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INSPIRATIONS

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



Student Ionna Saviolidis models a dress from Le Château down the catwalk at the "Welcome to the 60s" fashion show at Summit School on April 25. See p. 5.
Photo: *Inspirations*



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Inspirations news PODCAST

With host *Mark Bergman*

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Putting a humorous spin on learning disabilities

by *Randy Pinsky*

“Ha-ha your way to a whole new understanding of neurodiversity,” read the ad for the Neurodiverse Show, a comedy fundraiser coordinated by the Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities (MCLD) and Perfect Bite Productions, which took place May 11 at Hurley’s Irish Pub. Headlined by Montreal’s legendary Joey Elias and featuring an all neurodiverse line-up, comedians shared personal stories with heart and humour to a packed crowd.

An annual tradition, the comedy show took a hiatus during the pandemic but was back in full swing this year, hosted by Zak Kik.

The audience was excited to see brand new comedians on the roster: the members of the MCLD’s Ambassador Program, who receive coaching and give speaking engagements at schools and community centres. Their aim is to sensitize audiences to the daily struggles of living with a learning disability.

For many, the comedy evening was their first time at stand-up.

“Having a learning disability is like [navigating] the streets of Montreal,” explained Chris Simeone, one of the ambassadors. “There are orange cones everywhere.”

Georgia Kiriakos, another ambassador, quipped, “My learning disabilities negatively impact my mental health, but because I have a short-term memory, I’m not depressed for too long.”

The comedy training was a new initiative this year in collaboration with Vancouver comedian David Granirer, founder of the Stand Up for Mental Health program. Struggling with depression, Granirer discovered the power of comedy as a vehicle for talking about mental health. “You can’t change the past, but you can get the last laugh, and that can be really



MCLD Ambassadors Meghan Kerr, Georgia Kiriakos, Chris Simeone and Felana Stoyel performed at the Neurodiversity Show at Hurley’s Irish Pub on May 11. Photo: Sana Nakhleh

therapeutic,” he said in an article published on the Culture Days website, a national charitable organization celebrating the arts.

A comedian herself, MCLD’s vice president Pam Wener knows firsthand the power of humour. When the organization received a government grant to address mental health, it was the perfect opportunity. The Ambassadors received a six-week training course, as well as two hours of personal instruction with Granirer to prepare sets about their own experiences.

Wener noted their increase in confidence and bonding, and recognition of the value of raising awareness about learning disabilities. “[As David observed], you can get so much more education into people with humour than with a sob story,” she said in an interview with *Inspirations*.

Francesca Dansereau is a prime advocate of MCLD’s services. Now an ambassador, she recounted to the audience about feeling inadequate at school and said one teacher told her she was “not worth correcting.” She has proven that educator wrong.

MCLD’s predecessor was the Quebec Association for Children with Learning

Disabilities, which was started in 1966 by a group of parents seeking advice on helping their children in school.

“When it comes to learning disabilities,” the organization stated, “we have one purpose – to listen, understand and inform.” The MCLD community is part “of a growing movement to break down barriers and tear down stigma,” offering services for children and adults alike.

The ambassadors’ comedic timing and delivery was praised by seasoned veterans Annie Deschamps and Alain-Mylène Papillon, who shared their own experiences with ADHD and dyslexia during the fundraising show.

The comedy night concluded with raffle prizes from local businesses such as Dolly Swan and KidLink. “Thank you for coming out in support of this organization that is so dear to my heart,” said Wener, with Kiriakos reminding the crowd, “having a disability makes you special and is something to be proud of.”



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Simon Chang named EMSB Ambassador of the Year

by Wendy Singer

Since Simon Chang became the title sponsor of *Inspirations* in 2020 he has visited a multitude of schools, inspiring students and staff alike with his wealth of knowledge, creativity and positive outlook. In recognition of Chang's dedication and contribution to the special needs community of the Greater Montreal and surrounding areas, he has been named the English Montreal School Board's Ambassador of the Year.

Known primarily as a Canadian fashion designer with national exposure, Chang is also an innovative philanthropist, who uses his imagination to evoke positive change. He has been gifting scholarships to fashion and visual arts students for over 40 years and has raised over \$1 million for breast cancer research in collaboration with singer Céline Dion. Chang received the Order of Canada in 2008 as well as the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012 for his philanthropic efforts and social engagement.

In 2018, Chang and his business partner Faye Swift created the Simon Chang Foundation for Change, which would act as his own vehicle to give back to causes he believes in with his unique, hands-on philanthropic approach, and bring awareness to the many ways that positive change can be made in communities.

Chang's Foundation features an Arc of Life program, which aims to better the lives of individuals and families at each stage of the lifespan. Current projects include improvements for families at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the Sir Mortimer B. Davis Jewish General Hospital, and the Moment in Time program, which grants wishes to residents at the Donald Berman Maimonides Geriatric Centre and the Donald Berman Jewish Eldercare Centre.

Chang's work at *Inspirations* falls in the middle of this arc. He is playing an active role working with students with special needs. Some of his projects have included acting as lead fashion consultant for the Mackay Centre School's Fun Fashion for All show, donating fabric and making puppets with students at Galileo Adult Education Centre, creating aprons at John Grant High School, organizing a speaking



Simon Chang was named Ambassador of the Year at an EMSB event celebrating volunteers at St. Pius X Career Centre on April 25. From left: Faye Swift, Mark Bergman, Wendy Singer, Rosemary Federico (parent commissioner for ACSES), Simon Chang, Joe Ortona (EMSB chair) and Nick Katalifos (EMSB director general). Photo: EMSB Communications

tour for autism advocate Steven Atme, honouring a teaching team at Parkdale Elementary School and helping them create sensory boxes, and working on a video project with Summit TECC's Video Model Productions program.

Chang has the unique ability to engage with anyone, no matter who they are or what their abilities or interests are. Messages he imparts are inspiring as he encourages students to keep trying, to take chances and think outside of the box. The *Inspirations* team was so inspired by his messages that they created the Simon Chang Difference Maker Award as a way to recognize people in the community who make a difference.



"My aim was to be original, inspirational for the kids; and it seems to be a great approach. They're lovely kids," said Chang in an interview at a volunteer

award dinner at St. Pius X Career Centre on April 25. "I encourage students just to be themselves. You don't have to follow anybody. Be original. Be happy with yourself."



Simon Chang speaking at the EMSB Volunteer Night celebration at St. Pius X Career Centre.

'60s themed fashion show celebrates Summit School's 60th!

by *Wendy Singer*

The Summit School gym was buzzing with excitement on April 23 as a full house of guests anxiously awaited to be thrown back in time to experience a '60s themed fashion show. With music that gets everyone's toes tapping and flower power decorating every wall, it was time to dim the lights and have some fun.

The "Welcome to the '60s" fashion show got off to a great start with fabulous MCs Alessia Iglie, Ralph Odonos and Zachary Kruse, all Summit School students, who warmed up the crowd with their fun banter delivered with impeccable timing and kept the show rolling throughout the two hours.

Over 40 Summit students took their turn dancing and prancing down the catwalk, striking poses as they modeled outfits donated by a multitude of suppliers, such as Moores and Le Château. The energy, shout-outs and clapping from family and friends in the audience encouraged them to strut their best stuff at each corner of the runway. Summit School staff-turned-show producers Bena Finkelberg, senior

principal; Adina Superstein, educational consultant; and Tara Saxe, social worker were fully supportive of their stars and were clearly having a great time dancing along with them.

In a video taken after the team's first rehearsal, Finkelberg shared how happy the students were to be participating in their first fashion show. That energy carried through to show day. "The event was incredible," she said. "We gave students who are often not showcased an opportunity to shine. They felt so wonderful. One boy tried on his suit and said he felt like a movie star."

What began as a small show grew into a successful fundraiser, raising \$15,000 for Summit School's summer day camp, which provides students the opportunity to build skills and self-confidence during the summer months within a safe context.

"It was such a beautiful event," added Finkelberg. "The kids were amazing!"



Melissa Fitzgerald has fun modeling a Le Château dress at the "Welcome to the 60s" fashion show at Summit School on April 25.



Senior principal Bena Finkelberg and Simon Chang celebrate a successful fashion show at Summit School.

App features accessible activities

Jooay is a free mobile and web-based app (www.jooay.com) that helps children with disabilities and their families find leisure activities that suit their accessibility needs in the location of their choice. It is also a community where parents, rehabilitation professionals and educators can connect, exchange and learn from each other. This app was developed at McGill University by Dr. Keiko Shikako and Dr. Annette Majnemer, occupational therapists and childhood disability researchers in collaboration with parents, rehabilitation professionals, policy-makers, youth, physical educators and community partners. At Jooay you can find a list of more than 3,000 inclusive or adaptive leisure

activities for children and youth of all abilities, from sports and arts classes to summer camps and inclusive playgrounds. To download Jooay, visit the App Store or Google Play.

The Jooay App research group is currently creating game features so that everyone engages more with the app and with leisure in their communities as a consequence! They need the voices of parents, clinicians, educators, and youth with disabilities to help improve the app.

If you would like to know more or participate in this study, please contact jooay@childhooddisability.ca.

Experiencing *Lou*: A VR exploration in autism

by *Jordan Stoopler*

Martine Asselin and Annick Daigneault are no strangers to autism, having each raised a son on the spectrum. Asselin's son Théo, 14, and Daigneault's son Maëlle, 16, were much of the inspiration behind *Les pieds en haut: Lou*, an immersive and interactive virtual reality (VR) experience showing the sensitivities and special interests of Lou, who is autistic. The official Montreal launch for invited guests was held on April 19 at the Café de la société des arts technologiques before public screenings later that month.

"We wanted to work on a project that would help us better understand our own children, but also help others understand, whether it be classmates at school or other adults, what the reality of our autistic children was," said Daigneault, co-creator with Asselin. "We quickly realized the best way to highlight this was through virtual reality."

The co-production by Hubblo and UNLTD is available in both English and French and is split into two distinct chapters of the fictitious character Lou: his fifth birthday (Kid) and his first day of high school (Teen). Audiences, through the use of VR headsets, become Lou, experiencing the various emotions and behaviours that are brought about by these life events. Coping mechanisms, such as flapping one's hands like a bird (inspired by Maëlle's own behaviour), the slamming of a toy box cover and singing (a habit of Théo's) are re-enacted by the audience throughout the 25-minute production.

"We wanted to show how certain autistic individuals might react in different situations, how they might use objects and the noise they make to help them calm down during a stressful situation," said Daigneault.

There was an eight-year gap between the initial conception of the project in 2016 to its widespread release this month. During that time, Asselin and Daigneault spoke with a wide range of autistic people to get their input and help create the character of Lou.

"We took the most interesting elements we had gathered that would fit best with the virtual reality experience," said Asselin.

"It's a mixture of our observations and the testimonials we gathered," said Daigneault. "We translated the stories we received and our own personal experiences with our children. There's a lot of us and love in this project."

Lou has already earned high praise and received honours and awards. It was shown at the Montreal International Documentary Festival in November and at the famed

South by Southwest film festival in Austin, Texas earlier this spring. It was nominated for a prize at One World in Prague, the largest human rights film festival in the world, and recently captured a Canadian Screen Award for Best Immersive Experience, Non-Fiction.

Several public screenings took place in April and May in Quebec, including at L'Espace culturel **Georges-Émile-Lapalme at Place Des Arts**, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in Quebec City and as part of the **Sommets de l'animation** at the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal.

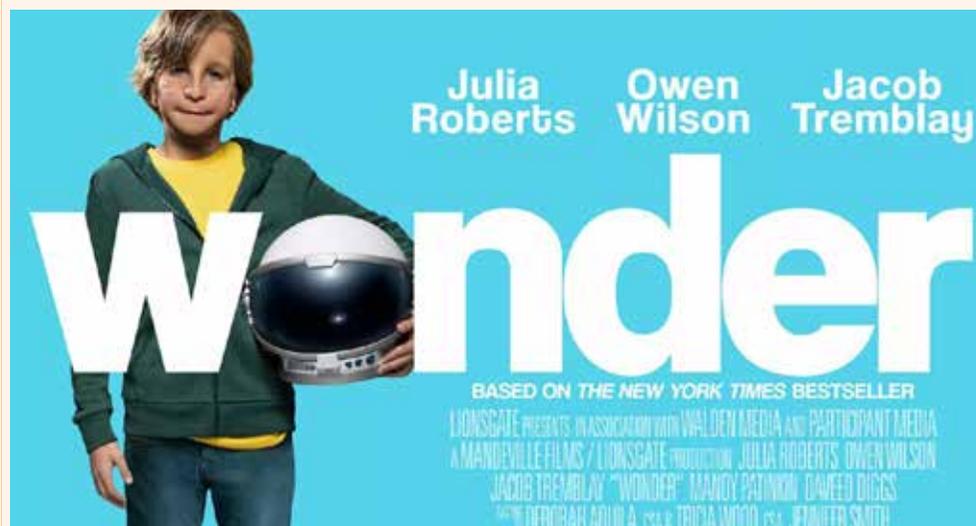
Asselin and Daigneault are planning to bring *Les pieds en haut: Lou* to cultural centres and schools, with customized workshops and presentations.

For information, visit Hubblo.ca.



Wonder: A coming-of-age film for the whole family

by *Ishini Fernando*



The 2017 movie *Wonder*, directed by Stephen Chbosky and based on a *New York Times* bestseller of the same name by R. J. Palacio, centres around August "Auggie" Pullman (played by Jacob Tremblay), who was born with Treacher Collins syndrome (TCS).

The movie begins with Auggie being enrolled in a private school for his fifth grade after having been homeschooled all his life. Due to the facial abnormalities caused by TCS, Auggie had undergone 27 surgeries in order to see, smell, speak and hear. Attending school proves to be a difficult adjustment for the protagonist as almost immediately upon enrolling, he becomes a victim of appearance-targeted bullying. It is a rough start to the school year when Auggie has to endure jokes and games made at his expense by his classmates.

Though school seems like torture at first, Auggie soon befriends Jack Will (played by Noah Jupe), and things start looking up. Viewers get to follow Auggie's journey as he

finds his place outside the comfort of his home, while learning to be comfortable in his own skin and accept himself as an individual who often stands out.

Notably, although the movie was very well received and helped raise awareness of people with craniofacial conditions, some critics feel that the movie makers should have casted an actor with a real facial abnormality rather than using prosthetics and heavy makeup on actor Tremblay. Others feel the movie softened the hardships and other implications of Auggie having been born with TCS in favour of pushing the "feel-good" sentiment of the movie. Still, the coming-of-age film holds all the elements needed for an enjoyable watch, complete with a well-written storyline, a terrific cast and heartfelt moments.

Overall, *Wonder* is easily a great choice for a family movie, one that teaches valuable lessons in kindness, friendship and self-acceptance.

Petitclerc opens this year's Défi sportif

by Pat Hickey, special to *Inspirations*

When Chantal Petitclerc's competitive career was winding down, the celebrated Paralympian wondered what to do for the rest of her life.

The question was answered when she received a phone call from the prime minister of Canada.

"I was thinking about coaching or maybe getting involved in the media, and then I got this call from Prime Minister Trudeau, who said they wanted to modernize the Senate, making it more independent, less partisan. They wanted to appoint me," Petitclerc said after addressing some of the 6,000 athletes participating in the April 24 press conference at the start of the Défi sportif, an annual multi-sport competition for people with disabilities.

"I thought about it for a few days, but you can't say no to that," said Petitclerc. "I was a history major in university, and I thought it was a chance to be part of the change. I said yes but, to be honest, this was the steepest learning curve because I'm not a politician, I'm not a lawyer. I remember the first question I was asking friends and former senators was whether, as a woman with a disability, I would be able to bring change.

They said: "Yes, but you have to be patient."

Petitclerc assumed office in March 2016. She sits with the Independent Senators Group.

Her priorities are health and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Petitclerc was 13 when she lost the use of her legs after a heavy barn door fell on her and fractured her spine while she was visiting a friend's farm.

"Sports played a major role in helping me cope with the accident and becoming a person with a disability," she said. "I was able to see that even with the wheelchair I had more potential than limits. Sports sends a message that you can do great things; you can belong."

Petitclerc has done great things.

She has won a total of 14 gold medals in wheelchair racing at the Paralympic Games in Atlanta, Sydney, Athens and Beijing. She won the Lou Marsh Trophy as Canada's athlete of the year, and she captured a gold medal in the 800 metres when wheelchair racing was a demonstration sport at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens.

With all her globetrotting success, Petitclerc



Chantal Petitclerc joins others in opening the Défi sportif AlterGo 40th edition on April 24 at Complexe sportif Claude-Robillard. Photo courtesy of Marelle Communications

is proud to be a spokesperson for the Défi sportif AlterGo, the "biggest multi-sport event in Canada and the only one that brings together elite and up-and-coming athletes of all functional limitations," according to the organization.

"After I finished my history degree at the University of Alberta, I raced four or five times at the Défi sportif, and it was always

special," said Petitclerc. "Now, people go to the Paralympic Games and the media is there and it's on TV, but back then the Défi sportif was a chance for friends and family to come and watch you."

"We want to have a social impact through sports. We want to make people with disabilities known not because of their limitations, but because of their potential."

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