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Editor's message

This Fall, the stories kept coming in ... and coming in. There seems to be no shortage of positive news to share in our special communities, which is a blessing.

As part of *Inspirations*' additional mandate to write about positive mental health, we put a focus on anti-bullying in this edition. Articles include a resource list, a column by psychologists exploring the difference between conflict and bullying, and a profile on BullyingCanada, a national organization for youth.

In this edition, we welcome Sue Montgomery, an experienced journalist who brings her talents to our pages. She gets started with several stories, among them one on a Concordia-Ometz partnership and another on new programming at the Sylvan Adams YM-YWHA. And we welcome photographer Zachary Silas-Gagnon, student in Computer Graphics at Wagar Adult Education Centre, who contributes two photographs in this issue.

Randy Pinsky writes about the edition's Simon Chang Difference Maker, an administrator from Summit School, and Nicole Proano covers the announcement of the *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award winner, the founder of a dance studio for people with special needs.

From our team of writers, you will read their stories on new housing projects, Special Olympics and student-designed apps. We also have news from schools, written by teachers and principals – it's always nice to hear directly from educators in the schools.

We like your feedback! Please write to us with comments, critiques or story ideas. Happy reading.

— Kristin McNeill

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Leadership changes at *Inspirations*

I am pleased to announce an important development at *Inspirations* newspaper.

Fifteen years ago I proudly founded this very special publication, with a focus on sharing inspiring stories from our special needs communities. As the editor, I worked directly with a number of individuals, principally Wendy Singer. As managing editor and director of operations Wendy took us to an entirely new level.

With this edition, I wish to announce that I will assume the new title of publisher. We would like to introduce Kristin McNeill as editor. She is a committed journalist who has been with us for a number of years as writer, copy editor and most recently news editor. We are grateful to Kristin for her excellent work in ensuring that *Inspirations* is informative, factual, resourceful and as always, inspiring. She will henceforth assume the role of spearheading the editorial mandate of *Inspirations*, in conjunction with myself, Wendy and our marketing and outreach manager Mark Bergman.

— Mike Cohen



INSPIRATIONS

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Inspirations distributes 15,000 copies across the Greater Montreal and surrounding areas, including Laval-Laurentians, the South Shore and the West Island. Our distribution includes English-language school boards (thanks to all of our amazing students who bundle *Inspirations* for their schools), special needs schools and over 150 drop-off spots including libraries, shopping malls, clinics and therapy centres. If you would like to receive copies, email us at info@inspirationsnews.com.



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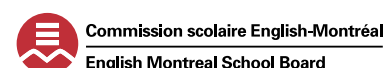
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Difference Maker uses passion, business savvy to prepare Summit students for the workplace

by *Randy Pinsky*

Looking for that one-of-a-kind gift? Summit School's leatherworking program has got you covered with meticulously made keychains, sturdy aprons and fashionable bow ties. *Inspirations* sponsor and fashion designer Simon Chang is pleased to honour Summit's vice principal of Entrepreneurial Development – and pioneer in the leatherworking program – Josh Cunningham with this edition's Simon Chang Difference Maker Award in recognition of his leadership, business savvy and commitment.

Jesse Heffring, director of Development at Summit School, applauded the nomination. "Josh oversees all the school's internal and external entrepreneurial efforts - [it's] a huge task that requires a tireless effort."

From the school's humble beginnings as a summer camp 60 years ago, it has expanded into three campuses serving over 650 students with intellectual and behavioural challenges. A leader in special education, it has garnered much attention particularly for its Transitional Educational Career Center (TECC)'s Work-Oriented Training Program (WOTP).

Students who would otherwise struggle in conventional academic settings can gain hands-on work and life skills for autonomous living and potential internship placement in woodworking, flower arranging, printing or baking. "TECC is just a blossoming place for creativity and is kind of known for that," shared Cunningham.

His connection with Summit started 14 years ago as a teaching assistant, helping to expand the leatherworking program from an extracurricular activity into "one of our first in-house businesses," said Heffring.



Simon Chang announces Josh Cunningham's award at Summit TECC, surrounded by students and staff on September 7. Photo: Liam Boucher



Josh Cunningham, left, celebrates his award with Simon Chang at his showroom on Chabanel St. October 10. Photo: Etienne Bédard, Pickle Creative Agency

One machine is borrowed from the Centre des métiers du cuir de Montréal, and artisan Gisèle Désilets, who helps students refine and improve techniques, has also donated equipment and materials to the program.

Beyond accumulating credits for their WOTP certificates, granted by the province's ministry of Education, students at TECC showcase and sell their products on the school's online Marketplace store Cunningham launched in December 2021.

"We have a very supportive administration who recognize peoples' skills and encourage them to create programs that benefit our students," he noted. "Passion is an important part of it, [which] is then conveyed to the students."

While his administrative duties keep him quite busy, Cunningham confided that teaching leatherworking "is my favourite day of the week. It keeps me grounded with the students."

Justin Guan is a peer mentor and former student of the leather program. In addition

to being one of the select few Cunningham has trained to work on the industrial sewing machine, he is also the first student to be placed in an external internship placement related to leatherworking.

"The best thing about [leatherworking] is that you have to figure out what works and what doesn't," shared Guan. "I want people to know that even though we have a disability, it doesn't mean that we cannot do this task. We do not stop trying until we get it, because we don't give up!"

The leather products are increasingly attracting external clients such as Dorval's Las Fincas coffee roaster. They are also sold at Encore Books and Records in NDG and Argo Bookshop downtown. Proceeds are funneled back into programs, events and new equipment.

"[Josh's] remarkable talent lies in helping companies and organizations recognize the value our students bring and how collaborating with us can lead to mutually beneficial experiences," said Cindy Larson, principal of Summit Satellite Campuses.

Difference Maker ◀ Cont'd from p. 6

To counter the absence of an interactive human component in doing sales online, Cunningham and his team arranged for the students to showcase their wares in pop-up markets and craft fairs, role playing vendor-client conversations in advance.

Partnering enterprises and buyers are consistently impressed with the quality of the products, Cunningham said, which he hopes will challenge assumptions about ability.

Another Cunningham initiative that encourages client interaction – a critical workplace skill – is the Summit Café at the Donald Berman Maimonides Geriatric Centre, approaching its second year. The school's first external business, the café has “changed the perception of neurodiverse employment possibilities,” said Heffring.

Cunningham is the first administrator to receive the Simon Chang Difference Maker Award since its inauguration in 2020. The Summit vice-principal was personally nominated by Chang after he helped facilitate Summit's Video Model Productions team filming the inspirational “A to Z

with Simon Chang” series (see p. 7 of the Spring-Summer 2023 edition).

“Josh is so enthusiastic about his work, the students and the school,” said Chang. “He's engaged, open to possibilities, versatile and a great listener – all attributes that add to his competence as an excellent administrator.”

The award has been funded by Eyal Cohen, president and chief executive officer of Marcarko Ltd., an on-site real estate management company that oversees 555 Midtown, where Chang's atelier is located. The funds from the award will contribute to Summit's projects.

“Winning the Simon Chang Difference Maker Award is a well-deserved acknowledgment of Josh's dedication and unwavering belief in the potential and abilities of our students,” said Larson. “He truly is a difference maker...who genuinely cares about our students, our staff and goes above and beyond to create meaningful connections.” ■

Summit School's Marketplace:
www.market.summit-school.com.



DÉFIS group at L.I.N.K.S. High School share their jazzed-up jeans on June 9.

Jazzing up jeans at L.I.N.K.S.

The art room at L.I.N.K.S. High School of the English Montreal School Board was buzzing with excitement on the morning of June 9. Art teacher Sophia Boyadjian had a fun-filled activity planned, and special guest Simon Chang was there to lead it. Chang met with three classes, offering each a lesson on how to paint on fabric and how to tap into individual creativity. The first group decorated baseball caps, while the second jazzed up tote bags, and the third (and oldest) group painted everything from dots to words to flowers on their jeans.

— Wendy Singer

Partners in fashion and philanthropy

by Wendy Singer

Eyal Cohen is president and chief executive officer of Marcarko Ltd., an on-site real estate management company that oversees 555 Midtown (Chabanel) in the heart of Montreal's fashion district. Over a span of four decades, Cohen's tenants have included some of Montreal's most successful enterprises. Fashion designer Simon Chang, whose showroom has been located at 555 for 40 years, is one such tenant. With this edition of *Inspirations*, Cohen merges business with philanthropy. He is proud to be the sponsor of this edition's Simon Chang Difference Maker Award.

“As a businessman, you have to share and give back to your community,” said Cohen. “What Simon is doing is very special. He has a good heart, and that's an admirable quality. He shares his extensive knowledge with the students he works with, as well as new fashion designers. You don't see too many people doing this.”

A graduate in electronic engineering of aviation, Cohen has always been civic-minded. He was a candidate for councillor of the city of Montreal and is engaged in his community. He served as president of the Community Centre of Saint-Laurent from 2005 to 2007 and is part of the Shaar-Hessed Committee, which collects funds to assist those in need.

Home to many fashion houses that have acquired international brand status, 555 Midtown is also the Centre international de mode de Montréal (CIMM), where Montreal fashion week began. CIMM provided a platform for emerging designers to showcase their work and grow. Cohen fondly remembers collaborating on many fashion shows with Chang. “I have known Simon since the 80's. He was one of the first tenants and designers in the building. He understood how to bring design to the commercial level,” said Cohen.

While managing the day-to-day operations of the building and supervising renovation and construction projects, Cohen is also dedicated to making 555 Midtown a leader in sustainability by reducing the building's carbon footprint and working towards the



Simon Chang, left, and Eyal Cohen talk fashion and philanthropy in Chang's foundation office at 555 Chabanel on October 10.

Photo: Etienne Béland, Pickle Creative Inc.

goal of zero net carbon emissions by 2040. This includes a “Zero Waste to Landfill” service, which will aim to ensure that all waste generated in the building is recycled, composted or converted to energy through anaerobic digestion.

Chang reflects on this long friendship and partnership – from fashion weeks providing him and the fashion industry at 555 a runway to share their work to encouraging and supporting the Simon Chang Foundation for Change. “Mr. Cohen has been such a strong and important friend of mine over the past 40 years. We couldn't have found a better place and collaborator to support our work,” said Chang. ■

Montreal Fluency Centre marks 25 years

by *Nicole Proano*

The Montreal Fluency Centre is marking 25 years of supporting children with learning and speech disorders, with several celebratory public outreach programs. Over the last quarter of a century, the Westmount non-profit has become a success story in equipping their students with learning tools needed for advancing into future studies or finding meaningful employment in the workplace.

The institution's new executive director, Sandra Furfaro, said that one of the features that sets the centre apart is that students are tested for both learning and speech disorders at the intake stage so that parents can get a more complete picture of what supports their child may need. Once a new student is assessed by a team of professionals, they are paired with a clinician equipped with the expertise that matches the student's profile.

Furfaro said that since learning disabilities do not disappear with age, students need to learn to work with them, work around them

and to adapt. "That's what we're doing," Furfaro said. "We're giving them those strategies." Before taking on the role with the Montreal Fluency Centre, Furfaro worked with the English Montreal School Board for 45 years, including serving as Educational Services director for 15 years.

Employees at the centre also take pride in the educational role they play to help destigmatize dyslexia and other learning disorders. According to Furfaro, the anniversary outreach programs are meant to be a celebration, not just of the centre's students and parents but of the community at large.

The centre partnered with the Westmount Public Library to provide a free workshop to help parents understand what a dyslexia diagnosis in their child may look like and how to live with it. The event, planned for dyslexia awareness month in October, was to feature a presentation from a speech language pathologist and the centre's former executive director, Véronique Paulet, who shares her experience as the mother of a child with dyslexia. "I explain to the parents what they go through," Paulet said, "and that there is hope."

Up until the winter holidays, the centre will also be running their annual fundraising



campaign for the bursary program called the Annual Gift of Speech. ■

For information about the Montreal Fluency Centre, including how to register or donate, visit montrealfluency.com.

Standing on the front steps of the Westmount-based Montreal Fluency Centre, from bottom to top on the left: Katherine Bavaro (clinician), Nesma Etoubashi (clinician) and Gillian Nyberg (clinician); right: Sandra Furfaro (executive director), Jillian Budd (clinician) and Jessica Haddad (office coordinator).

Ground-breaking on new arts, activity centre at Summit

by *Jesse Heffring*



A groundbreaking ceremony for Summit School's new Creative Arts and Physical Activity Centre took place on September 19. From left: Cindy Neveu, STGM Architecture; Jean-François Beaulieu, Omnia Technologies Inc.; Herman Erdogan, director general of Summit School; Susan Kasner, Summit School board of directors chair; and Joe Rabinovitch, Summit School Foundation board chair. Photo Credit: Sophie Heffring

A rainy day could not put a damper on the festivities surrounding Summit School breaking ground on its ambitious new Creative Arts and Physical Activity Centre. It was a wonderful and hopeful atmosphere in the gym, where students, donors, community members and staff gathered to celebrate the beginning of a new era at Summit. And that's quite something, since the school has been around for 60 years!

This new Centre will be a place where a new generation of neurodiverse youth can have access to the resources they need to thrive. Summit has a wide array of students with many diagnoses, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. This leads to a dynamic social environment, which will only become more so with the addition of a complex that will house a full-size gym, workout centre, dance studio, art room, media studio and music room.

The festivities began with a class of young students singing "Heigh, Ho, It's Off to Work We Go" and ended with an emotional speech by Sam Lewis, a Summit School alumnus whose life was changed by the arts programming at Summit. The school has

put on original plays that have shown on the Segal and Centaur stages. Recently, Summit collaborated with Geordie Theatre in the production of *Other Worlds* (see p. 39). And in December you can see Summit alumna Stephanie Torriani in a professional production at the Centaur Theatre titled *Extra/Beautiful/U*.

After a tour of the school and a view of the construction already underway, guests were treated to a delicious lunch provided by the Summit Bistro. ■

Jesse Heffring is the director of Development at Summit School.

Awesome mom and daughters Embracing who we are

by *Lorri Benedik*

In February 2002, Danielle Desrosiers and Joel Hay, of Dunany in the Laurentians, welcomed a healthy, 9.5-pound daughter. “Carly was an incredibly easy baby; she breastfed well, slept well and hit her six-month milestones,” recalled Desrosiers. Not long after, however, they noticed that she was not rolling over on her own and seemed slouched when sitting. They had Carly assessed at the Sainte-Justine hospital for children in Montreal. She was diagnosed with hypotonia, which manifests as a lack of muscle tone, and she began physiotherapy.

“There were challenges, for sure, but she figured out her own way to get things done,” Desrosiers said. They spoke English at home, and Carly went to pre-k in French. “When she began speaking in full sentences she did so beautifully – in both languages. She had the cutest French accent!” Desrosiers said. Additional assessments offered no definitive diagnosis. One doctor referred to Carly as “a beautiful enigma.”

The couple’s second child, Juliette, came along in 2005, when Carly was three. At age five, Carly began attending Sainte-Agathe Academy, a small school in the Laurentians. They finally received her diagnosis, which was non-verbal learning disorder (NVLD) and a code, which allowed the school to

provide an individualized education plan and an integration aide in the classroom.

Desrosiers became a parent-volunteer and was soon hired as an aide in the high school. During this time, she became aware of how socially isolated Carly was. “We had different lunchtimes; I would look outside from the resource room and see Carly all by herself, dancing and spinning.”

Desrosiers spent a lot of alone time with her daughters because Joel’s work required him to travel frequently to Southeast Asia. When Carly and Juliette were 12 and nine, she decided the family should move to Bali, so they could spend more time all together. She homeschooled the girls with support from the local community, and Carly became proficient in a third language: Indonesian. “In Bali, she was accepted as she was, which gave her great self-confidence,” explained Desrosiers. “Carly became quite outgoing and never hesitated to talk to anyone.”

In 2017, Desrosiers returned to Montreal with her daughters, and they settled in NDG. While Desrosiers began looking for work, Juliette attended Royal Vale School and Carly was bussed to John Grant High. Back in Montreal, she continued to be naturally friendly. Walking down the street,

she would see a stranger and say, “I love that colour on you”, or “nice hat!”

Carly was on a waiting list for Summit School and one year later, a spot became available. Her mother helped her to learn how to take public transportation, and within a week she was travelling on her own.

Both girls thrived in their new schools. “Carly is so joyful and exudes positivity,” Desrosiers said. “She’s like a cheerleader; when a friend shares on Facebook that she is trying something new, Carly comments, ‘You go girl, I know you can do it!’ ”

Now 21, Carly graduated from Summit’s TECC program and recently began classes at Wagar Adult Education Centre. She was nervous on her first day but when asked how she was feeling Carly said, “I’ve got this!” Juliette is now attending CEGEP at Dawson, and Desrosiers is working as a real estate agent focussing on special needs families.

“Life still happens even though our kids have challenges,” Desrosiers said, “Although we’d like to, we can’t protect them from the world. What we can do is guide them to inclusive communities and friends who ‘get’ them and embrace who they are.” ■



From left, Juliette Hay, Danielle Desrosiers and Carly Hay at Lake Louise, Alberta in August 2022.
Photo courtesy of D. Desrosiers

Giant Steps welcomes students, the public to new campus

by *Wendy Singer*

Giant Steps students began their school year at their brand-new campus located in the Technopôle Angus. Now called the Giant Steps Autism Centre, it was officially inaugurated on September 14 with a visit from Premier François Legault, Minister of Education Bernard Drainville, Charles Lafortune, donors and stakeholders.

The Centre was created to meet the special needs of people with autism throughout their lives, and includes in its inclusion mandate a school for students aged four to 21; adult education and training; resources and training for families and employers;

and research and innovation. (Read our story in the Spring-Summer 2023 edition, p. 24.)

Giant Steps also opened its doors to the community on September 30 with a resource fair. At a day-long event which included tours of the new campus, some 50 exhibitors gathered in the gym and surrounding areas to inform families and interested parties about their services. *Inspirations* and the English Montreal School Board were present to share the news and resources that the Board provides.

Remarkable features include a bright, spacious gym, quiet nooks, activity and sensory rooms and a diverse and fun-filled outdoor playground. These attributes, amongst others, were designed and implemented to foster an environment where students can thrive. In addition, the staff area provides ample spaces to relax and recharge. ■



The community came together at the new Giant Steps Autism Centre campus in the Technopôle Angus for its resource fair on September 14.
Photo courtesy of Giant Steps

Winning combo in Thiboutot:

Passion for dance and teaching fuels dance studio for special needs community

by *Nicole Proano*

Dancing joyously is part of a weekly routine for Studio J dancers, but news of the latest *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award winner will give its members one more reason to dance for joy.



Jodi Thiboutot

After receiving several nominations, the dance school's founder, Jodi Thiboutot, was chosen for the award, which is sponsored by Henry Zavriyev and recognizes outstanding individuals in the special needs community who are excelling at their job, provide a valuable service or who have demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit.

Since its creation in 2012, the West Island dance studio for people with special needs has steadily grown from three dancers to 20 under the care and attention of Thiboutot. "It's like a family," she said. "They come [to Studio J]; it's a safe environment, and they see their friends. They form stronger bonds."

Recognizing the relative lack of dance schools available to neurodivergent people in Montreal, Thiboutot decided to take her own love of the art and knack for teaching to fill the void.

Ahead of each four-month session, Thiboutot choreographs several dance numbers that range in style from hip hop to jazz, then teaches them to the students herself. At the end of each term, Studio J dancers get to show off their moves to their friends and family during highly anticipated recitals.

"I'm watching the audience," she said, recounting her own experience of the recitals. "I'm finding the parents, and they're glowing."

On top of being a fun time, Studio J has been credited for a number of physical and social benefits for the dancers, including increasing mobility to coaxing shy students out of their shell.

Lindsay Daoussis is a long-time dancer with Studio J. She credits much of her enjoyment to her teacher. "She's amazing," she said of Thiboutot. "She's very enthusiastic and always smiling... She's a really nice person. I really look up to her."

It is a sentiment that is shared by others, including Kathryn Iliopoulos, who has been volunteering at Studio J for two years. "I find with the energy that Jodi brings; the positivity comes from her," she said. "If your coach is always coming in positive, [and] she's always happy, everybody is going to be happy. It's so warm and welcoming."

With news of the award, Thiboutot is planning for a bigger venue that can accommodate the growing number of recital-goers.

"There's always room for growth," she stated, explaining that she hopes to begin offering sessions on the weekend once the demand is there. For now, the one-hour classes are held on Mondays and Fridays, and new members are welcome to register. ■

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Pleasence soars from player to instructor at tennis school

by *Anita Szabadi-Gottesman*

“Every child needs to have something they are great at!” says Lara Pleasence, proud mom of Toren, who became involved in tennis organization Proset Autism where he discovered he can “truly be great at something.”

Toren, now 17, was diagnosed with severe ADHD as well as being on the autism spectrum from an early age. Pleasence describes her son as a spirited child unable to sit still and enjoy fully in any organized sports program. “We tried gymnastics, karate and so many more,” she said. “Nothing was working for him. It was important for his dad and I to find a sport that Toren could enjoy. He just wanted something to participate in.”

Proset Autism provided the outlet for Toren that his parents had been searching for.

Launched in 2010 with Philippe Manning at the helm, with its tagline “Everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy physical fitness,” Manning developed a unique sports program combining socio-emotional skills, motor development, motivation and participation geared to children and teens with autism, ADHD or Down syndrome. In 2013, with Manning’s father John on board, Proset Autism obtained non-profit status expanding their reach from their home base in Vaudreuil to Pincourt and other locations in the West Island, Ottawa and Toronto.

Toren began taking tennis lessons at a young age and has progressively not only improved his tennis game and skill set but has risen through the ranks to become a

paid instructor. For his part, Toren feels that his participation in the program has opened doors for him, giving him the confidence to think about career opportunities and truly excel at something. “It feels so good and is very meaningful for me to know that I can help kids who are just like me,” he said. “I can relate to them and motivate them to pay attention and develop a drive to improve while having fun.”

For mom Lara, watching Toren go from student to instructor has been amazing to nurture and watch. “I want to tell other parents of children with ADHD or on the spectrum that their children will progress while learning so many life skills along the way,” she said. “Toren truly gets these kids – he’s been there.” ■



Toren Pleasence, 17, on task instructing his students in a tennis lesson at Proset Autism. Photo courtesy of Lara Pleasence



Café Soleil is open Monday to Thursday from 9:30 am to 2 pm. Photo: Zachary Silas-Gagnon

Café Soleil: A bright, delicious place to meet for coffee

In a photo taken October 5, from left, Caroline Mosel, Agence Ometz; George Kalimeris and Elaine Katzelman, Café Soleil staff from JEM workshop; and Mitchell Axelrad, Cummings Centre Volunteer, are hard at work at the new Café Soleil, which opened in July. A collaboration that also includes Federation CJA, Cummings Centre and Agence Ometz, the café offers kosher food prepared by Zera Café, a not-for-profit meal service, which employs neurodiverse adults. JEM provides adapted workplaces that provide training and employment options for adults with all abilities in the Jewish and general community. For the story on the Café’s opening, see “Federation CJA announces opening of Café Soleil” online news article on the *Inspirations* website (July 19, 2023). Listen to Mark Bergman’s podcast at <https://inspirationsnews.com/inspirations/podcasts>.

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The CASE for more inclusive workplaces

by **Randy Pinsky**

“Supported employment starts with the belief that everyone who wants paid employment can attain it if the proper supports are in place” is the guiding mantra behind the Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE). For those requiring accommodations however, what is the process and what are the concerns with the current model? CASE explored these ideas and more in their annual general assembly held online September 12.

The organization estimates that Canadians with disabilities make up 22 percent of the population yet have an unemployment rate of 52 percent, compared with the national rate of 5.7 percent, according to Statistics Canada in October. Through work-

shops, an annual conference, Disability Employment Awareness Month in October and workplace mediators, the organization seeks to enable all to “have equal opportunity to secure and sustain meaningful employment.”

AGM keynote speaker Dr. Mahadeo Sukhai shared his thoughts in “Built-In’ vs ‘Bolted-On’: Tension Among Disclosure, Accommodation, Duty to Accommodate and Universal Design in the Workplace.”

As the world’s first congenitally blind geneticist and vice president of Research and International Affairs and chief accessibility officer at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Sukhai promotes

organizational cultural change for more inclusive work environments.

He noted how accommodation approaches were developed with the increased mechanization of production, for example when workers would get injured on the factory floor, and have not really adapted to the changing realities of work or need.

As a result, accommodations are frequently “bolted on” afterthoughts, placing the onus on the employee to justify a need. Disclosure, which is still largely based on medical diagnoses, results in an overlooking of contextual aspects such as condition onset, degree of severity or invisible disability, Sukhai explained.

He advocated for accommodations to be considered at the design phase as opposed to upon request, and to emphasize ability-first language. For example, “I can do the job, I just need large print” as opposed to “I am blind, but I can do it.”

“When I started out, no one believed that a person who was blind could do what I wanted to do,” reflected Sukhai in his career profile on Let’s Talk Science. “At the CNIB, I’m continuing my efforts to change people’s perceptions and expectations.” ■

For more information on the Canadian Association for Supported Employment: www.supportedemployment.ca. For more information on the Canadian National Institute for the Blind: www.cnib.ca.

Zera Café recognized for employing neurodivergent adults

by **Sue Montgomery**

Zera Café has been awarded \$100,000 by the Azrieli Foundation for its outstanding work in offering neurodiverse adults with special needs hands-on experience in the workplace.

“It’s very exciting,” said Zera Café founder and director Eve Rochman, on being the first organization to win the foundation’s INfinity Prize. “I couldn’t believe it.”



Eve Rochman, founder of Zera Café. |

Her social enterprise, which is just three and a half years old, was among three finalists, including La Cuisine Collective Hochelaga-Maisonneuve and the Toronto-based Goodness Gift.

It is estimated that only one in four neurodiverse Canadians can find work, according to Rochman. She hopes to use her non-profit organization’s prize money to change that.

“We need more businesses that make accommodations,” she said. “You set [neurodiverse adults] up for success by looking at what the person needs, what is meaningful to this person.”

In addition to the prize money, Zera Café will receive two years of professional coaching and support from the Azrieli Foundation. The foundation, based in Toronto, has been operating for over 30 years and funds institutions and operates programs in Canada and Israel.

Neurodiverse adults who work at the Zera Café kitchen in Côte des Neiges gain catering experience by mass producing ready-to-eat meals that are sold on its website. They also cater meetings, school and synagogue events.



The team at Zera Café, after hearing about their win on October 25. Photos courtesy of Zera Café

“We applaud the efforts of Zera Café and others who are pioneering innovative and actionable pathways to truly inclusive hiring practices,” said Naomi Azrieli, chair and CEO of the Azrieli Foundation. “Zera Café is a great example of an initiative that creates equitable employment prospects for neurodivergent talent in Canada.”

Rochman, a seasoned cook herself, launched her non-profit in February 2020, right before Covid-19 hit. But she soldiered on, offering her protégés weekly online sessions and ended up preparing meals for people unable to get out of their homes.

In January 2022, the café moved from a synagogue into a modern and larger kitchen in Cummings Square and Rochman hired a professional support and leadership team. Their ready-to-eat meals focus on modern Israeli cuisine, centred on vegetables.

“Now we’re ready to scale up and grow bigger and better,” Rochman said after winning the award. ■

For more information about Zera Café: zeracafe.ca; and about the Azrieli Foundation award: azrielifoundation.org/infinityprize.

Evaluating disability disclosure in the workplace at Concordia workshop

by *Randy Pinsky*

Concordia University's Alumni Association hosted "Disclosing in the Workplace: Is it Worth it?" on October 5, an online workshop exploring the experiences encountered by working-age Canadians with a disability. While the presenters discussed how disclosing one's disability can lead to potential accommodations, they also noted reasons for hesitation, such as concerns about lost opportunities and different treatment.

Speakers included staff from Concordia's Access Centre for Students with Disabilities and the Equity Office of the Provost and Vice-President, sharing their insights and experiences with disclosure in the workplace. Periodical polls were launched in order to assess audience demographics and perspectives.

Anna Barrafato, Accessibility Change Lead at the university's Equity Office, defined disclosure as "the process in which an employee...reveals their disabilities to employers and subsequently may ask for workplace accommodation." Although it can lead to

needed adaptations, she acknowledged this can be taxing on the individual.

In the past, employees with challenges had to justify the need for workplace accommodation, however Barrafato noted the Quebec Charter of Rights now stipulates it is the employer's duty to accommodate, barring undue hardship such as financial cost.

How much information should be shared? "Low disclosure can be as effective as high disclosure for low-cost accommodations," said Charles Altman, advisor at Concordia's Access Centre.

An example of a low-cost accommodation is assistive technology features from Microsoft Office Suite and Windows, such as options to change contrast, font type or size, activate closed captioning and voice-to-text, many of which are already embedded by default or available for a nominal fee.

Employees can also apply for periodic breaks, remote offices or adapted sched-

ules. "Requesting an accommodation is an iterative and interactive process," observed Moire Stevenson, Access Centre Lead for Disability Accommodations.

While physical accommodations, such as specialized equipment or a ramp, can be complicated, Stevenson stated that employers may consider such requests as this can enhance their inclusion ratings on workplace sites such as LinkedIn and Glassdoor.

Though there has been more openness in recent years, disclosure is still challenging for many. When polled, 21 percent of the Concordia participants in the October 5 talk responded they would not reveal their situation.

In 2017, visually-impaired CBC Radio producer Sheyfali Saujani hosted "The Disclosure Dilemma," reflecting on how situations have changed over the past few decades. She opened with, "in the past, everyone with a disability knew that getting a job meant downplaying your disability, not asking for special treatment - [it] was my

problem and not something my boss had to worry about."

As an example, a social worker with cerebral palsy on Saujani's show stated she never mentions her condition in job applications for fear it might disqualify her. Even established employees may hesitate asking for accommodations due to the stigma of needing help or being treated differently.

Yet the decision to share about one's situation can also be a teaching opportunity. In Disability Alliance BC's "Disclosing Your Disability" legal guide, a hard-of-hearing employee shared, "if we're willing to educate the general public, they become more sensitive, and it improves all our working relationships."

Disclosure is a complex, situationally-specific undertaking. "Your disability is part of who you are," said an advocate on Saujani's show. "[It does] not take the focus away from what you can actually do." ■



Club Sportif Côte de Liesse and the "Leaps and Bounds" summer day camp program are proud to support Montreal's special needs and mental health communities.

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The difference between conflict and bullying, and how to address both

by *Janet Silverstone Perlis, Despina Vassiliou and Melissa Velandia-Rosales*

Parents worry when their children have difficulties with peers and, more often than not, they label such situations as bullying. Some situations are indeed bullying but many of such situations are conflict. It is imperative to address both situations and support children as they manoeuvre them.

It is critical, however, to understand the distinct differences between bullying and conflict as the implications and interventions for the two are very different. Several articles on bullying define it as "...repeated and purposeful. While the tactics vary from incident to incident, the bully is targeting the same people repeatedly with the purpose of hurting or controlling them." (*Psychology Today*, National Association of School Psychologists, Verywell Family)

Bullying entails targeting another with repeated and unwanted actions that are physical and/or verbal in nature. The goal involves exerting power and control using intimidation, harassment, threats and instilling fear. It is important to note that both the perpetrator and the victim require intervention.

Conflict, on the other hand, consists of a disagreement between peers: individuals

with equal power. These peers may be at odds due to a difference of perspective or opinion. It is not about seeking control or attention. The aim is not to hurt someone else despite being upset or emotional. The goal is to get their wants or needs met and eventually restore the relationship. When children are in conflict, we need to teach them conflict-resolution or problem-solving skills.

As part of addressing these important issues, let's teach our children the following:

1. Understand and recognize the difference between bullying and conflict.
2. Recognize that not every hurtful action is bullying even though it may feel that way.
3. Manage conflict. It is an important life skill that includes problem-solving and compromise and/or collaboration. There are many effective conflict-resolution programs to help learn those skills.
4. Get help from an adult if they are being bullied. Research shows that it is not helpful to have the targeted child handle bullies on their own. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help.
5. Teach them that they need not be a victim. They have the power to say no and not to be mistreated by others. They can stand up for themselves respectfully and without violence.



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Where should conflict resolution be applied?

The underlying assumption with conflict-resolution is that all parties involved in a problem situation are responsible and need to work it out. This is not the case when the issue is between a bully and their target, where different interventions are necessary and adult support is needed. Conflict-resolution programs are not recommended for bullying situations.

Forcing a child that is being bullied to participate in conflict resolution or mediation is never a good idea. Instead, develop an intervention process that ensures the safety of the student being bullied. (Verywell Family - Sherri Gordon, June 2020)

Knowing how to resolve conflicts without resorting to aggression is an important skill. Peer mediation and other appropriate models or programs for conflict resolution in school environments exist. However, it is important to reach out to your school if your child expresses having difficulty with a peer and needs help to handle the situation. Schools have many options for interventions for either conflicts or bullying, so do not hesitate to reach out if the situation is occurring at the school. ■

Janet Silverstone Perlis and Melissa Velandia-Rosales are psychologists, and Despina Vassiliou is a psychologist and coordinator, Student Services. All are at the English Montreal School Board.

Working out conflicts

In general, children and teenagers gain experience working out conflicts when they have the opportunity to be involved in group situations. Therefore, in addition to school, being part of a sports team, club or activity can also give them opportunities to successfully navigate peer conflict.

Below are several links to resources and tip sheets that parents and teachers may find helpful.

As well, *We Know Better Games* by Elaheh Bos is a book with strategies that are suitable for elementary-aged children to work on developing problem-solving skills with their parents.

www.preynet.ca/resources/tip-sheets

www.schoolclimate.org/resources-for-parents/



EMSB Database of Special Needs Resources

Consult our database on our website:

www.inspirationsnews.com/inspirations/resources

How the new complaints procedure works

by *Jordan Stoopler*

There is a new province-wide process in place for somebody wanting to file a complaint surrounding educational services.

Under the new protocols, which came into effect on August 28, parents or students must first direct their complaint, either verbally or in writing, to the person directly concerned or their superior. The person receiving the complaint has 10 business days to respond, after which the complainant may direct their grievance to their school board's Complaints Officer. The person in this role has 15 business days to address the matter before the issue can be brought to the Regional Student Ombudsman (RSO), who is appointed by the Ministère de l'Éducation based on the recommendations of a selection committee.

Cases of bullying can be dealt with directly by the Complaints Officer, while sexual violence complaints can bypass the two initial steps and be fast-tracked directly to the RSO.

The three-step process applies to all pre-school, elementary and secondary students, whether enrolled in public school boards or service centers, private educational institutions or those who are homeschooled, in vocational training or adult education.

"This bill only applies to educational services," said Nathalie Lauzière, who serves as the Complaints Officer for the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). "Any other complaints that parents might have regarding school taxes or buildings,

for instance, are not part of Bill 9 but are dealt with through a specific EMSB By-Law entitled Procedure for the Examination of Complaints relating to the Functions of the School Board falling under section 220.2 of the Education Act."

The changes to the complaints processing procedure stem from the 2022 passing of Bill 9, which allowed for the government to appoint a National Student Ombudsman and 13 RSOs responsible for ensuring that student rights are respected. All complainants and staff members involved in the complaint process are protected from reprisals.

Lauzière explained that under the previous format (Bylaw 8), students and parents could go to an EMSB-appointed Ombudsman directly anytime with their complaint.

She said the new procedure ensures documentation is easily accessible throughout the process thanks to a streamlined digital software and prioritizes sped-up response times of complaints.

"We have to make sure that these delays are respected," said Lauzière. "We have forms that are available online, where the parent can automatically write their complaint. An acknowledgement of receipt is sent automatically to them within two days of them filing the complaint." ■

For more information about the new complaints procedure at the EMSB:
www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb/services/central-services/Complaint

Bill 9: Strengthening Quebec's anti-bullying and anti-violence legislation

by *Victoria Della Cioppa*

To address the safety and well-being of all children in Quebec, the province has implemented various legislation over the years, one of the most notable being Bill 56. This law was designed to combat bullying and violence in educational institutions, making schools safer environments for our children. This year, Quebec has taken another step towards enhancing the protection of students by introducing Bill 9, which amends Bill 56 to include a crucial section on sexual violence. In response to the bill, the English Montreal School Board has revamped their plan, which was previously called the Safe School Action Plan, to become the Anti-Bullying Anti-Violence Action Plan.

Bill 56, known as "An Act to prevent and deal with bullying and violence in schools," was initially enacted in 2012. It introduced several key elements for school staff to consider when dealing with incidents of bullying and violence. These elements include: (1) Definitions of bullying and violence, ensuring that educators, parents and students have a consistent understanding when identifying and addressing these issues; (2) Prevention and awareness measures within educational institutions, attesting that schools implement proactive measures designed to tackle specific areas of concern related to bullying and violence; (3) Reporting mechanisms for students, parents and staff to report incidents.

These mechanisms are designed to protect those who report incidents and ensure

timely responses; and (4) Supervisory and support measures for all parties involved, including bystanders, which include both remediation measures and consequences, while taking into consideration several factors related to the student.

Bill 9 represents a significant enrichment of Bill 56 by recognizing the urgency of addressing sexual violence. The new bill has a dedicated section on sexual violence with steps to better protect students within educational settings. The amendments brought on by Bill 9 include: (1) An explicit definition of sexual violence within the context of educational institutions; (2) Mandatory training for all school staff on recognizing and addressing sexual violence to be provided by the Ministère de l'Éducation; and (3) Reporting directly to the Regional Student Ombudsman, thereby bypassing the complaint procedure route for bullying, which involves the school and the school board's complaints officer.

As parents and guardians, it is essential to be informed about these legislative changes. Bill 9's inclusion of sexual violence reinforces the commitment to protect our children from harm. By understanding these laws, parents can actively engage with educational institutions to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. ■

Victoria Della Cioppa is project development officer, School Climate and Violence Prevention with the English Montreal School Board.

EPCA informs parents

An information session on the new procedures and the role of the National Student Ombudsman (NSO) was given by the English Parents Committee Association (EPCA) on June 12 to parents who registered. The PowerPoint presentation, translated by the EPCA, outlined the evolution of the ombudsman's role, their responsibilities and the new procedures in place under the provisions of Bill 9. EPCA provides information about the NSO on their website at <https://epcquebec.org/national-student-ombudsman>.



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MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING DATABASE

We are creating a new database featuring mental health and well-being resources

www.inspirationsnews.com

Community resources support mental well-being

by *Sue Montgomery*

Who can you turn to when you are seeking support? We asked that question to the Mental Health Resource Centre at the English Montreal School Board, and they shared a few suggestions with us. The following sample of resources are available to help students and their families take care of their mental health and issues related to their well-being.

Strengthening Families Program Montreal

This is a free program offered by the Côte des Neiges Black Communities Association at its location at 6585 Côte-des-Neiges Rd. as well as in some English Montreal School Board schools.

By working with youth aged 3 to 17 years and their parents or caregivers, the program offers classes in the following areas: parent training, child skills training and family life skills training. The focus is on several areas such as conflict resolution, family therapy, mentoring, and substance abuse prevention and treatment. The goal is to improve social skills and school performance.

The 14-week program is offered in the fall and winter to families who are referred or come voluntarily. During the two-hour weekly classes, youth learn coping skills and anger management; parents learn how to discipline, listen to and interact positively with their children; and in classes that bring parents and children together, families practice what they've learned under the guidance of group leaders. There's a graduation ceremony at the end of the session.

The program comes from an American-based umbrella organization of the same name. The Montreal chapter is funded by schools and Centraide grants.

For more information: www.cdnbca.org or info@cdnbca.org.

The CLSC

CLSCs, or local community services centres, provide health and social services on

the premises, at work, as well as in homes and schools. There are several across the province that provide social, psychological and health services. They fall under the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux (CIUSSS).

For more information about what the CLSCs offer and where to find one closest to where you live, visit Quebec's Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux's website and choose "Health and Social Services Institutions."

Info-Social 811

An offshoot of Info-Santé 811, Info-Social 811 (Option 2) provides psychosocial assistance 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Individuals can call 811 to speak with a psychosocial worker for problems concerning themselves or a family member. The professionals answering the calls can offer support for emotional distress and, if necessary, provide references for the appropriate resource in the health and social services network, for example a crisis centre. Types of problems that are handled include anxiety, grieving, relationship problems or if the caller is looking for guidance on how to help a friend or relative. The information shared by the caller remains confidential.

Aire Ouverte

A provincial government resource for young people, the latest and newest Aire Ouverte centre is located at 5245 Côte-des-Neiges Rd. and is staffed by sexologists, nurses and social workers. Young people between 12 and 25 can drop in without an appointment to get everything from a shower to housing and financial advice.

"It's the middleman between a teen centre and a CLSC," said Caroline Smisek, a CLSC social worker at Westmount High School. "They can do pretty much anything and everything." Issues like family conflict, an abusive relationship, an unwanted pregnancy, addiction issues, failure at school or bullying can all be addressed at Aire Ouverte for free and anonymously.

Aire Ouverte centres are located around the city and are accessible by public transportation and are open to anyone regardless of where they live.



Photo: Anete Lusina Photography: www.pexels.com

For more information: www.ciuisswestcentral.ca/programs-and-services/aire-ouverte.

Counsellor in the Classroom program

This is a free, school-based program available in French and English to grades 4-12. It's provided by the Kids Help Phone and offers educators activities and resources to begin in-class discussions about mental health and how to ask for help.

The program has two stages. First, teachers lead their class through curriculum and activities that equip students with basic mental health knowledge and prepare them for a group call with a Kids Help Phone counsellor. The students will then have a 45-minute phone or video call with a counsellor, where they can learn more about the organization. ■

For more information: www.kidshelpphone.ca.

A graphic for the 'Inspirations News Podcast'. At the top is a logo featuring a rainbow and the text 'INSPIRATIONS News PODCAST'. Below this, the title 'INSPIRATIONS NEWS PODCAST' is written in large, bold, white and blue letters. Underneath the title, it says 'with host Mark Bergman' in a cursive font. At the bottom, there are icons for 'Find us on' Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts, and iHeart Radio. The background of the graphic is a dark blue and yellow abstract design.

Collaborative Problem Solving: Compassion is within our reach

by *Stephanie Paquette*

Parenting children who exhibit challenging behaviours can be disheartening. Despite best intentions, difficult behaviours can place strain on the parent-child relationship and contribute to conflictual outcomes. Behaviour has a communicative purpose, which may be misunderstood. Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) provides the structure for us to think about what skills are being impacted when behaviours are present.

CPS specifies that kids with challenging behaviours are having difficulty meeting expectations; they do not lack the will to behave well, rather they have not acquired the skills that contribute to good behaviour. When kids have difficulty meeting expectations, they become upset. These kids

often struggle with skills related to problem-solving, flexibility, and frustration tolerance. Assessing lagging skills using the CPS Thinking Skills Inventory can offer some clarity as to why kids are struggling to adaptively handle their challenges. It has been shown to build these skills.

Having a better understanding of the reason behind the behaviour contributes to the development of empathy and can strengthen the parent-child relationship.

The CPS model focuses on identifying unsolved problems and then engaging kids in solving them. For example, an ongoing challenge at bedtime or difficulty starting and completing homework, are problems to be solved that can be addressed using

the CPS model. It helps children and adults build crucial social-emotional skills and leads to a reduction in behaviours across the settings in which it is introduced. Research conducted at Think:Kids, via the Massachusetts General Hospital, has shown that CPS contributes to reductions in time spent out of class, detentions, suspensions, injuries, teacher stress and alternative placements as well as increases in emotional safety, attendance, academic growth and family participation.

In the spring of 2023, EMSB Student Services Department professionals and special education technicians working specifically with children who exhibit challenging behaviours, were introduced to the CPS model to integrate into their respective

settings. The model will continue to be introduced to a selection of EMSB school professionals throughout the 2023-2024 academic school year, with the intention of introducing a new approach to reducing behaviours and building relationships.

Continuing to integrate trauma-informed, social-emotional approaches in schools, is teaching important life skills that students and staff can integrate in educational spaces and beyond. ■

For more information on the Collaborative Problem Solving approach or to learn more about the CPS Thinking Skills Inventory: [Livesinthebalance.org](https://livesinthebalance.org) and [Thinkkids.com](https://thinkkids.com).

Stephanie Paquette is a social worker with the English Montreal School Board.

Combatting bullying one phone call at a time

by *Jordan Stoopler*

As a teenage victim of bullying, Rob Benn-Frenette was in desperate search for a resource to help him through his struggles.

Unable to find a suitable solution, he, along with Katie Thompson (Neu), co-founded BullyingCanada.ca in 2006.

“We initially were looking to provide a resource for youth who could find a community,” said Benn-Frenette, now executive director of BullyingCanada, referring to their original website. “The initial website provided some information on bullying and community-based resources.”

An expansion into a 24/7 support hotline occurred in 2011, just as BullyingCanada became a registered Canadian charity based out of Fredericton, New Brunswick. The free and bilingual nationwide support service coaches bullied kids up to the age of 18 on how to deal with bullies. It also acts as a resource for youth and their parents, where they can receive tips on bullying

prevention as well as guidance on how to approach individual schools or school boards if the problem persists.

The hotline is operated by between 70 to 100 rotating volunteers, who undergo a screening process and over 100 hours of what Benn-Frenette describes as “intense” training. This includes preparing support responders for various types of callers and situations, and offering different solutions that can be suggested to people calling the hotline.

The support line also addresses a glaring problem that dates back to Benn-Frenette’s days as a bullied teen.

“There were a couple charities that offered an information service where you could reach out and share your story, but anytime you contacted them, you had to share your story again and you were speaking with somebody new,” said Benn-Frenette. “To rehash your story more than once on any victim of bullying is quite difficult.”

As the “only wrap-around mental health service for bullied youth,” callers speak with the same volunteer continuously

throughout their case, which may last anywhere from a couple of days to many months.

Benn-Frenette said BullyingCanada’s services are needed now more than ever. In 2022, the charity received over 2.3 million phone calls and saw its website visited more than 282 million times, a sharp increase from pre-pandemic totals. He points to increased time online as one of the catalysts behind this trend.

“Nearly every student was studying online, creating this meeting environment where bullying could happen,” he said. “Technology is causing bullying to occur more outside school hours. The positive is that kids are reporting it more. It’s important that we continue the conversation about bullying within the classroom, which doesn’t happen nearly enough.” ■



Rob Benn-Frenette, co-founder and executive director of BullyingCanada, an organization dedicated to justice and healing for youth who are bullied, stands in front of the old Fredericton, NB courthouse. Photo courtesy of BullyingCanada

Heartfulness: An antidote to bullying

by *Danika Swanson*

For this *Inspirations* edition, we are revisiting a mindfulness practice that involves sending kind intentions to ourselves and others, called Heartfulness.

Heartfulness is based on Loving Kindness Meditation. While it has its roots in Buddhist tradition, there is a lot of research that shows that this practice can increase well-being and positive emotions, cultivate compassion and empathy for ourselves and others, and help us feel more connected to the people around us – both loved ones and strangers.

We could all use more kindness and empathy, both of which provide an important antidote to violence and bullying. In addition, research suggests that when people

practice regularly, they start automatically reacting more positively to others, enhancing the quality of their social interactions and relationships.

Traditionally, the Loving Kindness practice involves a simple repetition of three or four phrases wishing for someone to be happy, healthy and strong, and filled with ease/peace/joy. I like to add a wish for safety as well. The full practice traditionally includes directing these wishes to a series of different people starting with yourself and then expanding your circle outwards (to a loved one, then to someone you feel neutral about, then towards someone you might be having difficulty with, and finally to all beings everywhere).

Here, we will start with kind intentions for another person, with the option to add

kind intentions for yourself, and then your community (school/city/world etc.).

You can use whichever words and phrasing feel most comfortable or natural for you. For example, “May you be...” “I hope you will be...” “I wish for you to be...” If you say these slowly and include a mindful breath, it takes about 20 seconds; think about where you might be able to integrate this short practice into your daily life, such as when you wake up, before a meal, while washing your hands, or at bedtime.

Practice:

- ✧ Get into your mindful body. Place your hand(s) on your chest, your heart centre.
- ✧ Close your eyes (or keep your gaze soft) and bring to mind someone who you see regularly who makes you happy when you see them, like someone you live with, someone at school, a teacher, or maybe even a pet! Can you notice the happiness in your heart?
- ✧ Imagine this person is healthy and strong. Imagine they are happy. Imagine they are surrounded by calm and peaceful things, and feel a sense of calm and peace.
- ✧ Let your heart fill with kindness and then send kind thoughts to the person you are thinking of by saying the following, either silently or out loud:
 - May you be happy
 - May you be healthy
 - May you be peaceful
 - May you be kind, and accept yourself just as you are.
- ✧ Take a few moments and let those kind thoughts flow from your heart to theirs. Notice how it feels.
- ✧ If you would like, send the same kind thoughts to yourself. You can also send kind thoughts to a larger community such as your school/city/world by repeating the first three prompts.
- ✧ When you're ready, open your eyes and notice how it felt to send kind thoughts to others and/or to yourself. ■



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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 their potential. I'm a proud supporter of *Inspirations*!

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MNA FOR / DÉPUTÉE DE D'ARCY-MCGEE

Resources:

Sending Kind Thoughts | Loving-Kindness Meditation, from Greater Good Science Center (YouTube video 1:46)

Mindfulness Class for Kids! Ep. 5 by Mindful Schools, Sending Kind Thoughts (Vimeo video 15:13)

From the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC), under “Free Guided Meditations:”

Loving Kindness Meditation (English, 9:31).

Méditation de la Bienveillance (French, 14:26).

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



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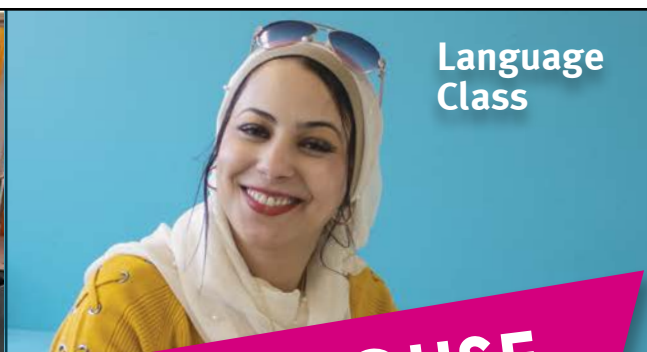
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L'École Peter Hall gagne le prix « Innovation - Adaptation scolaire de la FEEP »

par *Emmanuelle Assor*

Souvent les avancées technologiques nous prennent par surprise et changent drastiquement nos vies comme si cela avait toujours été le cas. À l'École Peter Hall, où sont mises à l'essai diverses approches nouvelles pour développer le plein potentiel des élèves, l'ordinateur Tobii a été intégré avec succès dans plusieurs classes.


Ce projet, qui a remporté le prix de l'innovation en adaptation scolaire pour l'année 2023, est le fruit d'un effort d'équipe joignant les enseignantes Francine Nachfolger, Chantal Lamarre, Sandra Rocrou à Danielle Gravel (ergothérapeute) et Tünde Szabad (orthophoniste).

Grâce à Tobii, un ordinateur avec contrôle oculaire, plusieurs élèves lourdement handicapés de l'École Peter Hall peuvent dorénavant accéder à du matériel didactique. Utilisé dans les cours au primaire, cet ordinateur adapté permet à trois classes d'une dizaine d'enfants - qui ne peuvent pas communiquer avec leur corps, mais qui sont disponibles cognitivement - de participer à toutes sortes d'activités sur écran.

Pendant que les enseignants mettent en œuvre une utilisation quotidienne, encourageant les enfants à participer et travailler fort, M^{me} Szabad s'est chargée de faire avancer le projet tout en s'occupant de sa maintenance technologique. « L'enthousiasme et la collaboration de l'équipe ont été nécessaires pour nous faire avancer. Grâce à ce travail, nos élèves prisonniers de leur corps et incapables

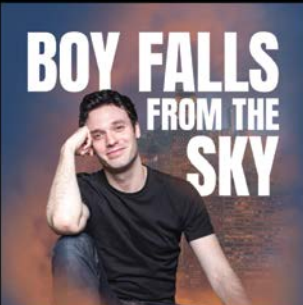


Les élèves réunis en classe le 10 octobre. À partir de la gauche, dernière rangée : Chantal Lamarre (enseignante), Tünde Szabad (orthophoniste) et Francine Nachfolger (enseignante); première rangée : les élèves Zion Daley, Hikma Youssouf, Bryan Nguyen et Ghaneem Ghani. Photo : Louise Baron




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d'utiliser des jouets, sont capables de s'exprimer, d'utiliser un outil et de jouer sur un ordinateur », affirme M^{me} Szabad. « Tobii les stimule sur le plan cognitif et leur permet d'avoir un certain contrôle sur leur vie plutôt que d'être des participants passifs. »

À quoi ressemble le tout? Tobii est un dispositif de communication agrémenté d'une barre de commande oculaire PCEye, que l'on accroche sur l'écran. Ceci permet aux utilisateurs d'interagir intuitivement avec leur ordinateur dans l'environnement Windows et de le contrôler par le biais du suivi oculaire. La commande oculaire peut être utilisée tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur de la salle de classe, sur un ordinateur à grand écran, un portable ou une tablette pour les sorties plus simples.

« On utilise actuellement cinq programmes différents à l'École Peter Hall dont : Look to Learn, Communicator, Eye can fly, Eyegaze Choosing et Attention. Nous utilisons aussi le site Web (Helpkidzlearn) activé par les yeux », explique M^{me} Szabad. À titre d'exemple, Look to Learn propose 40 activités de coloriage, des jeux musicaux

ou de stratégie comme le Ninja Fruit, des activités ludiques de cause à effet. Cette innovation enchante ces enfants qui auparavant n'avaient aucune façon de faire des choix ou de participer à ce genre d'activités. La plupart d'entre eux voudraient même utiliser Tobii tout le temps et le ramener à la maison!

Pour l'instant, l'ordinateur coûte 20 000 \$ et la commande oculaire oscille entre 5 000 et 8 500 \$. À l'heure actuelle, il n'existe qu'un seul programme d'aide financière, soit le Programme ministériel des aides techniques à la communication. Dans un avenir proche, l'objectif de l'équipe de Peter Hall est de trouver le budget nécessaire pour acheter un autre appareil de contrôle oculaire afin de pouvoir le louer aux enfants et aux parents pour les fins de semaine. « Nous aimerions également faire progresser nos élèves afin qu'ils puissent communiquer mieux en utilisant Tobii », de dire M^{me} Szabad. ■



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La Fondation Véro & Louis bâtira deux nouvelles maisons pour adultes autistes

par *Jordan Stoopler*

Quand Marcel Lussier a remporté le gros lot du tirage du Lotto Max de 70 millions \$ en juin 2022, il a voulu redonner à une fondation qui vient en aide à la communauté autiste.

C'est ainsi que la Fondation Véro & Louis s'est vu remettre la somme de 7 millions \$ qui permettra la construction d'une maison dédiée à une clientèle autiste âgée de 21 ans et plus dans les Laurentides.

« C'est un cadeau descendu du ciel », s'est réjouie Katty Taillon, directrice générale de la Fondation. « Ce n'était pas l'un de nos donateurs, on ne le connaissait pas. C'est un acte de générosité. Il a confiance dans la Fondation et dans notre projet. »

Ce sera la deuxième maison du genre à voir le jour. Elle succédera à la première inaugurée à Varennes en mai 2021, laquelle accueille 16 résidents de 25 à 60 ans en plus de 5 participants de jour qui habitent toujours chez leurs parents. La construction d'une troisième maison à Victoriaville est

aussi dans les cartons de la Fondation, en co-partenariat avec la Fondation François Bourgeois.

La Fondation est née du désir du célèbre couple Véronique Cloutier et Louis Morissette de mettre leur notoriété à profit en donnant une voix et de la visibilité à une grande cause. Le couple a arrêté son choix à la suite de la lecture du livre *Deux garçons à la mère* de la comédienne et animatrice Guylaine Guay, mère de deux enfants autistes et marraine de la Fondation, qui manifestait le désir que quelqu'un de généreux l'entende et l'aide à créer des maisons pour les adultes autistes de 21 ans et plus.

« Il y a un besoin criant au Québec pour ce type de maisons, affirme M^{me} Taillon. Jusqu'à l'âge de 21 ans, ces personnes suivent le parcours scolaire en fréquentant l'école pendant la journée. À partir de 21 ans, il n'y a pas de services. Pour l'hébergement, les listes d'attente sont longues. »



Véronique Cloutier et Louis Morissette, fondateurs de la Fondation Véro & Louis, entourés de Justin, Chantal et Alexandre, résidents de la Maison Véro & Louis de Varennes. Photo : Andréanne Gauthier

Les maisons Véro & Louis proposent un hébergement assorti d'activités et de programmations quotidiennes conçues en tenant compte des besoins et intérêts des participants et résidents.

« Pour les parents et les familles, c'est un grand soulagement de savoir que leurs enfant, frère ou sœur sont en sécurité dans un espace physiquement adapté pour eux, de dire M^{me} Taillon. C'est d'être capables de recommencer à vivre pour eux. On leur permet d'avoir une vie adulte, malgré leurs conditions et leur vulnérabilité. »

La Fondation espère entreprendre la construction des maisons dès la fonte des neiges en 2024, de manière à pouvoir y accueillir ses nouveaux résidents début 2025. ■

La Fondation Véro & Louis a un peu plus tôt cet automne donné le coup d'envoi à sa campagne *Différent comme toi*. Des tris de chaussettes, en tailles homme et femme, sont maintenant en vente au prix de 24 \$. Les profits réalisés permettent de soutenir la Fondation. Ils sont offerts dans les succursales Jean Coutu à la grandeur du Québec et sur la boutique en ligne à boutique.fondationverolouis.com.

WILOH aims to provide housing for neurodivergent adults in the West Island

by *Anita Szabadi-Gottesman*



The Maison WILOH board gathered together in late October. From left: Gary Panton, Barbara Morawski, Sofia Ioannou, Louise Beaudry and Jacques Lapierre. Photo courtesy of Maison WILOH

The need to find suitable housing in the West Island for neurodivergent adults is top of mind for chair Jacques Lapierre and his board of directors, who are spearheading the private, not-for-profit Maison WILOH (West Island Life Oasis Home). The initiative is also supported by a core group of 20 families.

Lapierre, father to his neurodiverse son Joel, 31, understands firsthand how important it is to plan for his future care and that of other special needs adults. He is clear in his vision for the completion of

the WILOH project. "For my son Joel and his peers, establishing a permanent living situation will give them a step forward towards maximized independence."

As stated in the informational pamphlet, the WILOH project aims to provide a viable alternative to families in search of a good home with an uplifting and rewarding life for their adult children 21 years and older with special needs. "As we age as parents, it is of the utmost importance to plan for the long-term care of our neurodivergent adult children when we can no longer care for them," Lapierre pointed out. "While there are some facilities in the West Island, no new projects were being proposed."

For close to two years, Lapierre and his team have been working to propose and

launch this new housing initiative. "We are speaking to the mayors of several West Island communities, and we are close to finding a location," he said.

WILOH's awareness campaign is set to launch soon alongside fundraising initiatives. Catering to a wide spectrum of intellectual deficiencies and/or autism, the WILOH residence would be planned and partitioned to best ensure safety and security based on the different abilities and levels of independence. ■

To volunteer or learn more, consult the WIAIH (West Island Association for the Intellectually Handicapped) Residential Committee at wiaih.qc.ca. A WILOH website was being developed for launch in the fall.



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First project launched in St. Jude's Bust a Move

by *Michael Brown and Tanya Santagata*

A team from St. Jude School in Greenfield Park and members of the Riverside School Board's occupational therapy team collaborated to create a sensory-motor pathway that was installed in time for the new school year. This is the first initiative in the "St. Jude's Bust a Move" project, which promotes movement break opportunities while also encouraging gross motor skill development in different areas throughout the entire school.

The sensory-motor pathway guides the students through a series of movements, indicated by images placed on the floor and walls. It incorporates gross motor tasks that provide different types of sensory input to help students with self-regulation and to be more receptive to learning in the classroom. Students can use the pathway throughout the day to help with transitions between periods, as a movement break during class time or as an activity to work on different gross motor skills, including balance, jumping and bilateral coordination. Calming stations, which include a visual of a dandelion blowing in the wind, encourage students to work on deep breathing which can help to reduce stress and anxiety.

In addition to its benefits with regards to self-regulation and gross motor skill development, the sensory-motor path also promotes literacy and numeracy skills through its brightly coloured alphabet and numbered hopscotch and jumping sections. Students can practice spelling their name by selecting the letters on a keyboard visual on the wall before starting on the path – a fun learning activity that can be incorporated within their daily routine.

The sensory-motor pathway marks the beginning of a wonderful collaboration that promotes the overall well-being of students within the school community. ■



Children at St. Jude School play in the sensory-motor pathway, practising different movements. Photos courtesy of the Riverside School Board

Michael Brown is principal at St. Jude School and Tanya Santagata is an occupational therapist with the Riverside School Board's Complementary Services.

Driving the conversation on special needs transportation

by *Jennifer LeHuquet*

More than 30 drivers and dispatchers were present at Riverside School Board (RSB) for a workshop on best practices for transporting students with special needs on September 19. The workshops were offered to all drivers who work with populations of students who attend Riverside's REACH School, as well as students who attend regional programs on the school board's territory.

The presenters, Lina Bluteau and Charlotte Couture, are occupational therapists who work closely with students with physical and neurological differences. Participants learned about the profile of clientele, internal and external factors that affect the transportation of students, safety concerns and how to mitigate them, and best practices for working with students with special needs. The interactive approach allowed them to ask questions, raise concerns and leave with practical tools and strategies to improve the transportation experience for everyone involved.

People attending the session came away with a better understanding of the students they interact with and the importance of their role as a partner in the child's devel-

opment. Drivers were happy to see this program return after having been suspended for several years due to Covid-19.

The session was one in a series of workshops offered by Riverside's Transportation Department for transporters. The next series of workshops will be offered to all drivers on Riverside's territory and focuses on first aid and rescue training to deal with emergency preparedness. ■

Jennifer LeHuquet is coordinator of Complementary Services at the Riverside School Board. The workshop was a collaboration between the board's Transportation Services and Complementary Services.



Lina Bluteau, left, and Charlotte Couture, occupational therapists with the Riverside School Board, gave a workshop on best practices for transporting students with special needs on September 19.



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Creating calm at the Y

by *Sue Montgomery*

A new eight-week program in the arts, physical activity or swimming is being planned for January at the Sylvan Adams YM-YWHA for neurodiverse children or those with physical challenges.

For children with diverse cognitive abilities, Inclusion Art uses a wide range of materials, like paper, rice, pasta, paint and glue to help children express themselves creatively. Elena Arranz, an art therapist from Spain who will be leading the classes, said that while creating, children can often be encouraged to express themselves about different aspects of their lives, like their families. “It also helps them learn to control their emotions,” she said.

The art program, for children aged 6-12, will run Sunday afternoons, from 3:30 to 5 pm.

Arranz plans to have six children in the program, so participants have to be independent. But for those who need a bit of extra help, a parent can accompany their child.

The Thrive and Swim program is scheduled to take place on Sundays for children 5 to 12 years old, with a ratio of three children to one instructor. The course will include cooperative games and activities in a gym, followed by pool fun, all while promoting friendship and skill development under the guidance of experienced facilitators.

The cost for the programs is \$354, and financial aid is possible.

“We want to provide a welcoming, engaging and inclusive environment,” said Rajneet Dhesi, Program and Inclusion coordinator.

Another excellent activity for young adults 14 years and older with developmental disabilities is United Explorers, a social and recreational program already underway this fall. Participants have the opportunity to engage in sports, swimming, sensory integration activities and organized outings, all within a supportive environment. The Saturday program is led by experienced organizers who specialize in working with the neurodiverse community. ■



For more info: ymywha.com/inclusion-services.

Ometz, Concordia team up for autistic students

by *Sue Montgomery*

The Ometz Centre for Young Adults (known as L'Annexe), is partnering with Concordia University's Access Centre for Students with Disabilities (ACSD) to help overcome the challenges of communication and time management – which can be particularly challenging for students on the autism spectrum.

Up to nine students from Concordia's Access Centre meet for an hour and a half once a week for six weeks to work on specific skills needed in a classroom setting, such as communication with peers on a group project or working with a professor.

Participants also learn what is appropriate information to share, how to read social cues and how to advocate for themselves.

Time management and an ability to focus, crucial for any student, is also addressed in the class.

“Concordia reached out to us and said they wanted to offer workshops specifically geared towards students on the autism spectrum who were registered with the Access Centre,” said L'Annexe manager, Lanya McClintock. “We were really excited for this opportunity that allowed us to offer programs outside of our physical space, connect with new audiences and build more partnerships in the city.”

Adelina Feo, ACSD manager, said the workshop content is tailored to the needs of autistic students. “This collaboration allows students to become acquainted with resources in the community, which they might be interested in accessing even after they graduate,” she said.

ACSD's expertise in navigating university requirements meshes well with L'Annexe's initiative, called accés:succès, whose aim is to help neurodiverse young adults build the skills needed to get an education and land a job. McClintock said that given the success of the partnership so far (they are in the midst of their third cohort), it's hoped they can extend the service to other CEGEPs

and universities. “It helps us, it helps them and that's how we are both able to meet our missions,” she said.

L'Annexe is a diverse, LGBTQ-affirming Jewish social service and community space open to everyone aged 16 to 35. ■

For more information: L'Annexe's Instagram page @lannexemtl or its Facebook page.



The Summer 2023 cohort of L'Annexe's accés:succès students gather for a photo. Photo courtesy of Agence Ometz



by *Mike Cohen*

Report on Parliament

Federal government introduces new ministers for disability and mental health files

Two portfolios pertinent to the mandate of this newspaper have changed hands.

There is a new minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities in Kamal Khera. She succeeds Carla Qualtrough, now the sports minister, whose dossier title at the time had been Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion. Qualtrough had brought a unique perspective to the job given the fact she is legally blind. Some disability advocates believe that Khera's previous experience as a nurse in Brampton, Ontario, and as the former minister for seniors provides her with "a rich understanding" of important components of the disability file.

Liberal Ontario MP for York Centre Ya'ara Saks is the new minister of Mental Health

and Addictions and associate minister of Health. She succeeds Caroline Bennett, who won't be seeking re-election after 26 years of service. Following the 2021 general election, Saks was named parliamentary secretary to the minister of Families, Children and Social Development. Prior to her election, she was a co-owner of a yoga studio and director of a mental health charity. She is now tasked with addressing Canada's opioid crisis and overseeing the establishment of the 988 Lifeline, a suicide prevention hotline, which is expected to come this fall.

Funding for the CNIB

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) has received a funding commitment from the Government of Canada's Digital Literacy Exchange Program intended to expand fundamental digital literacy

skills training to Canadians living with sight loss and ensure more people within this population can access the internet. It will also support the development of trainers so people can keep their skills current with new technologies and teaching methods. Examples of training topics include screen-reading software, optical character recognition, braille display, speech recognition software, accessible device features, awareness and educational training about the risks of the online environment. Training will be offered in a variety of formats and locations both online and in-person at partnering local public libraries.

"Our government knows that Canada thrives when no one gets left behind. And in today's reality, understanding digital technology and being able to use the internet safely, securely, and effectively are vital, which is why we are committed to ensuring

that all Canadians have the skills to access information and opportunities online," said François-Philippe Champagne, minister of Innovation, Science and Industry in a press release. "Therefore, through our Digital Literacy Exchange Program, we're proud to support CNIB's initiative to provide digital literacy skills training to Canadians with sight loss and intersecting social identities." ■

Historic Canadian Disability Benefit Act approved in June

After years of lobbying, the landmark Canadian Disability Benefit Act (Bill C-22) gained royal assent on June 22. The federal income supplement is intended "to reduce poverty and create financial security for working-age Canadians with disabilities," announced Carla Qualtrough, then minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion. The motivation behind the bill was the fact that this cohort has a higher likelihood of being low-income than their non-disabled counterparts, for social, economic and other reasons. While the bill – the first of its kind and "a cornerstone of [Canada's] Disability Inclusion Action Plan" as stated by the government of Canada – bears much promise, several in the disability community view it with cautious optimism as details remain unknown. The government has emphasized it will work in the spirit of "Nothing Without Us" in accordance with the Accessible Canada Act, which specifies that "persons with disabilities must be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs, services and structures."

– Randy Pinsky

Leaders on Wheels test accessibility of the REM

by *Rose Sondola*

When the Leaders on Wheels decided to check out the accessibility of the REM on August 31, it turned out to be quite an adventure!

Leaders on Wheels is a group of students who attend the Mackay Centre School's satellite class at Westmount High School. As part of the satellite class mission statement, students take trips into the community whenever possible, with the aim of familiarizing them with the city of Montreal and enabling them to become comfortable with taking the Metro. This empowers our students and gives them a sense of independence and freedom.

When faced with accessibility challenges, we learn to quickly adapt and find solutions. Parents love this aspect of our program because it familiarizes our students with real-life scenarios.

While Marie-Claude Landry, manager of customer service for the REM, was waiting

to give us a VIP tour, we were down in the Bonaventure Metro Station across the street. While this station does indeed have an elevator, which was running (we always check the website before leaving), it does not take us up to street level, only to the turnstiles. We then must take the elevator in 1000 de la Gauchetière, which is linked to the Metro station. There, this elevator was not working! So, we had to get back on the Metro and go to the next station with a working elevator at Place-d'Armes, and walk back to Gare Centrale, where we met Marie-Claude and had our much-anticipated REM experience.

We wrote a letter of complaint to the STM saying that it was misleading to advertise that the Bonaventure Metro station has an elevator without stipulating that the elevator does not get you to the street level.

The REM is fully accessible with roomy elevators, and thankfully they were all working the day we rode it!



A group of students who attend the Mackay Centre School's satellite class at Westmount High School take a ride on the new REM, testing its accessibility. Photo courtesy of Mackay Centre School

During our VIP tour, we sat by the window of the smooth, quiet train. There were no issues getting on or off the train as the entrance was completely flush with the floor, and our students have become adept at manoeuvring their power chairs in tight places.

We had a blast! ■

Rose Sondola is a teacher with the Mackay Centre School Satellite program at Westmount High School of the English Montreal School Board.



by *Elisabeth Prass*

Striving to ensure education, respite for all

I hope that you had a great summer with your families. Allow me to wish you, your children and their school staff an enjoyable and successful school year!

In late August, as parents learned of the shortage of teachers a few days before the beginning of the school year, my thoughts went particularly to parents like us who have children with special needs. I cringe to imagine the shortage of speech therapists and other special educators who are needed to assist our children.

This fall, I will be calling on the CAQ government to call and study Private Members' Bill 398 to enshrine the right of handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities to receive educational services equivalent to those provided by their school, if their school is unable to do so. Bill 398 was de-

posited by my colleague from Westmount-Saint-Louis, MNA Jennifer Maccarone.

In the winter of 2022, no less than 1,500 students with special needs were sent home from their schools because they did not have the resources they needed. When this happens, their parents are required to take over their child's education and, in many cases, have to stop working to do so. This is unacceptable. Article 1 of Quebec's Education Act says "Every person is entitled to the preschool education services and elementary and secondary school instructional services provided for by this Act..." The Legault government claims that its priority is student success, but apparently that does not apply to all students.

In September, I participated in a public campaign alongside the Quebec Intellectual Disability Society, the Fédération québé-

coise de l'autisme and the Coalition des parents d'enfants à besoins particuliers du Québec, asking the government to provide all students with the necessary resources for student success.

I will also continue to put pressure on the Minister of Social Services to reform the Family Support Program, which has not been indexed since its inception in 1995. This program is designed to provide support to families and loved ones who reside with one or more people who have a physical or intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder, by providing financial assistance for them to access respite or babysitting services. The amounts allocated by the government for these services amount to \$3.75 to \$5.25 per hour. Clearly the program is completely out of touch with 2023's financial realities; it's absolutely outrageous.

It's going to be a busy Fall in Quebec City, and 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 voices, your concerns and your needs to the decision makers in Quebec City so that we can work together to help our children achieve their potential.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office if we can provide you with information or be of assistance. ■

Elisabeth Prass is the MNA for D'Arcy-McGee and the 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. She can be reached at elisabeth.prass.dmg@assnat.qc.ca or 514.488.7028.



by *Joanne Charron*

Working together to address symptoms of bullying

Given that this edition of *Inspirations* focuses on bullying, I thought it would be a good opportunity to share my thoughts. While I am not a mental health professional, my involvement as a parent in my children's schools and as a past commissioner of special needs students on the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) has given me insight into some of the creative ways schools can address this important issue.

As we know, bullying starts at a very young age. We do know that teaching and prevention is key and should begin at home, although that is not always the case and sometimes might be the cause. Is the act of bullying an outward symptom of what someone is dealing with internally or in their home environment? Is it a cry for help? This is why it is so important that schools have implemented initiatives to guide, support and model proper behaviour. Once an incident has happened there are consequences for the perpetrator,

but they must be accompanied by support to get to the root cause.

There must be support for both the bully and the bullied otherwise intervention will be in vain. This is why mental health support is so much in need, especially in today's times.

While my kids were students at the EMSB, I appreciated the board's initiatives to address issues of bullying through anti-bullying campaigns, school assemblies, mentoring programs including some that paired older students with younger students, class discussions and more. The board also has programs that shed light on our special needs community, such as reverse integration programs, satellite classes, integration and volunteering for our special needs students.

We should continue to involve the children more in combatting issues like bullying. Sometimes they have the best ideas. We

should have them more involved in the decision-making process, for example with more seats on our governing boards, roles as anti-bullying reps in our schools or even on council as a student commissioner.

As adults we need to address these issues for the well-being of our children and our society. We are creating the next generation: We have to be what we want to see. If bullying is symptomatic of other underlying issues, maybe we need to address that.

There needs to be more professional involvement and guidance. Unfortunately, we do not have enough professionals to go around; the waiting lists for care in the public sphere are too long and not all families can afford private care. We could, however, look into other ways such as partnering with universities for student interns, reaching out to retirees in the field, elders and professionals willing to volunteer some of their time.

As a parent to three children who all attended EMSB schools, I appreciated the way they handled these and other issues and know that they are always willing to meet and work with me as a parent. I always felt safe and secure that my children were in those schools, and that if anything arose, we could work together to solve it. And we did.

This as a parent was a great comfort. It goes to show that if we work together, we can do anything because our goal is the same: the education, health and welfare of our children. ■

Joanne Charron is president of The C.A.R.E. Centre and president of the Comité des usagers of the Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre Users' Committee. She is special advisor to Inspirations. Contact her at charronjoanne@gmail.com.



by *Nick Katalifos*

Taking a proactive stance

As members of our various communities, we hate to hear stories of bullying – whether in the schoolyard, online or anywhere. As educators, we strive to find ways to prevent bullying, and ways to guide students towards self-respect and respect for others. We use our teaching and coaching skills to show children how to manage their emotions and learn conflict-resolution skills – and other ways to help prevent situations from escalating

into bullying. Where we can, we strive for prevention.

This issue of *Inspirations* gives me the opportunity to share some of the ways the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) is taking a proactive stance in preventing bullying, which as we all know takes a tremendous toll on one's mental health.

In its secondary school network, the EMSB has several initiatives underway, including the EMSB Student Leadership Program. This time-tested and successful program has been running since the mid 1980s. Its purpose is to bring high school students together from across Montreal to receive hands-on leadership training in weekly character-building activities.

Students are challenged to experience situations from a multitude of perspectives and to understand how much their own actions and words can affect others. Their learning comes full circle as they share their lessons in leadership by running fun and meaningful activities for 200 students from EMSB high schools during a two-day spring leadership camp they have designed, organized and facilitated.

At the elementary level, Leonardo Da Vinci Academy in Rivière des Prairies is the first EMSB school to run the Champions for Life Foundation's Recess Champions program. It is designed to nurture children in Grades 4, 5 and 6 to take on the role of "meaningful movement ambassadors" in their schools. Based on its three core pillars of leadership, physical literacy and fair play, it aims to make the schoolyard during recess – often a place where bullying and conflicts arise – more active, safe and inclusive.

Another interesting initiative is Project Harbour's RULER program, which has been introduced to some elementary schools and high schools under the umbrella of our Student Services Department. This is a social-emotional program that aims to increase competencies in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. School teams, including day care staff, have been trained in this method, and students have received various workshops relating to the RULER program. In its third year of implementation at the EMSB, we have now begun embedding

social-emotional learning within the school curriculum, so that teachers are actively teaching it on a regular basis.

We are addressing the issue of bullying in several other ways at the EMSB, including the Anti-Bullying Anti-Violence Action Plan that every school must complete on an annual basis, outlining their preventive measures against bullying and violence. (Please see the story on p. 15.)

Well-being clubs, currently being piloted in 10 schools, aim to enhance students' mental health and well-being. Also, an anti-bullying training workshop is being offered to staff this winter and spring and as always, programming from our Spiritual and Community Animation team plays a crucial role in anti-bullying and violence prevention initiatives at the EMSB.

Our schools, like all schools, are finding creative and motivating ways to combat bullying. But the work continues. ■

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



by
Steven Atme

A surprising reunion with my first school

Growing up in Montreal's Cartier-ville borough, my two sisters and I attended the English Montreal School Board's (EMSB) Parkdale Elementary School. Speaking as a Canadian Lebanese person, the school is known until this day as a great place, with multicultural students and staff.

Speaking as someone with autism, it felt like very few were aware of autism and all disabilities back in the years from 1998 to 2001. I didn't have many friends and was bullied every day. My saving grace was my former teacher, the late Maria Cordova. She

was my pillar of the special needs world, who also helped me read and write.

After being transferred to Summit School, I didn't look back, but carried the experience with me until the year 2015, when I was invited back to Parkdale to sing and speak during the EMSB's Kindergarten registration campaign kick-off event, which happened to take place at my old school. And so, I went back, spoke and performed "The Prayer."

Eight years had passed when EMSB Autism Consultant Maria Bartzakos approached me after my performance at St. Raphael Elementary School last January. She asked if I was interested in giving a short Creative Arts Therapy class to the Wings program at Sinclair Laird and Parkdale. Parkdale: the word echoed in my mind, and I had flashbacks and feelings of uncertainty. But then I recalled that 2015 visit where I saw how things had changed – for the better.

I gave it another chance. After walking around the building, the schoolyard and visiting my old classroom, I started to cry. It was time to create fun activities and make memories for the new generation after 22 years going from resentment to reconciliation.

There were five Wings classes. Each session always started with body stretches, meditation music through live piano playing and then new weekly activities. These students were outstanding! It was wonderful seeing everyone choreograph their own dances and vocals and improvise in acting and making music on my piano! Another shoutout to Shelley Sokoloff's 2022-23 students for their work and beautiful performance of Will.i.am's song, "What I Am," Sesame Street-style! Congratulations to these remarkable Parkdale kids and staff!

It was truly a great honour and pleasure being part of that personal journey on the "Parkdale Trail" with you guys! May we continue setting these examples of getting creative, staying positive, laughing and making brighter memories. My father always says, "The past is what makes you become the person you are today."



Steven Atme poses with the Wings team, from left: Sandra Crawford, Anna Nguyen, Shelley Sokoloff, Lisa-Marie Alfieri and Sorina Chis.

The truth is this is one of the reasons 2023 has been a better year for me. Trails always start rough but become smooth like all our journeys. That's also how we make better connections and build bridges. Once again, thank you so much Parkdale. I love you. ■

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. Contact Steven at atmepianosphd@hotmail.com.

New SVI class opens up at Galileo

by *Tanya Lo Bianco*

Let's take a moment to welcome the new SVI class that has begun at Galileo! These dedicated students have decided to take their education to the next level. Why? The answer lies in learning about what this new program has to offer.

The Sociovocational Integration program (SVI) is individualized to meet the needs of the neurodiverse student population at Galileo. The goal of the program is for students to develop the transferable skills to find and maintain meaningful employment, and the technical skills to achieve a Training Certificate for a Semi-Skilled Trade from the Quebec ministry of Education. With over 100 of these trades to choose from, there is something for all interests and abilities. The focus of the program is to build on students' strengths and interests in an inclusive environment for learning at their own pace. The program will provide students with the opportunity to integrate into competitive employment in the community and ultimately facilitate their transition to employment with continuing support.

SVI students have been working hard at drafting and executing their S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) goals as well



Alex Ponte, a student in the SVI program, learns to make a meal in the kitchen.

as building their personal employment plan, learning interpersonal skills, and developing social skills for the workplace. And more is to come throughout the year! ■

There is still availability in the program. Students must meet the eligibility requirements of the program, so an intake interview is required. For more information: 514.721.0120.

Tanya Lo Bianco is a Sociovocational Integration teacher at Galileo Adult Centre of the English Montreal School Board.

Smiles all around: Galileo and L.I.N.K.S at McGill's dental clinic

Galileo Adult Education Centre and L.I.N.K.S. High School took part in a partnership with Special Olympics Quebec's Healthy Communities Program on October 18. Free dental check-ups were provided to 36 students from the schools.

Teachers understand that the unknown can be stressful and scary, so in preparation for the upcoming visit, students practiced role-playing and discussed social stories to visualize the experience in all its aspects.

In turn, McGill dental students received sensitization training from the English Montreal School Board's special education consultant, Sarah Lynch, and director of Healthy Communities, Tristan Delmas, in anticipation of the event. "Our advice to them is to [approach] with a lot of humanity – communicat[ion is key]. Don't see the disability; see the ability first," said Delmas.

The collaboration is part of a 12-week internship program with McGill's Ingram School of Nursing. In order to encourage a less stressful association with medical professionals, the interns lead workshops



A high school student receives a dental check-up by McGill dental students on October 18.

and teacher trainings, and socialize with the students, including an apple-picking activity, to foster trust and rapport.

The team hopes the pilot project will lead to more collaborations, such as physiotherapy assessments. ■

– Randy Pinsky



Coronation Elementary student Van Rojan Badajos participates in the English Montreal School Board's first Olympiade in June 2023.

EMSB's first Special Olympics event attracts 80 elementary students

by *Sarah Lynch*

The English Montreal School Board's (EMSB) first annual Olympiade in conjunction with Special Olympics Quebec took place on June 7 at McGill's Tomlinson Fieldhouse. Organized by both the Educational Services and Student Services departments in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence for the Physically, Intellectually and Multi-Challenged, this special event provided an opportunity for students with autism or intellectual disabilities to experience sporting activities in a non-competitive and inclusive environment.

Over 80 athletes in elementary school participated in a variety of activities that were

set up and organized by EMSB professionals, consultants and leadership students from Laurier Macdonald High School.

The day began by welcoming the excited athletes, who arrived in their school colours, carrying signs and posters. Parents and EMSB staff celebrated the entrance of each school as they walked around the track during the official opening of the Olympiade.

The athletes participated in different sports and events, such as curling, baseball, basketball, obstacle course, parachute and running races. The day ended with closing remarks and each athlete received a certificate of participation.

A sincere thank you goes out to all of those who dedicated their time to plan, attend, help manage and take part in such a memorable event, as well as to the teachers who took the chance to embark on a new challenge by preparing and supporting their students. The day was a huge success, and we are looking forward to further collaborations to highlight the talents of so many well-deserving athletes. ■

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

Wagar students building app for their peers

by *Jordan Stoopler*

It is being billed as a project done “for students, by students.”

Elias Tanbe’s user interface and user experience design classes at Wagar Adult Education Centre have been working together to create an app to address the growing needs of their fellow students.

“The project was initially meant to critique other popular apps and see how well they address the needs of their clients,” said Tanbe, the creator and coordinator of the program, which was formed under the sociovocational integration umbrella three years ago. “The idea was then raised about how we can address the needs of students at Wagar.”

Initially, 18 students were divided into pairs, and later, two larger groups as they competed against each other. A jury, composed of the school’s principal, vice principal and education counselor, chose the winning group, taking into account the different functions, features, design and user interface ideas proposed.

“The jury insisted that the chosen app implement some of the features from the losing

app,” said Tanbe. “It is an interesting dynamic. At first, everyone was pitted against each other. Now, they are using every skill they have learned in a collaborative manner. It is the first time they are working together in such a large group.”

Student Michelle Perron-Elgee shared her opinion as the leader of the winning team. She said that she is a competitive person by nature but during this project she didn’t feel like she was in competition with the others, and instead felt like they were all working together for the success of the project.

The app will include weather alerts and announcements of school closures during winter storms, an events page, personalized student schedules so students can better track their time, a discussion forum and the school guidebook.

In the early fall, the app was still in development, with students meeting weekly to work on the project and iron out security issues. The plan is for the app to officially be launched in the spring of 2024 and made available to all Wagar students via the App Store and Google Play.

Tanbe says there is great demand for this app at Wagar, particularly amongst the school’s special needs community. Students polled were very supportive of the idea, as were the school’s administration.

“The principal and vice principal were perhaps the most supportive,” said Tanbe. “They knew it would help students out a lot.” ■



Wagar students work on the creation of an app for their school. From left: Ricardo Masciotra, Fiaz Khalid, Michelle Perron-Elgee, Nathan Stacey, Anurag Tuli and Raquel Iny. Photo: Zachary Silas-Gagnon

Edinburgh takes part in assistive tech workshops

by *Gaetano Sifoni*

On September 28, students at Edinburgh Elementary School of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) partnered with McGill University and an organization called Makers Making Change to participate in hands-on, interactive workshops building low-cost assistive technology for people with disabilities. Each class in Grade 5 and 6 participated in a 75-minute workshop.

In all, students built over 80 switches that will be donated to MacKay Centre School of the EMSB and Constance Lethbridge Rehabilitation Centre. In doing so, they learned about practical applications for 3D printing, while also having the chance to raise their awareness and understanding of people with special needs. Students engaged in conversation about different types of assistive technologies in our everyday

lives and, for many, it was the first time that they were able to consider how inaccessible so many things are – things we take for granted. What’s more, they were shocked to discover how much these simple assistive switches cost to purchase and were thrilled at the opportunity to make and donate them thanks to the workshop.

Makers Making Change is an organization that aims to provide low-cost assistive technology for people with disabilities. They do this through their website, where they have a library of open-source devices that anyone can access and make for anyone who may need it. They also provide low-cost assistive devices by partnering with groups of volunteers where they lead workshops building an assistive device, providing the tools, instructions and parts. They often do these sessions with schools

like Edinburgh as it is a great way to have students try soldering and assembling and applying 3D printing, while also having the chance to discuss and learn about accessibility and assistive technology. These workshops allow students to focus on STEM with a purpose: youth learn new skills and serve their community while improving their awareness and understanding of people with disabilities. ■

For more information on Makers Making Change:
<https://makersmakingchange.com>

Gaetano Sifoni is principal of Edinburgh Elementary School.



Students at Edinburgh Elementary School took part in a Makers Making Change workshop on September 28.

GMAA race a first for neurodivergent students at JCA!

by Tina Filippone, Courtney Sculnick and Alba Cano Juarez

Heartwarming support and loud cheers emerged from the crowd full of parents, volunteers and participants at the annual Greater Montreal Athletic Association (GMAA) cross country race on October 5. Schools from across the Montreal region had the opportunity to come together to fraternize and compete on Mount Royal.

This year's race marked a significant stride towards real inclusion and empowerment for the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) as neurodivergent students were invited to participate in the one-kilometre run, allowing them to showcase their athletic abilities and passion for running. The inclusive race was a huge success as neurodivergent students from John Caboto Academy demonstrated their athletic abilities and perseverance to complete the race with the correct adaptations and support.

These adaptations included creating a social story for students that explained what is done during a race, such as wearing a bib, lining up, waiting for the start cue, cheering everyone on, teaching them not to give up during the run. The students also practiced running on the track in the park with their physical education teachers to build up their stamina and to practice all the skills needed to be successful during the race at Mont Royal.

On race day our John Caboto support staff ran alongside the students the entire race to ensure they knew where to run as they require visual boundaries. The air gun shot to initiate the race was replaced by a visual hand cue to accommodate some students who are sensitive to loud noises.

Inclusive opportunities such as these give students of all abilities the equal opportu-

nity to grow their athletic abilities, increase their confidence and continue to cultivate a sense of belonging. Inclusion not only benefits our neurodivergent population; it also helps build understanding, acceptance and a sense of respect for those with different abilities.

Katherine Baker, EMSB Physical Education and Health consultant, played a vital role in creating this inclusive event. John Caboto Academy is looking forward to planning and hosting a mini-inclusive race for all EMSB students enrolled in our specialized classes this spring. ■



John Caboto Academy students and staff had a blast at this year's GMAA cross country race.

Tina Filippone is a behavioural technician, and Alba Cano Juarez is a special education teacher, both at John Caboto Academy. Courtney Sculnick is a special education consultant with the English Montreal School Board.

Galileo students get healthy with Special Olympics Quebec

by Randy Pinsky

A new collaboration in support of healthy living has been launched between Special Olympics Quebec (SOQ), the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and McGill University. Offering training programs for teachers and free check-ups to students, Galileo Adult Education Centre will be EMSB's first adult school to join the program.

Sarah Lynch, special education consultant for the EMSB and coordinator of the Centre of Excellence for the Physically, Intellectually and Multi-Challenged, is no stranger to the health concerns faced by many special needs families. As the mother of a teen with Down syndrome, she is familiar with the lack of specialized professionals and sensory overload, which can mean it can take several visits for a dental cleaning.

Starting with a teaching workshop on physical activity with Special Olympics Quebec in March 2022, the EMSB joined the SOQ's Healthy Communities Program and partnership with McGill's medical and dentistry departments. Students at

Parkdale Elementary School and L.I.N.K.S High School had access to free check-ups, discussions about healthy living and a summer Olympiade.

"We had no idea we would be eligible for so many of their services by signing up for this school training program!" exclaimed Lynch. "They're really an untapped resource."

The Healthy Communities Program seeks to address barriers to primary health care access for people with special needs. These can include socio-economic challenges or the need for specialized training for providing medical services. This focus is integrated in all SOQ initiatives, often uncovering under-addressed health concerns through its clinics, and enabling Special Olympics Quebec to state it is the world's largest public health program for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Such a preventative health measures collaboration is thus invaluable for the participating schools, said Lynch. "It's a win-win philosophy that guides us," said

Tristan Delmas, director of the Healthy Communities Program.

While the initiative was first intended for primary and secondary schools, he noted that Galileo Adult Education Centre was the missing piece. "More organizations should tap into the adult side, to continue to help for health. It doesn't stop at 21!" said Galileo principal Martina Schiavone.

The partnership with McGill's Ingram School of Nursing started on September 12, with five interns assessing needs and interests. They will develop a program covering personal hygiene, emotional regulation and self-love – themes reinforced in Galileo's programs for independent living.

Delmas hopes that such initiatives will encourage routine sensitization for

health professionals, and, ultimately, more inclusive clinics. "The work is huge," he acknowledged, "but if everyone takes a small part, we can all make it better."

For more information on Special Olympics Quebec's Healthy Communities Program: <https://olympiquesspeciauxquebec.ca/en/participate/health/healthy-communities>.



Gathering together for a photo at Galileo Adult Education Centre were Galileo students and McGill nursing interns as part of the Healthy Communities Program in collaboration with Special Olympics Quebec. Rosy, the therapy dog, also appears. Photo courtesy of Galileo

Lions and hockey players share smiles at bowling tournament

Every bowling alley at Quilles Moderne was occupied on the evening of October 21 by over 250 special needs kids, adults and their families, representatives from resource organizations, sponsors and Lions Club members. They all came out to play at the Montreal Autism Community Lions Club (MACLC) and Avalanche Kidz Hockey Development Program's "Special Smiles Bowling Tournament."

Organized jointly by MACLC, founded by **Lori-Ann Zemanovich**, and Avalanche Kidz, founded by **Vinnie Matteo** and his daughter **Linda Matteo**, the goal was to organize an inclusive event that would bring Montreal's special needs community together. In the process, they raised over \$6,000.

"This funding will help us to continue to provide our inclusive programs, our part-

nership support of various special needs organizations in the Greater Montreal and surrounding areas and our annual school supplies donation drive for students in need throughout the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), Summit and Giant Steps schools," said Zemanovich.

Avalanche Kidz will use the funding to continue their developmental hockey program.

This year, EMSB schools East Hill, Willingdon and Leonardo da Vinci, as well as Summit School, will participate in the Lions Club's International Peace Poster contest.

"Our community enjoyed a wonderful, inclusive event, supported one another, had fun and won amazing prizes. Together, we will continue to advocate and embrace autism and celebrate neurodiversity," said Zemanovich.



The Montreal Autism Community Lions Club (MACLC) strikes a pose during their bowling fundraiser on October 21. Founder of MACLC Lori-Ann Zemanovich is seen kneeling in the front row. Photos: Kevin J Raftery, PCJ Sport Photography

The Miriam Foundation holds Art Auction for Autism



Art Auction for Autism committee co-chairs, from left: Jeannette Hoffman-Zaffir, Carol Tryansky, Franki Yanofsky and Judy Wolfe. Photo: Ryan Blau, PBL Photography.

On October 19, the Miriam Foundation welcomed over 120 guests to the Maison-Alcan in Montreal for its 11th annual Art Auction for Autism. Radio personality **Lee Haberkorn** hosted the live auction of 27 works of art created by accomplished artists, as well as a dozen paintings by the participants of Miriam's Recreational and Therapeutic Arts program.

The event raised \$165,000 under the leadership of Art Auction Committee co-chairs **Jeannette Hoffman-Zaffir**, **Carol Tryansky**, **Franki Yanofsky** and **Judy Wolfe**. Funds raised will support the development of subsidized clinical services, innovative intervention programs and adapted activities for people of all ages with a neurodevelopmental disorder, such as autism or intellectual disability.

Celebrating 65 years of WIAIH

On October 1, a portion of Donegani Ave. in Pointe-Claire's Valois village was closed for a block party in celebration of the West Island Association for the Intellectually Handicapped's (WIAIH) 65th anniversary.

WIAIH offers services for persons with intellectual disabilities or autism throughout the lifespan. It began in 1958 out of the will of parents and the Lakeshore Civitan Club, which financially supported the first small school-age class. Ten years later, the Club bought the building located at 111 Donegani and donated it to WIAIH. It remains their home to this day.

Over 500 guests dropped by including WIAIH members, families, community partners, sponsors, government officials MP **Francis Scarpaleggia**, MNA **Gregory Kelley**, retired MNA **Geoffrey Kelley**, MNA **Marwah Rizqy**, mayors **Tim Thomas**, **Marc Doret**, **Michel Gibson** and **Alex Bottausci**, and city councillors **Cynthia Homan**, **Paul Bissonnette**, **Brent Cowan**, **Bruno Tremblay** and **Christopher von Roretz**.

"The West Island has been supporting WIAIH and its families for over six decades, and this is our way to say thank you to all of you," said WIAIH board president **Jean-Pascal Bruneau** while addressing attendees.

WIAIH supporter **Sheldon Kagan** donated his time and expertise to the party, with musical guests **Pierre Perpall** and Freddie Mercury impersonator **Johnny Zatylny** of Queen Flash, a live DJ and animation. Other crowd pleasers were **Sonia Balazovjeh** with her dance company and **Anthony Roach** playing steel pan drums.

"We are grateful to the Caisse Desjardins de l'Ouest-de-l'Île for their generous donation, along with other partners who helped make the event a great success," said **Lyne Charlebois**, WIAIH's executive director. "This celebration was a testament to the resilience of families and caregivers who inspire us, the WIAIH team, every day."

Living in Tandem hard to put down

by *Roanne Weisman*

One of the first – and best – rules I learned as a young writer had only four words: Keep your reader awake. *Living in Tandem: A Memoir About Being More Than An Autism Mom*, a new book by Audrey Burt Saha, not only kept this reader awake, it also kept me so riveted that I had to read it in one sitting.

The writing is engaging and excellent, and the story is compelling. Saha and her husband, Kunal, who live on Montreal's South Shore, raised their son, Keyan, who is autistic and non-verbal, from babyhood to the young adult he is now. But there is so much more to this book, as the subtitle suggests. It is an excellent resource not only for autism families but also for readers (like me) who have had no personal experience with autism. Through the book, Saha gives her readers the rare privilege of looking deeply into not only her experiences as an autism mom, but also her feelings, personal history and the raw emotions those experiences

evoke. We also learn about her personal growth, as well as the powerful actions she took as an advocate, community leader and spokesperson for the autism community in Quebec and around the country.

In her preface, she writes, "There were times when my writing sessions revolved sharing my deepest thoughts and inner truths...I thought I was writing a book about autism, but it evolved into something more...The result is this book that journeys through motherhood, the early days of coming to terms with my son's autism, the birth of a charitable organization, a life spent running to and from things, and the messy parts of awakening to my own life."

Saha is unflinching about sharing the joys of being Keyan's mom, but also the uncertainties, frustrations and sheer exhaustion. The most important joy she describes is the love within her family: Keyan's dimpled smile, the love in his eyes and the big hugs

he still shares as a young adult. His older sister, Manisha, who is neurotypical, wrote a long poem (included in the book) about her love for Keyan, which she read to an audience of 400 during a poetry slam.

Saha's personal journey also included becoming a marathon runner and triathlon athlete. "I decided I needed to do something for myself."

In 2018, Saha received a Canada Volunteer Award for Community Leader, celebrating her many accomplishments, including the founding of Soutiens Autism Support (S.Au.S.) on the South Shore, the creation of an autism awareness run and a day centre for low-functioning adults with ASD over the age of 21 and the 2015 opening of Camp Oasis.



Celebrating Keyan's 19th birthday in Maine in October 2022, were, from left: Kunal, Keyan, Audrey and Manisha.

Through this book, Saha has managed to tap into a basic human need, not only for those living with autism but for all who suffer grief, loss and fear. "Whenever someone is diagnosed with cancer, or a loved one is taken from us, or we suffer alongside a family member (for whatever reason), we need connection. We not only want answers, but we need to connect with those who have a shared experience. We want to feel less alone," she writes. ■

Howard S. Billings student writes book on autism acceptance

by *Jill Smeall*

"Your goal is to write a story book for a Kindergarten class. If you take your time and apply yourself, you can make a really beautiful, finished book that we can share with some of the schools in the New Frontiers School Board."

These were the instructions to an assignment that sparked a passion in Annabel Adewunmi, now a Grade 11 student at Howard S. Billings Regional High School. After completing her assignment – a beautifully written and illustrated book about sound blends – Annabel decided that one book wasn't enough.

So, she set to writing her next book, "Our Brother Robin: On Autism Acceptance." Annabel used her unique voice and perspective as an autistic student, along with her passion for art, to create this colourful book that seeks to demystify autism. With the support of art teacher Katrina Valade, Annabel's book was scanned, refined, and independently published and made available on Amazon in March 2023 in both English and French.

Annabel then went on a book tour sharing her book along with an interactive presentation about autism over 20 times in nine different schools! She is now working on both a colouring book and a sequel to her first book called *Our Brother Robin Goes to School*. ■

Jill Smeall is Special Needs Department Head at Howard S. Billings High School of the New Frontiers School Board.



Geordie Theatre brings neurodivergent voices to stage with *Other Worlds*

by *Samara O’Gorman*



In October, Maison Théâtre welcomed *Other Worlds* to their stage, a mainstage production by Geordie Theatre. Written by Stephen Patrick Booth and directed by Jessica Abdallah, the play follows a small island overrun by land developers and two

entirely different strangers – Kale (played by Christopher de Varennes) and Riley (played by Robyn Vivian).

The characters serendipitously meet after an unexpected ecological disaster whilst both seeking safety in a bunker. Kale and Riley have conflicting personalities, but both agree about their shared dislike for the developers that are ruining their homes. This eventually leads them into a plan for survival and gifts the audience with an unforgettable story of friendship, community and belonging.

The play was inspired by Geordie’s From You to Us to You initiative and was developed and presented in collaboration with Summit School. Both collected poems, stories and essays from students, which were used to directly influence and build the play. The impact this collaboration

had was showcased when a group of high school students attended the talkback after the play and were eager to ask the actors questions about the characters they played.

One question was directed to de Varennes, who played Kale. The student was curious about the character’s repetitive body movement or noises throughout the play. He explained that some neurodivergent individuals use “stimming” to help manage emotions and regulate the body when faced with a dysregulating source, whether sensory, social, informational or emotional. De Varennes explained that stimming is a natural response that is visible in both neurodivergent people and others, and that no one person will react in the same way. Witnessing this student learn about stimming was a great example as to why neurodivergent awareness is crucial in youth education.

Other Worlds celebrates neurodiverse stories and neurodivergent voices. In the trailer, de Varennes shared the impact the play has made to the neurodivergent community. “I think I’d feel a lot of pride... seeing someone who has maybe had the same difficulties as me in my life, to do that – and thrive.”

Geordie Theatre’s recent play highlights how human diversity can thrive on stage, and most importantly, how the self-identity of the individual is always, positively impacted. ■

Keep up to date with Geordie’s future shows and events at geordie.ca

Samara O’Gorman is a Montreal-based actress, author and Irish Studies scholar.

As We See It a heartfelt comedy about a trio of autistic roommates

by *Ishini Fernando*

As *We See It*, the 2022 Prime Video comedy-drama created by Jason Katims, tells the story of three autistic roommates navigating adulthood. Based on the Israeli show *On the Spectrum* (2018), the eight-part series follows Jack (Rick Glassman), Violet (Sue Ann Pien) and Harrison (Albert Rutecki), who live together with their aid Mandy (Sosie Bacon) in an effort to become independent.

The show delves into each of the roommates’ goals and challenges. There is Violet, who desperately wants a “normal” boyfriend and pursues love almost obsessively. This combined with her tendency to romanticize and misread men’s behaviour gets her into several awkward situations. Then there is Jack, who often inadvertently rubs people the wrong way. His world turns upside down when he comes to learn some unfortunate news about his family. And finally, there is Harrison, who struggles with stress eating and agoraphobia, making him a hard-core homebody. Things get a

little easier when he strikes up an unlikely friendship with a boy who lives on another floor of his building.

Viewers get to follow along as the three strive to find love, make friends, and get and hold onto jobs. The show also explores the perspectives of their families and Mandy, who often struggle to support them in their journeys to independence. Like the leads, they too are unsure in the decisions they make and often wonder whether they are doing right by their loved ones. The series does not shy away from serious topics but keeps things light-hearted with a mix of tender moments and well-placed humour. The struggles are real, but so are the laughs.

As We See It remarkably breaks a few Hollywood patterns. For one, by having three leads who play characters on the spectrum with vastly different strengths and weaknesses, it does a great job in portraying diversity in autism while simultaneously avoiding the pitfall of stereo-

typical autistic representation. Another noteworthy fact of the show is that the three leads are actually played by autistic actors. As reported by the New York Times, the show’s creator drew from his personal and professional experience to make *As We See It* what it is. Katims has a son on the spectrum who has been a source of inspiration for his work in the past. With his son now grown, Katims began wondering what adulthood would look like for him. When he learned of the Israeli show *On the Spectrum*, he knew he wanted an American adaptation.

Katims also wished for autistic actors to play the leads. In many recent films and shows portraying autistic characters, the majority of those roles have gone to neurotypical actors. While Katims planned to go against the Hollywood grain, he was still pleasantly surprised when he discovered the pool of talent of autistic actors. Sue Ann Pien, who plays Violet, has expressed how she would not have been able

to bring depth to her character if she hadn’t had the experience to draw from. She related to Violet’s difficulties searching for love and connection and could even trace certain scenes to her life.

In an interview for the Emmys, Glassman (Jack) has spoken about how he only received his autism spectrum disorder diagnosis well into his adult years. Until then, he had simply believed himself to be “difficult.” Receiving his diagnosis had made everything click and allowed him to bring this understanding to his character. Notably, Rutecki (Harrison) booked the role on his first-ever audition and was initially scared to embark on this journey. Fortunately, as he told the Times, having co-stars he could relate to and a crew who created a bubble of acceptance made his first experience as an actor a positive one.

As We See It is a great choice for a weekend binge-watch and is certain to fill the room with laughter. ■

Making a splash: Canada's first national para dragon boat team brings home gold



The team at the World Dragon Boat Racing Championships in Thailand in August. Photo: Steven Wills

by **Randy Pinsky**

This summer, Canada launched its very first national para dragon boat team to represent the country at the 16th World Dragon Boat Racing Championships in Pattaya, Thailand. Not only did they exceed expectations, but the team also represents critical progress in accessible sport.

From August 7 to 13, three Canadian crews battled the waters of Thailand in nine events, bringing home three gold, four silver and two bronze medals. The teams included a small PD1 boat (10 para paddlers), a small PD2 (10 paddlers, half being para) and a standard PD2 (20 paddlers, half being para).

In 2019, the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF) introduced a new division for world championships: Paradrasons. "Dragon boating has always been an inclusive sport, but the para division takes it to a whole new level," said Canadian Para National coach Katy Milne.

The IDBF defines paradrasons as "paddlers who have some form of physical, psycho-

logical, neurological, sensory developmental or intellectual impairment" – a broad classification which widens perceptions of disability.

Bronwyn Funicello of Ottawa was one of three visually-impaired paddlers on the boat. "I have never been made to feel any different," she said. "I am expected to paddle just as hard. No excuses or exceptions."

Several of the other athletes have "invisible disabilities" or emotional or psychological challenges, such as anxiety, depression or post-trauma.

For instance, dragon boating helped Carmen Bevan from Kelowna, BC through the darkest moments of her life when she lost her daughter in a car accident in May 2021.

"I honestly know I would not have survived without the support of my paddle sisters and brothers," reflected Bevan. "Paddling for the para team is about finding healthy ways to channel my grief."

Today, she competes in honour of her daughter.

While Trois-Rivières paddler Simon Lamy is not a paradrason himself, he contributes

insight and empathy due to having a sibling with cerebral palsy. "Being with my brother [has] made me a deeply different person for life," he said.

In reflecting on their international debut, Milne said "I think we put Canada on the map with respect to para dragon boat[ing].

We surprised everyone - including ourselves!"

She hopes that the national para team's performance on the world stage will challenge perceptions about athletes with disabilities. "It starts here," she affirmed. ■

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Lucille's

Lucille's Oyster Dive opened its first location on Monkland Ave. in NDG back in 2009. For reasons I cannot properly explain, it took me 14 years to enjoy my first experience and, wow, was this ever a treat. There are now five restaurant locations: NDG, Fairview Pointe-Claire, Dix30 in Brossard, Laval and Mont Tremblant. In addition, there is a summer pop-up at Atwater Market, three food trucks and a catering division. We decided to enjoy our

first Lucille's experience at Fairview. The entrance is fully wheelchair accessible. So is access to the gender-neutral washrooms and the seasonal terrasse. Let us recommend the half seafood tower, containing fresh lobster, snow crab, shrimp and oysters. As well, the Asian-style salmon tartare, the 45-ounce porterhouse steak and for dessert, the domed chocolate mousse cake or key lime pie.



Oysters and Lucille's go hand in hand. |

Duc de Lorraine

Located on Côte des Neiges Road just off Queen Mary, Duc de Lorraine (www.ducdelorraine.ca) is a magical spot that serves French pastries, seasonal cakes, viennoiseries and macarons, using traditional recipes by great French pastry chefs. Victoria Sørensen became the owner 14 years ago, and she has truly developed this into a full-service restaurant, catering service, dessert emporium and a pastry shop all rolled into one. We enjoyed a sumptuous brunch, including the lobster eggs benedict, avocado toast with salmon, a heaping serving of lobster risotto and of course some beyond delicious desserts, settling on the millefeuille double crème, fraisier (strawberry pastry) and mousse royale. Hats off to the barista for the amazing decaf latté served up, with decorated heart at the top. The Duc de Lorraine lunch and dinner menus look



equally appealing. Their second menu, available from 11 am to closing time, has salads, soups, sandwiches, burgers, quiche, pasta, steak, filet mignon, fish and shrimp just to name a few. Tapas dishes are served every night starting at 5 pm. I hope to check that off my list eventually. One of the seasonal terrasses and the main entrance are wheelchair accessible, as are the washrooms.

Burgundy Lion

Pub Burgundy Lion is located in Little Burgundy at 2496 Notre Dame St. W. The concept behind the design and feel here is to blend a traditional British pub with a modern lounge bar and to offer a unique twist on British pub cuisine. Indeed, Burgundy Lion is obsessed with whisky, be it blends, single malts, Scotch, Irish whiskies, bourbons, ryes or whiskies of the world. The place can accommodate 300 diners over two floors and a pair of seasonal terrasses. The first floor and terrasse are wheelchair accessible. Let us recommend the cod fish cakes, the London Tea Party tuna and cucumber tea

sandwiches with crisps (i.e. chips) and salad, the Little Burgundy Fish & Chips, Shepherd's Pie, and the Ticky Toffee, cheesecake and the brandy chocolate mousse for dessert.

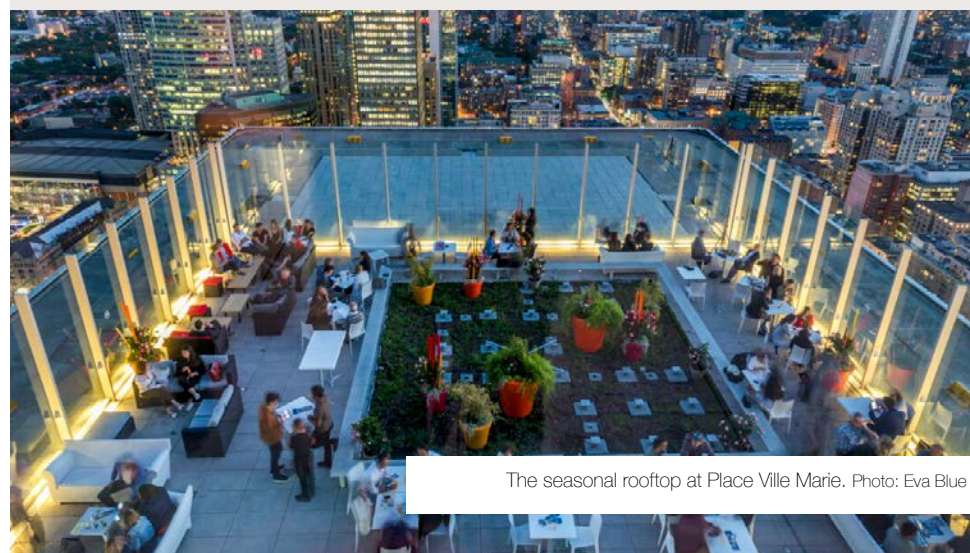


Tuna and cucumber tea sandwiches. |

Les Enfants Terribles

Les Enfants Terribles has been around for 15 years, with locations at the top of Place Ville Marie, Bernard Ave. in Outremont, Centropolis Laval, Brossard, Nuns' Island and Magog. Les Enfants Terribles revisits the classics and crafts innovative and simple dishes with a festive, flavourful and unorthodox touch. If you have mobility challenges, enter the

downtown location via Robert Bourassa Blvd. Two elevators will bring you to the restaurant on the 44th floor. Once there, the dining room and gorgeous seasonal terrasse are fully wheelchair accessible. We recommend New Brunswick oysters, salmon tartar, the steak and fries, grilled sea bass and for dessert a granola praline with lemon and whipped cream.



The seasonal rooftop at Place Ville Marie. Photo: Eva Blue |



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A day by the pool and some dining options in downtown Toronto

by *Alexandra Cohen*

It is almost impossible to be bored in Toronto. With its array of permanent and temporary attractions, live performances, major league sports and the fantastic food scene, you will never run out of things to do.

Last summer, I spent a month in downtown Toronto, which was chock-full of entertainment, including a visit to an outdoor pool, some excellent dinners, a concert at Rogers Centre, a play at the Ed Mirvish Theatre, a trip to Toronto Island and much more.

The Radisson Blu

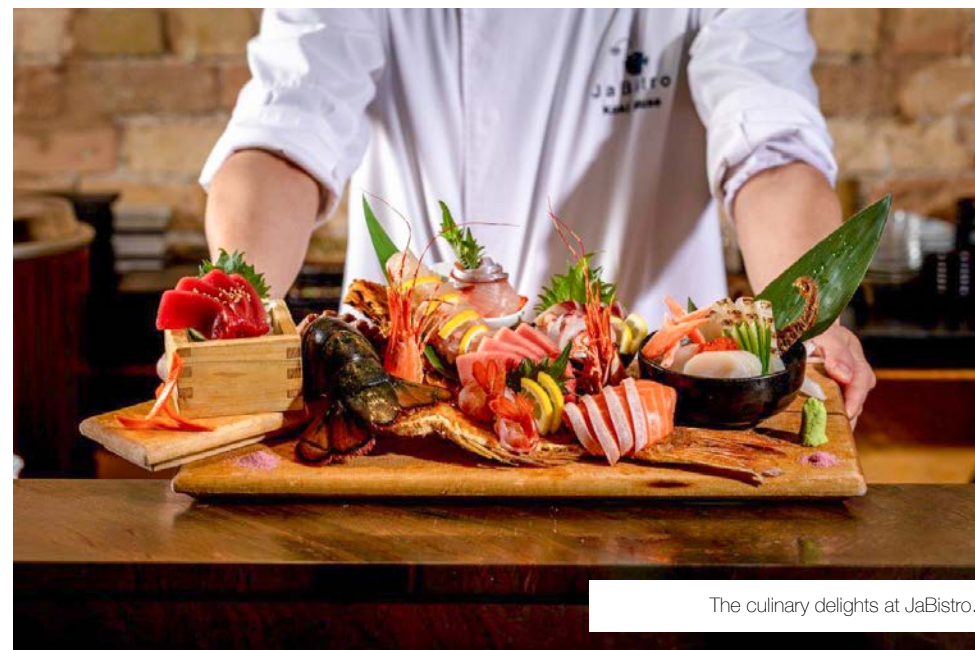
While I did not stay at a hotel while visiting Toronto, I did have the chance to visit the Radisson Blu Downtown. With the weather being so warm during my stay, I looked into options for swimming in the city, and came across Radisson's rooftop pool, which is open to visitors who purchase day passes. The hotel is conveniently located at 249 Queens Quay West, which is just steps away from the Toronto Harbour and around a five-minute drive from the Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport. The pool day passes can be booked via OpenTable. They are \$65 per person plus taxes and fees, and includes in/out privileges, towels and service right at your seat. It is open from noon until 10 pm. (For hotel guests, of course, there are no fees associated with going to the pool.)

My day at the pool was incredibly relaxing. The water was warm, and I was treated to views of the harbour on one side and a picturesque view of the CN Tower on the other. The pool menu features a variety of cocktails and cold beer, as well as snacks

and meals that you can enjoy poolside. The hotel has an elevator that leads to the pool and is wheelchair accessible for parking, the restaurant, and the registration and concierge desks.

Dining out

Looking for some fresh, delicious sushi? JaBistro is a contemporary take on traditional Japanese fine dining, where the dishes are treated like works of art. The restaurant opened its doors in November 2012 in Toronto's Entertainment District, welcoming guests into its warm



The culinary delights at JaBistro.

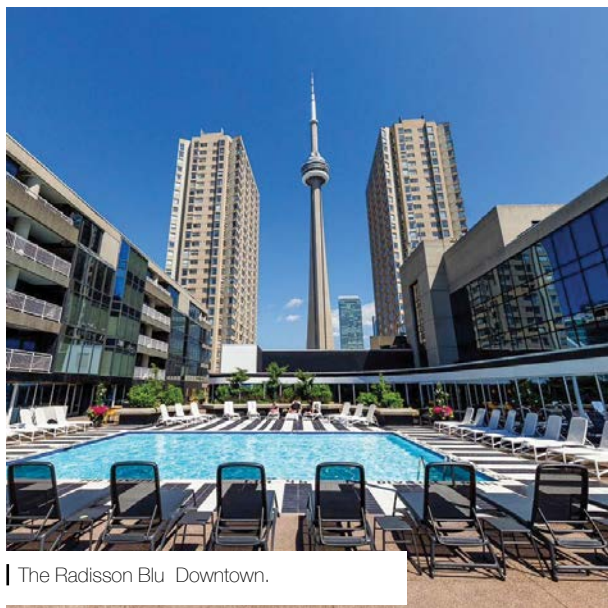
and chic space on Richmond St. Located mere blocks away from the popular Nathan Phillips Square, the modern and sleek restaurant offers both indoor and outdoor seating.

During our visit, my travel partner and I sat on their lovely outdoor patio, which had a nice aesthetic and a dedicated bar. The nigiri platter offered us a taste of the chef's top recommended fish of the day. Other highlights included the salmon oshizushi, the Jabistroll (the one true maki on the menu) and the Gindara, which is grilled black cod with saikyo miso. Indeed, the restaurant is probably best known for their aburi sushi, with a multitude of different options on the menu, including ebi (shrimp), saba (cured mackerel), hotate (scallop), and wagyu (beef).

While we went with an à-la-carte option for our meal, guests can also choose from various *prix fixe* options, both at lunchtime and dinnertime. From the perspective of wheelchair accessibility, please note that the rooftop patio is only accessible via stairs. The restaurant entrance is wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs or mobility de-

vices. There are standardized washrooms, minus accessibility features like grab bars or accessible sinks.

Meanwhile, there are three Cibo Wine Bar locations in Toronto: 522 King St. W., 2472 Yonge St. and 133 Yorkville Ave. We were lucky enough to enjoy a delicious meal on the patio on King St. This Italian restaurant and wine bar, created by the Liberty Entertainment Group, offers traditional Italian fare in a relaxed and inviting atmosphere. The menu offers guests a true taste of Italian cuisine, featuring both traditional classics and modern staples. Like the food, the space itself is warm and inviting with stone and glass walls, rustic wood finishes, exposed brick and butcher block tabletop. During our visit, we were treated to small portions of all of the menu highlights. Cibo King has an accessibility ramp and an accessible restroom, therefore making the patio and main floor options for people with mobility issues. ■



The Radisson Blu Downtown.



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Working together to support the mental health needs of the EMSB community

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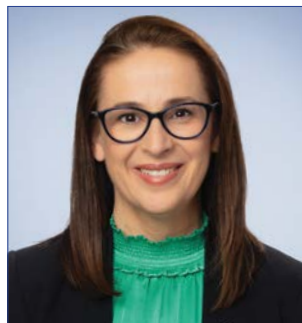
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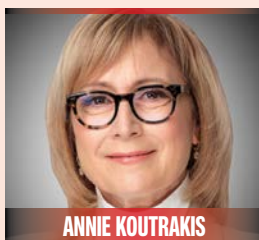
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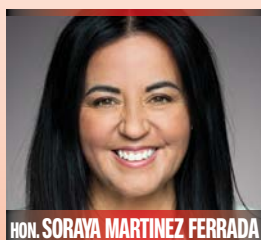
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