; Sandra Fréchette, conseillère en emploi – Service spécialisé, Intégration-Travail Laurentides; Nadya Joly, conseillère en emploi – Service spécialisé, Intégration-Travail Laurentides; Mylène Gauthier, directrice générale – Intégration-Travail Laurentides et Guylaine Guay, autrice, conférencière et animatrice. Photo : Jessica Godin-Desjardins, Maman Ourse Photographie



by Elisabeth Prass

Working on benefits and respite services

Let me begin by wishing you and your children a happy belated World Autism Awareness Day and Month!

Every child deserves the chance to reach for their highest hopes and fulfill their greatest potential. April is Autism Awareness month, and it gives us the opportunity to reaffirm our support for those on the autism spectrum, and to uphold our obligation to help make sure every child – regardless of ability or background – is accepted for who they are and able to lead a life free from discrimination and filled with opportunity.

Let us create a future in which no person living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is limited by anything but the size of their dreams, and one in which all people have the opportunity to live a life filled with

a sense of identity, purpose and self-determination. Striving to be an inclusive society, we must support individuals on the autism spectrum and their families, and help shape a world in which people are accepted for who they are.

As parents, we are preoccupied with the situation our children will find themselves in when they become adults. Regarding the transition period between childhood to adulthood, in July 2022 the CAQ government removed autism as one of the diagnoses that gives eligible people automatic access to Social Solidarity benefits. For many adults living with ASD who are not able to work, these benefits are their only source of income. I recently sponsored a petition on behalf of the Quebec Federation for Autism to ask that ASD and other diagnoses related to mental health be reinstated on that list,

to allow those individuals to not have to fight for access to funding.

As for us parents, respite can be an indispensable resource to allow us to recharge and give us some rare time for ourselves. I questioned the Minister for Social Services in the National Assembly about the fact that last year the CAQ government announced \$50 million for respite services, yet a year later Répit Québec reported that over half of their members still had not received any of said funding, and that the average wait time for access to respite services is 317 days. This is completely unacceptable for our families. As waiting lists for respite services increase, access to these services is on the decline. This needs to be a priority if this government truly wants to support parents with a child living with ASD.

I promise to be your voice at the National Assembly and to hold the government accountable to our kids and families. We are stronger together and I will carry your concerns and needs to the decision makers in Quebec City so that we can work together to achieve the best for our children.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office if we can provide you with information or be of any help: elisabeth.prass.dmg@assnat.qc.ca or 514.488.7028. ■

Elisabeth Prass is MNA for D'Arcy-McGee, Official Opposition Critic for Social Services, Mental Health, for People Living with a Disability or with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and for the Fight Against Homelessness and mom of a wonderful little boy living with ASD.



by Steven Atme

From original cast member to musical director of I Can Dream Theatre

A lot has changed since I came back to I Can Dream Theatre (ICDT). I had the pleasure of working with founders Ada Masciarelli, Tricia Bartley and Michele Matthews as an original cast member in 2011. A year later, I was asked by the trio to take on the role of Michele's assistant musical director. After helping with two productions, *Dead... On the Orient Express* and *Saving Marvel*, Michele retired, and the team recruited two people to run music and choreography for 2020's potential production, *The Dream Cabaret*. Then, Covid-19 happened.

For three years, ICDT held their meetings over Zoom. Unfortunately, the two new recruits couldn't continue because of other opportunities, and after some changes were made, Ada and Trish carried on with playwrighting, directing, making song and some choreography decisions. Hold up! Where was the musical director? Well, they thought of me as their last resource, like the famous line from *Star Wars*: "You're my only hope."

After some efforts to finalize the position, and after lots of discussion, I agreed. It was a nice "welcome home" moment, honestly.

The production titled *The Godfather's*

Wonderful Life was inspired by two iconic films, *The Godfather* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. The funniest coincidence for me was before ICDT, I was involved with the Summit School Players when they did their 2010 production, *The Godfather: A Family Reunion*, which was based on *The Partridge Family*. I played Dean Martin.

Ada and Trish provided me with songs to study, direction and tools for singers and arranged vocalization. I showed up for rehearsals once a month and then biweekly before the show a year later. It was a major success on February 9 and 10 at the Eric Maclean Center for the Performing Arts. The whole team did an amazing job with their performances. What a strong comeback! I was especially thrilled to see the singers shine.

During rehearsals, I would tell them they would never know what strong abilities they had until making attempts and strengthening them. Even a tiny technical adjustment can create a major impact. More importantly, I would tell them that you must have passion, confidence and happiness. Connect with the music, understand and interpret it in your own way because it shows who you are.

This advice applies to everything! The team demonstrated it all, and I couldn't be prouder of them. And I'm proud of myself, going from being an original cast member to musical director. ■

Steven Atme is a pianist and composer, gives private piano lessons and is a public speaker, enlightening on his experience growing up and living with autism.



by *Nick Katalifos*

The promise of a new school for students with specialized needs

Spring is in the air, and there is exciting news from the English Montreal School Board that I would like to share with the *Inspirations* community. A seven-month consultation process has begun to discuss a new, innovative school for elementary students with social-emotional challenges. Slated to open for the 2026-2027 academic year, the school is proposed being housed in the building of Nesbitt Elementary School in Rosemount-La Petite Patrie. Being a large building, it can accommodate two separate schools.

Nearby St. Raphael School has long been welcoming students with social-emotional challenges, and they have developed strategies that have helped children successfully reintegrate back into their home school.

With a growing demand for this type of educational setting, the project proposes to close St. Raphael and open a new school with more space to serve students with these same challenges in an environment adapted to help them develop strategies and coping mechanisms. Students will follow the regular curriculum with special adaptations, if needed – and always with the goal of re-integration back into their home schools.

The idea is for the new school to also be a centre of expertise, by consolidating resources developed at St. Raphael into one location and become a place for parents to meet with school professionals and form support networks with other parents. It could even be a meeting space for teachers

from other schools to come together to share information and find solutions.

Consultation will involve input from several stakeholders, including the governing boards of several elementary schools, including Nesbitt and St. Raphael, and committees such as the EMSB Parents' Committee and the Advisory Committee on Special Education Services (ACSES). As well, input from teacher unions will be an integral part in forming recommendations. ■

Nick Katalifos is the director general of the English Montreal School Board.

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Mon premier emploi rémunéré

par *Kenza Deschênes-Kherchi*

Je m'appelle Kenza Deschênes-Kherchi, j'ai 31 ans et je vis avec le syndrome d'Asperger. J'habite à Saint-Lambert sur la Rive-Sud de Montréal. J'aimerais vous partager une expérience enrichissante que j'ai vécue l'été dernier lorsque j'ai décroché mon premier emploi rémunéré à la crèmerie Pinocchio de Jonquière.

Tout a commencé en juillet 2022 après avoir vu aux nouvelles qu'Anick Arsenault avait engagé un jeune autiste de 12 ans. Cette vignette m'a vraiment touchée. De passage au Saguenay, je suis allée à la crèmerie Pinocchio avec des amies. Lorsque j'ai rencontré la gérante, Anick Arsenault, je l'ai félicitée pour son inclusivité et son ouverture face à la différence. Elle m'a offert de travailler avec elle l'été suivant. J'ai tout de suite sauté sur l'occasion, ravie de pouvoir occuper un emploi rémunéré dans ma région préférée.

Le 4 juillet 2023, j'ai donc officiellement commencé à travailler à la crèmerie pendant six semaines. La première journée, j'étais tellement emballée d'avoir enfin un travail rémunéré. Je me sentais un peu nerveuse, mais c'est normal lorsqu'on entreprend quelque chose de nouveau. Mon horaire à la crèmerie était de 16 heures par semaine. Grâce à cette expérience, j'ai pu apprendre plusieurs nouvelles tâches dont tenir la caisse, chose que je n'aurais jamais cru possible il y a à peine quelques années. C'était vraiment agréable pour moi de servir la clientèle. J'étais toujours impatiente d'arriver au travail.

J'ai également appris à faire des barbotines (*slushs*), à organiser un bar à coupes glacées, à préparer des mélanges de coulis de chocolat et de la pâte à biscuits.

Les membres de l'équipe de la crèmerie étaient super sympathiques et ouverts à la différence. Je me souviens d'une fois où une employée a fait preuve d'une telle ouverture en offrant à un jeune homme avec un

trouble du spectre de l'autisme (TSA) une petite expérience de travail à la crèmerie. Dans la vie, il faut des gens bienveillants qui sont réceptifs à la différence et qui donnent la chance à des personnes neurodivergentes de vivre des expériences susceptibles de rehausser leur estime personnelle.

Les clients aussi étaient gentils et ouverts face à la différence. Ils étaient heureux qu'Anick m'ait donné cette chance.

J'étais fière d'avoir un travail rémunéré et de contribuer à la société. Je me sentais normale. Grâce à mon expérience de travail à la crèmerie, j'ai confiance maintenant que je suis capable d'occuper un véritable emploi. Depuis le mois d'octobre, j'effectue un stage dans le cadre du programme de préparation à l'emploi du SEMO Montérégie comme étalagiste chez Pharmaprix à Saint-Lambert, à raison de 15 heures par semaine. ■



Kenza Deschênes-Kherchi |

Kenza Deschênes-Kherchi, âgée de 31 ans, vit avec le syndrome d'Asperger. Elle habite à Saint-Lambert sur la Rive-Sud de Montréal.

Galileo work program students share their experiences

by *Randy Pinsky*

The Social Integration Work Program at the Galileo Adult Education Centre in Montreal North has grown over the past decade. Students Nancy Leopardi, Erica Farini and Ruby Ipekian, alongside their teacher Luciana Franceschini, shared their internship experiences on an *Inspirations* News podcast March 14 at a time when the students were completing work placements at Mode de Vie and Home Depot.

Podcast host Mark Bergman: Welcome to another edition of the *Inspirations* News podcast. I'm very excited to talk to my friends at Galileo. Luciana, could you tell us what the Social Integration Work Program is all about?

Luciana: Sure! We work with our students to help them integrate into the workforce, discussing skills like responsibility and time management, but also about themselves.

The second part is an internship where they get to practice these skills in the field. **Mark:** Nancy, tell us why you're participating in the program.

Nancy: At my job, they don't judge me on my disability. They treat me like a team worker, and they ask [my opinion].

Mark: How does that make you feel?

Nancy: I'm very proud because I feel I am part of the team.

Mark: Ruby, how did Galileo help prepare you for this stage [internship]?

Ruby: I like the school and my teachers. We watch videos about security and communication.

Luciana: Our students have proven that they are capable – we just have to be willing to adapt to their way of learning. They are really good with structure and routine, have amazing attention to detail, and can accomplish so much.

Mark: There [seems to be] a sense of belonging as well.

Luciana: One hundred percent. The internship part is amazing because it connects them socially to the community.

Erica: Sometimes it's hard with my problems and insecurities. I am thankful for the people who support me.

Luciana: It proves to them that we believe in them, so they need to believe in themselves too!

Mark: Nancy, what would you tell somebody who is not sure about hiring someone with disabilities?

Nancy: Just give us a chance, and we'll give you 150 percent.



Students in the Social Integration Work Program at Galileo Adult Education Centre, from left: Ruby Ipekian, internship supervisor Michel Massé, Erica Farina, Nancy Leopardi and facilitating teacher Luciana Franceschini. Photo courtesy of Galileo Adult Education Centre

Mark: What advice would you give to someone who's afraid to go into the workforce?

Ruby: Be strong, be courageous, be positive.

Erica: Believe in yourself and don't let people tell you you're not able to do it.

Mark: Thank you! Those are great words to end on. ■

Patrons line up at student-run L.I.N.K.S. café

by *Gail Bernstein and Anna Gualtieri*

L.I.N.K.S. High School students in the Pre-work training and DEFIS work skills classes are on a mission: To provide students and staff the chance to delight in a positive, friendly and delectable experience.

The vision of a café and gift shop is now a reality, where the students have become entrepreneurs and are reaping the benefits. They are acquiring important life skills as

they navigate the essentials of running a business and discovering their strengths, interests and talents. Experimenting with the various jobs associated with running a café, they are learning to hone skills in the areas of money math, cooking, food preparation and hygiene, customer service, sales, shopping in-store and online, kitchen safety as well as all the associated soft skills. A specific team is dedicated to recycling and composting coffee pods, in effort to manage waste responsibly.

An entrepreneurship class developed the website.

The café is open twice a week, and students and staff have been lining up to enjoy bagels, grilled cheese sandwiches, croissants, hot chocolate, coffee, tea and other special items.

Students in various classes are selling their handmade wares including gift cards, bracelets, ornaments and more. Competency-based Approach to Social Participation students have been proud to be in charge of displaying positivity quotes for all to reflect on.



Café Pause for Positivity student employees at L.I.N.K.S. High School show off their new uniforms in late February. Photo: Madeleine Valerio

The learning goals of the café extend to both the employees and customers. Teachers use the café as a tool to teach their students the skills required to become customers, including speaking French.

The hardworking students are excited to spend the profits on exploring the city over two days. Their skillset continues to grow as they must plan out an itinerary, budget

accordingly, learn to prioritize and how to pack lightly. All involved are increasing their independence, self-esteem, motivation to learn and feeling a part of the L.I.N.K.S. family. ■

Gail Bernstein is a DÉFIS Work Skills teacher and Anna Gualtieri is a teacher in the Work Oriented Training Pathway program, both with the English Montreal School Board.

Rising above challenges

by *Olivia Integlia*

When Kaleb-Wolf De Melo Torres was applying to high school in Grade 6, he was attracted to Vincent Massey Collegiate (VMC) of the English Montreal School Board for its advanced math and science program. At the time, he had dreams of becoming a geneticist. Upon receiving his acceptance, he was excited about the new prospect but knew it would not come without its challenges.

Born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle bone disease, De Melo Torres has used a wheelchair his whole life. “My bones are like a Swiss cheese. There are holes inside of them [...] That means that I don’t grow as much and that I’m quite fragile,” he explained. Throughout his life, he has broken over 200 bones. “I always have to be careful about how I do everything,” said De Melo Torres, adding that a single bump into another student can result in a broken bone.

VMC has been accommodating to him, he said. “They have an elevator, and they do have an entrance for me.” He also added that the school ordered smaller desks for him, and his teachers always dismiss him

a few minutes earlier from class so he can navigate the halls safely.

While De Melo Torres says that there is always more that can be done, he appreciates how staff and students have become more aware of how to be cautious to prevent injury and have done everything to ensure that he is treated like any ordinary student. He was particularly thankful for his physical education teacher, Zachary MacDonald, for his work in preparing a modified lesson plan to ensure that he could be included with the other students.

Now in Secondary 4, De Melo Torres decided to take on a new challenge. Since elementary school, he has wanted to join the debate team. “[My friend] praised the debate team, and that’s also one of the reasons I wanted to join VMC,” he said. He was also motivated by a former teacher who taught the importance of always justifying his opinions.

De Melo Torres had a lot to look up to when he was in elementary school. Over the years, Vincent Massey has had many successes, dating back to 2008. The most

recent success includes being a semi-finalist team for the 2019 Championnat national de débat français.

When regular school life resumed after the Covid-19 restrictions, De Melo Torres remembers thinking, “Alright, you know what? Why not?” he added, “My mom was like, ‘You always wanted to do this.’”

The VMC debate club meets once a week after school to prepare for upcoming tournaments. Students discuss current events and learn to formulate arguments effectively. De Melo Torres says that the debate club has been an inclusive space without the many challenges that a student in his position would face in other situations.

Despite still being new to the craft, De Melo Torres speaks with confidence. He will even sometimes raise the seat of his wheelchair to be as tall as his opponents.



Kaleb-Wolf De Melo Torres debating the existence of Valentine’s Day at practice on February 15 at Vincent Massey Collegiate.

De Melo Torres’ hard work paid off this spring. In April at the 2024 French Nationals Championships, he and his debating partner made it to the quarter finals and ranked seventh best team in all of Canada.

At VMC, De Melo Torres feels he is among a community of individuals who share his interests and curiosity to learn. ■

Making connections in the community: A step towards independence

by *Sarah Lynch*

Increasing my son’s independence and supporting his social participation within the community has always been a priority. Recently, my son Kian, 14, has expressed his desire for more independence and agency over his decisions. Given that he has a moderate intellectual disability in the context of Down syndrome, creating opportunities for independence and social participation requires some delicate planning and support from others.

Within the past few months, Kian has become a client at our local barber, Mama’s Boy. When booking his first appointment, I asked him to choose his barber and he happily did, choosing Danielle, who has since become an important part of his life within the community.

After Kian’s first haircut with Danielle, he asked me if he could go on his own the next time and walk home by himself. Seeing his desire to be like other teenagers made me realize that there must be a way to make this happen for him, albeit in steps.

I spoke with Danielle about the possibility of “dropping him off” while I stood waiting outside the barber. Without hesitation, she was on board. Over the next few haircuts, I would leave Kian to go in by himself, guide him to pay with my credit card and wait for him further and further down the street. While I waited outside, Kian was able to greet Danielle, the other clients and barbers, describe the type of haircut he wanted and enjoy some alone time without

the presence of a parent. Once his haircut was done, I asked Danielle to ensure that he turned left when leaving the shop, guiding him towards my home.

As I watched him walk down the street a few weeks ago, his face showed an incredible sense of pride and accomplishment. He was learning how to go to an appointment, ask for what he wanted, pay, leave and then safely cross the street on his own for the first time.

This connection with Danielle and her willingness to support his autonomy has been a touching experience. We frequently walk by the barber and stop in to say hello. We are always greeted by Danielle, who will stop working to spend time with Kian. The last time we saw her, he brought her a rose.

We are planning a haircut in the coming weeks, and I can’t help but smile as I picture him walking into the barber shop with more confidence, excited to show off his new wallet with a prepaid Visa card inside.

My next challenge will be teaching him how to get inside my building on his own, but I realize that we are far from that moment. In the meantime, I will focus on the happiness and pride that Kian feels, while creating opportunities for him to be like every other teenager.

I thank Danielle for her kind actions. I am so grateful for the compassion she has shown towards him. Small gestures can make a huge impact on someone’s life.

And Kian is grateful for finding his rose. ■

Sarah Lynch is special education consultant for the English Montreal School Board and coordinator, Centre of Excellence for the Physically, Intellectually, and Multi-Challenged.

Special education committee rolls out digital toolkits for parents

by *Jordan Stoopler*

As a mother of two sons (now aged 16 and 18) with learning challenges, Rosemarie Federico has long had to navigate the bumpy roads of their respective educational paths. She remembers attending parent teacher conferences at their schools, later leaving with regrets for not having asked specific questions she had originally gone looking for answers to.

“I navigated blindly,” she said. “Had I known back then what I know now, things would have gone a lot smoother. I would have spared myself a lot of tears and frustrations. I would have understood more and not felt like my child was being attacked or targeted. There are so many

emotional roller coasters that a parent goes through when they discover that their child is neurodivergent.”

Federico, also the chair of the English Montreal School Board’s (EMSB) Advisory Committee on Special Education Services (ACSES), is aiming to make sure today’s parents don’t find themselves in the same situation.

The committee, which brings together parents, teachers, school administrators and support staff, among others, is building digital toolkits containing tips and templates to help all parents manage various situations and best advocate for their

children. Topics being covered include how to enter into a respectful inquiry with your child’s teacher about a bad grade or the overall roles to play in your child’s academic success.

“It can be very overwhelming for parents,” said Julie Kristof, a parent member of the ACSES committee and governing board chair at John Grant High School. “The goal is to lessen the sense of overwhelm and to make sure that parents and students have the right tools.”

The toolkits are being compiled in collaboration with the EMSB, the English Parents’ Committee Association of Quebec (EPCA),

la Fédération des comités de parents du Québec, Éducation Québec and Société de formation à distance des centres de services scolaires et des commissions scolaires du Québec. Videos are being rolled out monthly and are available on the EMSB website and EPCA’s Facebook page.

“All these different organizations are working together for a common goal,” said Federico. “There is a lot of overlap with our members. We like to be pioneers, and we saw this as an opportunity. These issues are not going to go away anytime soon. This project became very necessary for all of us.” ■

Zebruary: Raising awareness on rare diseases

by *Randy Pinsky*

For families affected by rare diseases, each day is a challenge with many unknowns. The Regroupement québécois des maladies orphelines (RQMO) has renamed the second month of the year “Zebruary,” coinciding with the globally coordinated Rare Disease Day, to raise awareness of their cause.

Much as the zebra is less common than its cousin, the horse, the spirit behind the RQMO’s “Show Your Zebra” campaign is to invite people to raise awareness about less common diseases on social media. From speaking engagements at schools to online “Zebinars,” the initiative aims to make those impacted feel less alone.

RQMO executive director Jonathan Pratt explained how the organization was created in 2010 to advocate for families confronted with challenging (and often undiagnosed) conditions. While rare diseases refer to cases impacting less than one in 2,000, more than three million Canadians are affected. Most are children, however there can also be late development as with renowned

Quebec singer Celine Dion’s recent diagnosis of stiff-person syndrome.

Limited understanding of rare diseases can result in medical practitioners being unable to provide much guidance, let alone a prognosis.

The RQMO’s iRARE Centre is thus a unique online resource in Canada, connecting families with international specialists. Individuals can find useful documentation, simplified research, as well as hope and support from families across the world dealing with a similar condition.

“You want to know: ‘What can I do for my child?’ and there are [often] no answers,” shared Véronique D’Amour-Dionne, mother of 5-year-old Cassandre, who has a rare mutation of the proteasome protein complex (PMSC5), key for cell functioning.

Determined to find solutions, D’Amour-Dionne reached out to the Centre d’excellence en recherche sur les maladies orphelines -Fondation Courtois (CERMO-FC) at



Cassandre and her family, with mom Véronique D’Amour-Dionne, brother Félix and dad Dominic Paquin-Trempe. Photo: Arthur Beauchet

UQAM. “As a parent, you have to ask and fight for things.” The family created a website (<https://projetsmc5.com/>) documenting their story and to solicit donations for research.

With 20 years in the field, CERMO-FC researcher Marc Lussier has been instrumental in the family’s journey, admiring “Véronique’s motivation in moving mountains” for her daughter.

There is a new ray of hope for families with the Quebec Plan for Rare Diseases launched last May by the provincial government. Premised on sensitization and training, enhanced access to diagnosis, care and services, and greater funding for clinical trials, “the RQMO can help with the different goals,” said Pratt. “We just need the government to put the stamp on and say ‘go.’” ■

Dinner in the Dark does the trick

On February 8, the Quebec Federation of the Blind (QFB), with funding provided by Habilitas Foundation, treated 73 Layton-Lethbridge-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre (LLMRC) staff to “Dinner in the Dark,” catered by Pasta Casareccia. This event was in celebration of White Cane Week, which took place February 5 to 10 and aims to raise public awareness of the challenges faced by Canadians living with vision loss.

“For people to really understand the challenges of living with vision loss, they need to live it firsthand. I thought that a few hours of being blindfolded and in the dark would probably do the trick,” said **Lucio D’Intino**, president, QFB and organizer of the event.

Volunteers escorted blindfolded guests to communal tables in the darkened Layton Hall at the LLMRC and served the meal. Visually impaired ambassadors sat with guests throughout the dinner, imparting



From left, back row: Volunteers Cole Munro and Jacob Karpfen. front row volunteer Annie Krespil; Lucio D’Intino, and volunteer Gina Mills at Dinner in the Dark during White Cane Week at the Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre on February 8.

Photo: Avigail Aronoff

tips and tricks that they use daily to navigate meals and socialize in the absence of sight.

“My goal for this event was not only to sensitize staff to how it feels to live with vision loss, but also for them to see how services can be modified or added to better serve our clients,” said D’Intino.

An impactful Pink Shirt Day chat

On February 26, **Michael Dean Rafferty**, founder of I N-O! Inc. with the Kera brand and Kera Cares visited the Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools of the English Montreal School Board to share his story about growing up with vision loss, bullying, and how sport – in his case, downhill skiing – changed his life. During a Q&A session with host of *Inspirations* News podcast **Mark Bergman**, Rafferty encouraged students to find their gift, whether it’s in the arts, sports or culture, and to not be afraid to express themselves. He created Kera Cares as a way of giving back and plans to donate a portion of the proceeds from profits back to those with keratoconus, and other community organizations.



Michael Dean Rafferty, back row, fifth from left, with students and staff after a Q&A session on February 26 at the Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools.

Celebrating inclusion, community and the power of art

For the third year in a row, Ometz, L’Annexe: the Ometz Centre for Young Adults and the Cummings Centre collaborated on a multigenerational art exhibition “From Strength to Strength” in honour of Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month.

Over 300 guests attended the February 21 vernissage at the Gelber Conference Centre, which featured beautiful works by over 65 artists aged five to 85, who identify as living with a disability, mental illness or neurological difference, as well as those who do not. Artists from Moishe House and Sylvan Adams YM-YWHA also exhibited their work, as well as four professional artists from the Ukraine, who are newcomer clients at Ometz. Works on display covered a multitude of media, from paintings to stop-motion animation, digital art, textiles, poetry, photography and more.

Listen to Mark Bergman’s in-depth interview with artists **Sarah Aspler** and **Benny Wark**, and manager of L’Annexe **Lanya McClintock** on the *Inspirations* News podcast.



Megan Zelikovic, left, and Sarah Aspler exhibit their artwork at this year’s multigenerational art exhibition “From Strength to Strength” at the Gelber Conference Centre on February 21.

Summit’s Catwalk for camp

Over 50 Summit School students took to the stage on February 13 to star in a fashion show fundraiser, produced by Summit School’s senior principal **Bena Finkelberg**, educational consultant **Adina Superstein** and social worker **Tara Saxe**. The student models walked and danced down the catwalk to the loud cheers of family, friends and staff, who packed the hall at The Challenger in Saint-Laurent from corner to corner. The show was brilliantly MCed by students **Alessia Igllo**, **Ralph Odones** and **Zachary Kruse**. The evening raised \$14,000 to support Summit’s summer camp.



Jamie Hope Denis, left, wearing a dress donated by an anonymous donor, and Ludovic Black-Thompson, wearing a suit from Signor Terry, have fun modeling at Catwalk for camp at The Challenger in Saint-Laurent on February 13. Photo: Liam Boucher

A mirror reflects both ways: A look at Sonia Rodi's new book

by Samara O'Gorman

Montrealer Sonia Rodi has always believed that her son Matteo, who has Down syndrome, has a special gift. From a young age, she instilled in him a sense of confidence and a sense of who he is. This belief in himself inspired her to write her debut book, *Mirror, Mirror, What Do You See?*, which was published by FriesenPress in November 2023. The book's message is clear: every child deserves to feel worthy, accepted and loved.

Rodi believes that the book is also for adults, as it highlights the influence that parents have on their children's self-belief. A mirror reflects both ways, and a child mirrors how their parents see themselves. If parents are confident and positive, their children will be too.

As a child behaviour specialist and Down syndrome advocate, Rodi hopes that the book will raise awareness of the stigma surrounding it. When Matteo was first diag-

nosed, doctors listed his limitations instead of the possibilities. However, Rodi refused to accept these limitations and responded that her son would conquer every challenge and beat the odds.

The book is a way of embracing Matteo's superpower and challenging negative stigmas. Each page features Matteo in front of the mirror, envisioning a different future for himself; whether that be an astronaut, a singer or a skateboarder - "he can be everything he dreams to be." Rodi hopes Matteo will pass on these messages to others as he grows up. "He has the light that the world needs; he has that power, and he can carry on spreading this message."

The book has become even more important recently as Rodi has noticed a surge of people experiencing low self-esteem and self-worth she believes is due to social media. She believes that spending quality time with family, away from devices, can

have a positive impact on children's confidence and well-being. Rodi's Italian heritage has taught her the importance of family gatherings as it has created an extraordinary outlet for Matteo. "He fuels the family's energy and thrives in social gatherings. He loves the food, company and playing games."

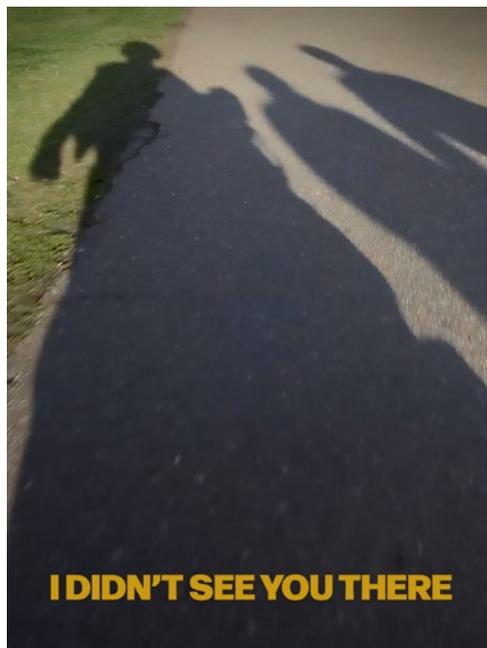
The book is accompanied by lighthearted illustrations by Stephanie McCaffery, which reinforce Matteo's vibrant personality and positive character.

Mirror, Mirror, What Do You See? is a book for all ages that encourages us to believe in ourselves, our abilities and our potential. ■



I Didn't See You There – An unconventional film

by Ishini Fernando



I Didn't See You There is an award-winning (Golden Gate Award for Bay Area Documentary Feature and Truer than Fiction Award) and experimental 2022 documentary by Reid Davenport. Defying conventions of modern-day documentaries, the film refuses to use interview clips, re-enactments or even much dialogue. It is entirely narrated and shot by Davenport, with the camera often angled on his wheelchair or occasionally handheld, allowing viewers to see the world from his perspective. An article from *The Guardian* newspaper (January 11, 2023) states that Davenport has cerebral palsy.

When a circus tent goes up in his neighbourhood in Oakland, California in the beginning of the film, Davenport begins to reflect on the parallels between what he refers to as circus 'freaks' (historically atypical humans who were displayed and exploited to entertain paying customers) and those

living with a disability in modern day. This exploration of past and present treatment of people with disabilities is a major theme throughout the film, even as Davenport visits his hometown in Bethel, Connecticut, a birthplace he shares with well-known showman P.T. Barnum.

Perhaps intentionally, nowhere in the documentary does Davenport reveal his cerebral palsy, instead letting viewers draw their own conclusions. Almost all of the film is shot in motion as he navigates day-to-day life in Oakland, showing the difficulties of getting around the city, sometimes having to take long detours or the odd alleyway to reach his destination and at other times dealing with the frustration of blocked ramps. At one point, Davenport explains that while Oakland is still decently accessible, most places are not, which remains a huge barrier to independent living for wheelchair users.

Davenport also captures the various reactions of people outside of his home, ranging from passers-by treating him like he is invisible to being overly mindful of him.

I Didn't See You There places viewers in Davenport's seat, allowing them to truly connect with him in the awkwardness and plain discomfort of his encounters with fellow citizens, the daily struggles with accessibility and the captured beauty of the city that can rarely be observed from a standing position. Raw and unapologetic in his shots and narrations, Davenport avoids the cliches of atypical representation often seen on television, and notably, keeps his lens towards the world rather than turning it on him. His documentary is a collection of relaxed shots and tense moments, and much like him, it is meant to be experienced rather than passively viewed. ■

Follow the yellow ribbons to ICDT's return: *The Godfather's Wonderful Life*

by *Samara O'Gorman*

After a four-year hiatus due to the pandemic, I Can Dream Theatre Inc. (ICDT) made an elaborate return this winter through its production, *The Godfather's Wonderful Life*. This creative fusion of the Corleone family (from *The Godfather* film series) and the classic film, *It's a Wonderful Life* opened at the Eric Maclean S.J. Centre for the Performing Arts on February 9. It was a triumph that showcased the impressive talents of the troupe's actors after a year of rehearsals.

I Can Dream Theatre is a non-profit organization that has been providing opportunities for neurodiverse adults in the performing arts since 2011. It aims to promote independence, responsibility, commitment, perseverance, social skills, self-confidence and friendship through their performances. ICDT is known for its unique approach to theatre, and their shows are always a hit with audiences.

Merrill Matthews, the community manager of ICDT, is encouraging of anyone interested in theatre to get involved in their next production. "Theatre, as an outlet, for anybody, builds confidence and promotes self-expression..." That sentiment held true throughout ICDT's latest show, *The Godfather's Wonderful Life*, as the cast in-

teracted with the audience and turned the whole production into a meta-masterpiece.

Fans, who are a built-in community that keeps returning to the organization's shows, are eagerly awaiting future productions. ICDT performances often encourage audience participation. On opening night, the ushers handed out yellow ribbons inviting them to interact with the cast.

Before the curtains opened, Matthews told *Inspirations* that "...there's a sense of uniqueness to their plays, it's not your typical show..." This was solidified when the entire audience turned yellow, waving ribbons to the tune of "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree." It was a fantastic way to start a show, enforcing that the community that supports ICDT is one of love – with the ribbons symbolizing inclusion and unity.

To answer the question asked in their opening number: "Tie a yellow ribbon 'round the ole oak tree... It's been three long years, do you still want me?" Yes, even though many years passed before this production's debut, it seems that the fan base of ICDT will always want them. ■

For more info: www.icandreamtheatre.com.



ICDT cast on the opening night of *The Godfather's Wonderful Life*, February 9, at the Eric Maclean S.J. Centre for the Performing Arts.



Gold Centre staff took a break during the open house to pose for a photo. From left: Chloé Giroux, Meghan Turnbull, Jordanna Vamos, Consuelo Calderon, Lina Gharibah, Emma Veteau, Mélissa Sokoloff and Nina Chepurmyi. Photo: Micheline Nalette

New Gold Centre houses range of services, arts programming

On April 17, the Gold Centre welcomed the public to their first Open House event, held in honour of the Miriam Foundation's 50th anniversary and Autism Awareness Month. This provided visitors with an opportunity to explore the facilities of their new centre, inaugurated in 2021, and become acquainted with the various programs and services the Gold Centre offers to individuals with neurodevelop-

mental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability. Of the many highlights, the Centre boasts an arts wing that will house an arts program that is currently under development. Plans include a summer arts camp, a community art hive, dance and music programs.

- Wendy Singer

Some local Paralympic athletes to watch out for this summer

The 2024 Paralympic Games, set to run from August 28 to September 8 in Paris, will feature a number of Canadian medal contenders looking to bring home precious hardware. Here are several locals to keep an eye out for during the Games this summer:



Alison Levine competing in individual Boccia at the Parapan American Games in Santiago, November 20, 2023. Photos courtesy of the Canadian Paralympic Committee

Alison Levine

Hometown: Montreal, QC
Sport: Boccia

Alison Levine is a veteran of the Paralympic Games, having competed in both the 2016 and 2020 events in Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo, respectively. The Montrealer is coming off a strong showing at last year's Parapan American Games in Santiago, Chile. Levine captured gold in both her boccia events: the women's BC4 individual tournament as well as in the pairs competition alongside fellow Montrealer Iulian Ciobanu. Her exploits in Chile earned her the honour of serving as the Canadian flag bearer during the closing ceremonies. She is looking for her first-ever Paralympic medals in Paris.



Charles Moreau competes in men's Para cycling handcycling road race at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, September 1, 2021.

Charles Moreau

Hometown: Victoriaville, QC
Sport: Para Cycling

Charles Moreau is a two-time bronze medallist at the 2016 Rio Games. The para cyclist, who was left paralyzed after a road accident in 2008, failed to reach the podium during the 2020 Tokyo Games due to mechanical issues. Nevertheless, the 42-year-old is determined to bounce back in Paris, having earned a bronze medal in the men's elite handcycling 3 time trial event at the 2023 Parapan American Games last November in Santiago, Chile.



Aurélie Rivard wins gold in the women's 100m S10 at the Tokyo 202 Paralympic Games, August 28, 2021.

Aurélie Rivard

Hometown: St-Jean-sur-Richelieu, QC
Sport: Para Swimming

Aurélie Rivard is one of Canada's most decorated swimmers in history, having won 19 world championship medals and 10 Paralympic medals, including five gold, across three Paralympic Games appearances (London 2012, Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020). Her career-high five medals in Tokyo in 2020 were the most by any Canadian athlete at the Games. Rivard, who is also studying to become a lawyer, won gold in both the 50m and 100m freestyle at the Para Swimming World Championships last summer in Manchester, England.



Brent Lakatos competes in the men's marathon final at the Tokyo 2020 games, September 5, 2021.

Brent Lakatos

Hometown: Dorval, QC
Sport: Para Athletics

Brent Lakatos' resume speaks for itself: 11 Paralympic medals (one gold, eight silver and two bronze) across five separate Games (2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020) and 13 gold medals at the world championships, along with four silver and two bronze. Lakatos, who turns 44 in June, is Canada's most decorated male wheelchair racer of all-time, surpassing the 10 Paralympic medals earned by Andre Viger. Having added long-distance events to his range in Tokyo, Lakatos is expected to compete regularly and often in both sprints and marathon races across multiple distances in Paris.

Historic win for Paralympians

After years of negotiations, Canadian Paralympic athletes will be receiving financial rewards for podium results on par with their Olympic counterparts. The new Paralympic Performance Recognition program from the Canadian Paralympic Committee was announced on January 24 at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec and will come into effect at the 2024 summer Olympic games in Paris. Gold medalists will now earn \$20,000, silver medalists \$15,000 and bronze \$10,000 sourced from a combination of private grants and government funding. Paralympic legend and Senator Chantal Petitclerc was active in the initiative.

- Randy Pinsky

By the numbers: This summer's games

4,400 Paralympic athletes

549 Paralympic events

11 days of competitions

184 nations represented

22 sports

21 total medals won by Canada in 2020 at the previous Paralympic Summer Games in Tokyo

Rosély's at the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth

Whether it is a casual business lunch, a grand family dinner or Sunday brunch, Rosély's at the beautiful Fairmont Queen Elizabeth Hotel offers a refined bistro experience. The restaurant can seat 100 to 150 diners. There is also a private room upstairs that can accommodate 70 people. An accessible ramp is available on the side entrance of the hotel on Mansfield St. Once in the hotel, you can access the restaurant and other areas of the facility. The washrooms at the restaurant are fully accessible.

A meal at Rosély's is an experience and starts with the staff. Manager Antoine Char tours the dining room to ensure that each customer is satisfied. Servers like Sylvain Joyal, supported by the likes of Stéphane Vincent, really make everyone feel right at home. It is Vincent, an employee of 34 years, who gets you set at your table and keeps your glass of water topped up. Joyal has been on board for 30 years, and he has an encyclopedic knowledge of the menu and every ingredient.

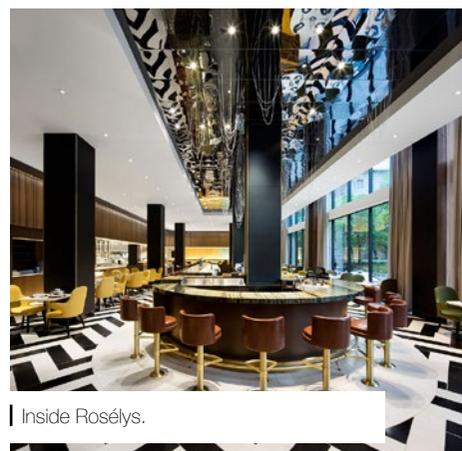
Whether it is a glass of champagne, wine or beer on tap, there are plenty of drinks to get your meal started in the right direction.

There is a nice array of starters to choose from. My friend and I opted to share the grilled octopus and the Arctic char. The main courses consist of pasta, fish, meat items and even a vegan burger.

I had my eyes on the roasted duck breast from the moment I opened the menu since this is not something you can find at many restaurants. It was prepared exquisitely, with salsify three ways, fermented physalis and vanilla bean jus. My friend leaned on Joyal's expertise and went for the East Coast large scallops with Yuzu endives, cream of lettuce, beurre blanc, mullet caviar and Lardo di Pata Negra.

Desserts here are the creation of Jean-Marc Guillot, a world champion pastry chef from France. We sampled the morello cherries and signature chocolate dessert (chocolate praline biscuit, hazelnut crumble and sour cherry sorbet) and the caramelized trilogy and boreal crisp (crème caramel with maple syrup, meringue with boreal spices, Breton shortbread with caramel and fleur de sel ice cream).

Rosély's is located at 900 Réne-Levesque Blvd. W. You can reserve by phoning, going online or to [opentable.com](https://www.opentable.com). ■



Inside Rosély's.



Longtime server Sylvain Joyal.

Boustan

Emad Saad purchased the Boustan restaurant brand in 2017. At the time, only the original spot on downtown Crescent St. and three others existed. Seven years later there are now 66 locations and counting. I sat down with Saad and head office manager Kaylea Peres at the spanking new Lachine location, situated in a strip mall on busy Victoria St.

The entry way is completely accessible and so is a seasonal terrasse. There are 32 seats, with tables able to accommodate individuals in wheelchairs. For my friend and I, Saad went behind the counter himself to prepare a pair of delicious mixed shawarma bowls, containing perfectly shaved beef and chicken, with crispy garlic potatoes, rice and salad along with their garlic and special sauces. Saad also handed us what looked like chicken brochettes for us to try. They were quite tasty. Both of us were convinced they were chicken. In fact, they were vegan shiitake mushroom! For sure that will be among my selections next visit. Thanks to Saad, and of course the original owners, Boustan has become a household name, renowned for its unparalleled Mediterranean cuisine. New openings in Lachine, Park Extension and Montreal North showcase a refreshed, contemporary look and an enhanced dining experience that encapsulates the spirit of modernity and authenticity. The Lachine spot is corporately owned and has already been dubbed as their new flagship. ■



The mixed shawarma bowl.

Owner Emad Saad gets behind the counter.

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Palm Springs region offers plenty to do and lots of accessibility

by *Alexandra Cohen*

Close your eyes. Imagine a place with palm tree-lined streets, beautiful summer weather in the spring and fall, resorts, golfing, hiking, shopping and more. For many years, I had heard such wonderful things about The Greater Palm Springs region, and when I finally had the opportunity to travel there myself, it absolutely lived up to the hype.

Where to stay

During my time in Palm Springs, I had the great pleasure of staying at The Renaissance Esmeralda Resort & Spa, a beautiful resort in Indian Wells, which is conveniently nestled between the Palm Desert and La Quinta regions, just at the foot of the Santa Rosa Mountains. It is adjacent to the Indian Wells Golf Resort.

There are two swimming pools – one with a fountain and the other with zero-entry – and a sandy beach, as well as two hot tubs. There is plenty of seating. My travel partner and I enjoyed a lovely day in a cabana, which comes with couches, a television, water and a large fruit platter. We also ordered drinks and lunch from the tasty and diverse pool menu. The service was truly top-notch.

The hotel has accessible on-site parking, a self-operating lift and a sloped entry into the swimming pools. Service animals are welcome. All hotel entrances are accessible. Handicap-equipped guest rooms have accessible vanities, an adjustable height hand-held shower wand, alarm clock tele-

phone ringers, bathtub grab rails, a bathtub seat, closed caption TV and flashing door knockers. Guests in mobility-accessible rooms may inquire about lowering the bed height, hearing accessible rooms and/or kits, roll-in showers and toilet seats at wheelchair height.

Hotel dining

We started off our dining experiences in the Greater Palm Springs region at our own hotel, first, at The Place Lobby Bar, which offers an extensive and creative cocktail menu, as well as many light bites. Both indoor and outdoor seating are available. The second restaurant that we tried at the Renaissance Esmeralda was Cava, which is on the terrace level with a patio adjacent to the swimming pools. Cava has different menus available for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Dining out

We also ventured beyond the front doors of our hotel to experience what some of the neighbouring regions had to offer. I highly recommend visiting Pacifica Seafood Restaurant during your trip. Their fine dining menu focuses on their selection of fresh seafood, as well as their hand-crafted cocktails and award-winning wine list. The entry and patio are fully accessible.

Arnold Palmer's Restaurant, named after the late and legendary pro golfer, remains a staple in the La Quinta area. The menu features some of Palmer's favourites, including fresh seafood, aged beef and a variety of comfort foods. The daily specials are also frequently evolving, some of which we enjoyed during our visit. To start, we had a Hamachi appetizer, which was one of the



The Renaissance Esmeralda Resort & Spa

specials and was incredibly light and fresh. The restaurant is single level and is ADA compliant (regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act).

Accessible options

When you aren't relaxing at a hotel pool or playing a round of golf, there are plenty of other activities to consider during your visit to Palm Springs. The Palm Springs Aerial Tramway is the world's largest rotating tram car with accessible entry. The Living Desert, home to over 500 animals representing over 150 species, provides guests with sensory processing needs, such as sensory bags containing special KultureCity VIP badges, fidget tools, noise-canceling headphones and other resources available for checkout.

Monoculars are offered to aid sight-impaired guests. The Palm Springs Art Museum offers sign language inter-

preters on an as-needed basis. At the Palm Springs Air Museum, pre-arranged group tours can be accommodated with accessibility features any day of the week between 10 am and 3 pm. The tours are guided by knowledgeable individuals, typically veterans and former pilots.

Palm Springs International Airport also offers a variety of services for passengers with disabilities. The first row of parking nearest to the terminal building provides spaces for drivers with disabilities. For those with disabilities who are traveling alone, you need only pull up curbside to receive assistance. Wheelchair service can be arranged in advance, in which case porters can take you directly to your gate. ■

For more info:

www.visitgreaterpalmsprings.com

Samara O’Gorman: Leading with her heart at elementary schools

by Wendy Singer

This fall, *Inspirations* proudly welcomed Samara O’Gorman to the team as Advocate for Compassionate Leadership. She has been busy sharing her impactful message of leading with your heart to elementary school students across the English Montreal School Board (EMSB).

O’Gorman is a 25-year-old actress, singer, poet and Irish studies scholar. She can be found reading her poetry at public events around Montreal or participating in local St. Patrick’s parades, having been named queen in Montreal’s parade last year and Chateauguay’s this year. With a passion for mental well-being, O’Gorman donates a portion of sales of her debut poetry collection *What If the Sun Died* to youth mental health and suicide prevention causes.

With the support of Victoria Della Cioppa and Sima Youssef of the EMSB’s School Climate team, O’Gorman has melded her messages of kindness, leadership, community involvement, self-love and poetry into her presentation, and varies it to suit the specific mission of each school that she visits. While her tour was initiated for Pink Shirt Day, usually held on the last Wednesday each February, it is pertinent year-round.

O’Gorman’s first stop was at Carlyle Elementary School of the EMSB in December, where she addressed Grade 4 to 6 students. “Samara’s presentation was impressive, outstanding and relatable,” said Carlyle principal Dina Vourdouzis. “Her unique style captured the attention and curiosity of her audience.”

“When I was your age, I came to elementary school dressed like a Disney Princess every day,” explains O’Gorman during

her presentations. She now loves to wear colourful vintage dresses. While her style caused her difficulties fitting in at school, O’Gorman was not willing to be anyone but herself.

“I’ve experienced bullying and understand the impact it can have,” she said. “By sharing my story and emphasizing the importance of kindness, I hope to inspire students to believe in the power of compassion and empathy.”

“Samara has manifested the negative effects of bullying into positive outcomes and life lessons to share and inspire each student,” added Vourdouzis.

This Lester B. Pearson School Board alumna hopes to empower students to embrace their true selves, speak up without fear and contribute to creating an inclusive, supportive and safe environment in their schools and communities. “I achieve this by encouraging students to pursue their passions and by sharing my interests in Irish culture and poetry as a source of inspiration,” she said.

“The meaningful takeaway message that Samara shared with our students was to lead with their heart, follow their dreams and stay true to themselves,” said Laetitia Kachmar, interim principal of Edinburgh Elementary School (EMSB) after O’Gorman’s February 27 visit.

O’Gorman is excited to continue her tour into the 2024-25 school year at EMSB schools and those in other school boards. “While teaching students about leadership, they, in turn, have taught me so much with their creative and caring personalities. Every child deserves to learn the importance of staying true to themselves. It is precisely what I yearned for at their age.” ■

Presentations are available in English or in both French and English. She also offers poetry workshops.

For info: info@inspirationsnews.com.



Samara O’Gorman takes all the time she needs to answer a student’s question after her presentation at Edinburgh Elementary School of the EMSB on February 27.

Photo: Mark Bergman

“Kindness is not only rewarding but also a commendable trait. Everyone faces their own challenges in life. A simple act of kindness has the potential to significantly impact someone’s entire day. Strive to be the individual who illuminates another person’s day... we always need a little more light.”
– Samara O’Gorman

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- Leadership
- Community involvement
- Self-love

Presentations are tailored to each school, and are delivered in English or bilingually. Poetry workshops are available as well.

Samara is available to visit schools throughout the Greater Montreal and surrounding areas.

"Samara's unique style captured the attention and curiosity of her audience."

- Dina Vourdouis, principal, Carlyle Elementary School



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Anna Gualtieri, teacher at L.I.N.K.S. High School, was named this edition's Difference Maker. She is seen here with Simon Chang in her classroom's beauty corner on March 26.



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