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INSPIRATIONS

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



From left: Natalie Mitchell, child care worker; Simon Chang; Bernard Atondo, Leader on Wheels student; and Rosemarie Sondola, teacher of the Mackay Centre School satellite class, have fun preparing spice rubs for their annual fundraiser at Westmount High School on October 10. Meet this edition's Simon Chang Difference Makers on p. 8. Photo: Wendy Singer

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Editor's message

With every edition comes a chance to try something new – whether it's dipping our toes into a different topic or integrating a new step that improves our editorial process. Most often it's not something we actively seek out but rather something that seems to occur naturally.

Our core team of reporters continues to delve into the variety of stories they're assigned with a non-biased and open mind. We're excited to include our newest reporter Olivia Integlia, a multimedia freelance journalist for the English Montreal School Board, with an undergraduate degree in journalism and political science. And, in this edition, we're also dedicating more column spaces to people who want to write something from their own perspectives. The italicized "signature" at the end of their piece cues the reader to the perspective from which they write – whether it be their profession, as a parent or member of a specific community.

In this edition, we bring in several new voices, including some from the academic research world. Professor Jake Burack, with the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University, and Ph.D. student Anna-Francesca Boatswain-Jacques share some of their research around information processing and autism.

Readers will also hear from several teachers who write about different initiatives, allowing us a glimpse into school environments where interesting, positive and kind (as you will see!) things are happening.

Our readership survey brought us helpful information as to what readers want from these pages. While we feel we're on the right track, and in the spirit of being open to change, we are eager to explore new topics and bring to light different stories.

— Kristin McNeill

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Our second readership survey was conducted last spring, and we thank the nearly 350 parents, teachers, professionals, school staff and community members who took the time to complete it. We have taken your thoughtful feedback to heart and are incorporating it at every opportunity. One thing we learned is that *Inspirations* resoundingly means community, special needs, positive mental health and well-being, and resources to you. And that means we are fulfilling our mission.

We would also like to thank our loyal advertisers and welcome new ones, as well as our sponsors. Their ads not only show critical support for our community, they also fund the majority of our operations. They are the reason that we are able to produce these editions. We invite you to take a close look at our advertisements and learn more about what they have to offer.

— Wendy Singer, managing editor



INSPIRATIONS

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Daughter teams up with family on advocacy venture

by *Olivia Integlia*

Alessia Iglio has achieved far more than most her age. At just 21 years old, she is the executive director and co-founder of Dis the Dis, a movement focused on changing the discourse around disability.

Iglio's track to success did not come without its challenges. At just 20 months, she was diagnosed with developmental coordination disorder, or dyspraxia, a neurodevelopmental condition causing a global delay and impaired coordination in motor skills, such as tying laces or writing.

"Alessia goes from A to C to get to B, whereas other people just go from A to B," explained Angie Spatari, Alessia's mother. "But in the end, she gets there. Everything she tries [...] she manages to conquer."

Iglio first got the idea for the Dis the Dis movement while she was a student at Summit School. In 2022, she was selected among her peers to make a speech during the annual Awaken the Potential golf tournament.

Iglio thought of ways she could inspire the crowd. Having been bullied for her disability at a previous school, she wanted to talk to her audience about the negative language often used towards the special needs community.

It was then that her mother gave her the idea to create a poster with the "Dis" in disability crossed out, alongside other negative words used to classify people with disabilities.

"This three-letter word is so negative," said Iglio, "Even though [someone] has a disability, it doesn't mean they can't do it. It's just going to take them longer to do it."

She could not have predicted what happened next. "I made the poster, I told [the

crowd] what it was about, and they were going crazy about it [...] I was very surprised because I made a room of full-grown men cry."

Just like that, the Dis the Dis movement was born. Iglio, with the help of her parents, then decided to create a website where she sells merchandise and spreads her message around the world.

Spatari said her daughter has always been strong-willed and has always had grandiose ambitions. She thinks back to when Iglio first began taking swimming lessons. Despite doctors discouraging her from the sport due to sensory issues, she pursued it anyway.

"The neurologist always said, 'I'm glad you didn't listen to me,'" said Spatari. "She cried, and she cried, but we didn't give up [...] and now she's a fish. It's the same thing with skating."

Iglio's ambitions are ever-growing. Currently, she is a student at the English Montreal School Board's Wagar Adult Education Centre, where she is pursuing culinary education. She hopes to inspire others to equally pursue their passions despite any hurdles they may face.

"If you wake up and you say, 'Today, I'm going to give it all I got, even if I'm really low, then you're still doing your best, and I'm very proud of you just even getting out of bed because it's a tough position for people with and without disabilities.'"

She also aspires to expand the Dis the Dis movement. "I'm hoping to write a book about it and do a speaking tour at the Bell Centre," said Iglio, "I want to show [everyone] that you could also take the Dis out a disability." ■

For more information: disthedis.org.

Hear more from Alessia Iglio on the Inspirations podcast: inspirationsnews.com/inspirations/podcasts.



Alessia Iglio, co-founder of Dis the Dis.
Photo courtesy of Pietro Iglio

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Leaders on Wheels come up with spicy solutions to fundraising

by *Randy Pinsky*

Watch out Heinz 57. There's a new sauce-maker in town! Leaders on Wheels students from the Mackay Centre School have been making the news for their BBQ sauces, spice rubs and brownies, raising over \$30,000 for The Montreal Children's Hospital Foundation (MCHF) in the past 10 years. In recognition of their work, they were honoured as one of this edition's Simon Chang Difference Makers.

The satellite class, housed at Westmount High School, has always taken on social action projects such as penny drives for humanitarian organizations, however there was often a disconnect with the cause. When Rosemarie Sondola (Rose) joined as homeroom teacher in 2014, she proposed selecting one closer to home. To her surprise, the students unanimously suggested The Montreal Children's Hospital.

Each Leader has spent months there due to their complex disabilities, and they knew all too well how lonely and scary it can be. Sondola's class immediately started brainstorming how they could go about helping other patients.

So why BBQ sauces, spice rubs and brownies? They are all multi-step processes, which everyone can take part in. Be it measuring, mixing or capping, there is also marketing, graphic design, script writing and directing for their online infomercials – a role for everyone.

Being part of a hands-on project is very motivating for the students, and “there is a sense of satisfaction and pride,” shared Sondola. She added that Leaders on Wheels are challenging assumptions about abilities and gaining transferable skills critical for independence, dexterity and confidence.

In the summer, the group was recognized for their work by the OSEntrepreneure provincial grant competition in the Secondary Cycle 1 division, part of the government's efforts to encourage entrepreneurial culture in schools.



From left: Jordan Paquette, Alexis Zhang and Isabelle Orianne-Walker receive a Big Blue Hug painting in recognition of being awarded the Simon Chang Difference Makers at Westmount High School on October 10.



Leaders on Wheels bottle their spice rub with special visitor Simon Chang in their classroom at Westmount High on October 10. Photos: Wendy Singer

Travis Hall, EMSB educational consultant in Career Development, shared, “I often use Rose's project as a fundraising example because a lot of schools get stuck on how to do something new and creative. The reason Leaders on Wheels have been so successful is that they have kept at it.”

The group exemplifies business savviness; beyond selling at school, they regularly sell their products in front of the foundation office at The Children's. Each visit is preceded by an excited flurry of prepping and practicing selling the products. The “secret sauce” to their success is sharing their stories with interested buyers. Rehearsing sales pitches has helped build confidence, observed Sondola.

The group was presented with the Simon Chang Difference Maker Award on October 10 at a ceremony at Westmount High, where they got to meet the award sponsor.

Chang shared business insight, igniting ideas for growing their production. “I am so impressed by all these students who come from diverse backgrounds and work

so hard together, with passion and enthusiasm. There is so much heart, meaning and potential in this project. Keep up the great work, Leaders!”

Alessia Di Giorgio, director of Events at MCHF, said, “People often infantilize individuals with disabilities, but they are empowered here. The students are the ones who are in charge of making the promotional videos. Yes, the teachers fill in the gaps, but it is the students [who] take the lead.”

This past summer, the group proudly presented the MCHF with a cheque for just over \$7,000 – their largest amount yet in the 10 years of the program.

Funds raised are allocated to the most urgent needs, Child Life Services and the paramedical team. The group came to the rescue when the hospital decided to switch to Smart IV pumps, an endeavour that had to be done all at once. While the government paid for the majority of the pumps,

► *Continued on p. 9*

Mechaly walks the talk for his community

by *Randy Pinsky*

Ariel Mechaly is a master fundraiser. Each year, he contacts everyone in his network – and speaks to all who will listen – about the annual Walk4Friendship in support of special needs programming at the Friendship Circle (FC). Over the past three years, he has raised over \$76,000.

He was nominated as one of this edition's Difference Makers by his mother, Rissa Mechaly, in recognition of his efforts, which she reinforced are all self-led. In spite of navigating several challenges due to having Down syndrome, Ariel, 43, demonstrates there are no limits to caring.

Walk4Friendship, which took place November 10 at the FC building on Bourret Ave., is the highlight of Ariel's year. Currently one of the organization's top 10 fundraisers, his highest tally was a whopping \$30,000 in 2021. "He's relentless," said

Rissa. "People in the community know him because he's not shy."

Ariel added, "My secret to fundraising is this: I go out and tell people about why the Walk is important. I'm there to support Friendship Circle and the amazing work they do." People are immediately drawn to his friendly nature and passion for the cause. "They are my family and always have been."

Difference Maker sponsor Simon Chang met the Mechalys at his Chabanel studio on September 18, where Ariel was presented with a glass art piece by Big Blue Hug. "Congratulations to Ariel for raising so much money for the Friendship Circle – one phone call and one email at a time," shared Chang. "His determination and big heart make him a very successful fundraiser. It is my privilege to honour Ariel Mechaly as a Difference Maker."

The Mechalys are a family of fighters. Rissa was part of the WestEnd Parent Group, which campaigned for the integration of

students with disabilities into mainstream schools in the 80's. Led by teacher Linda Mahler and inclusion advocate Evelyn Lusthaus, Ariel participated in a pilot project at Elizabeth Ballantyne Elementary School and then Westmount High School, at the time both under the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal and now with the English Montreal School Board.

When he received the award in September, Ariel's tally was \$7,000. By October, it was over \$12,000. "He still has some weeks to gently persuade people to give money from their pockets," commented Rissa. On his fundraising page, Ariel wrote: "Together, we are creating an inclusive community that values each individual's uniqueness and contributions."

For more information about the Walk4Friendship or to support Ariel's fundraising efforts, visit www.walk4friendship.ca.

Nominate your Difference Maker at info@inspirationsnews.com.



Simon Chang, left, welcomed Ariel Mechaly and his family to his studio on Chabanel St. for a ceremony of his Difference Maker award on September 18.

Photo: Wendy Singer

Leaders on Wheels

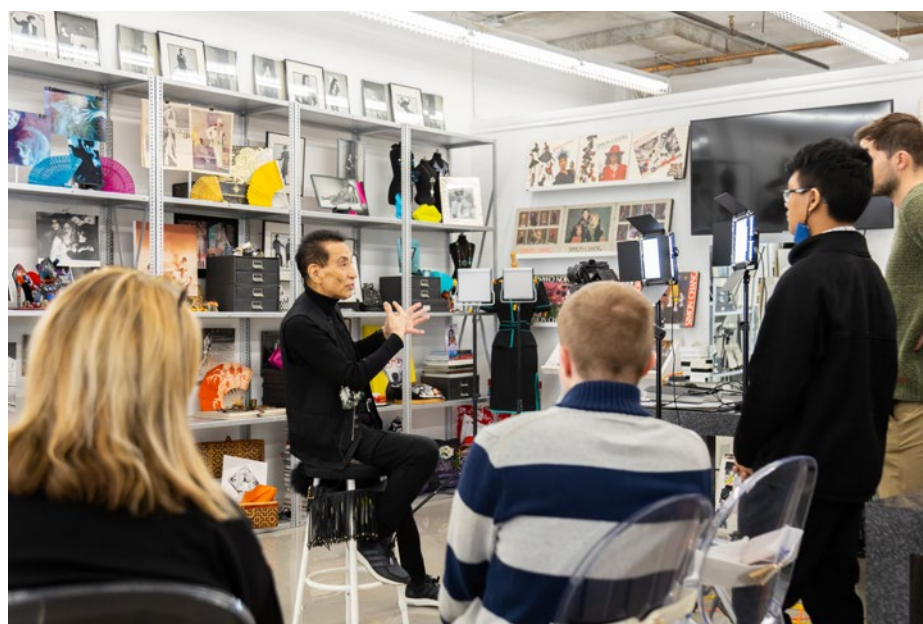
◀ *Cont'd from p. 8*

Leaders on Wheels and the Healthy Kids Fund came up with the balance, allowing for the project's success.

"The student entrepreneurs help us realize that everyone has a way of contributing," said Di Giorgio. Student Jordan Paquette echoed, "I'm so happy to win this award. It makes me feel proud and recognized for the hard work that we do."

So, whether the sauce you crave is exotic Wheels of Asia, Wheels on Fire or the ever-popular Sweet Wheels, Leaders on Wheels are paving the way for easier hospital visits for young patients.

Check out the Leaders on Wheels infomercials, designed and filmed by the students at www.youtube.com/@L.O.W626/videos.



Simon Chang speaks with students from Summit School's TECC Video Model Productions program on January 26, 2023 at Chang's Chabanel studio.

Photo: Etienne Béland for Pickle Creative Agency

A to Z with Simon Chang

Simon Chang teamed up with students from Summit School's TECC Video Model Productions program, led by instructor Liam Boucher, to film "A to Z" – a motivational video on "how to make your own kind of music" and inspired by Chang's own life experiences.

Beginning with A for ambition, B for believe and C for commitment, Chang matches the positive qualities that have played a part in his early struggles at the onset of his career and his eventual success as a designer and as a citizen to every letter of the alphabet.

The entire video was filmed in Chang's studio on Chabanel St. It provided the students with practical production experience and marked the program's first venture outside the school premises.

– Wendy Singer

A to Z with Simon Chang is available for viewing on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQ8ujS9WZJM

Home and school connection bolsters mental health

by *Janet Silverstone Perlis*

In our post-pandemic world, our concern over our children seems to have shifted from their physical health to their mental health. Preoccupations have moved from vaccines, masks and social distancing to social and emotional welfare topics like anxiety, depression, school attendance, weakening academic achievement and disengagement.

But the good news is we can look to one critical key to navigating these concerns, and that is by focusing on connection and belongingness at school.

In the past, the responsibility rested on *either* the parents and guardians *or* the teachers. Research stresses how essential collaboration of parents *together* with teachers is in creating these meaningful connections. A major benefit is the promotion of positive mental health in children.

What is school belonging?

In the 2021 article “School Belonging: The importance of Student and Teacher Relationships” by KA Allen and others, school belonging is defined as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school environment.” Our children’s perception needs to be that school is a place that is physically, emotionally and psychologically safe and secure. Students need to feel visible and that they matter. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines school connectedness in a similar way, emphasizing that it is based on the student’s belief that the adults in their environment care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. The CDC also highlights that concepts such as personal recognition and emotional support are key factors in the promotion of mental health. “There is a profound relationship between belonging and connectedness; the former is rooted in the perception of

being an integral part of their community while the latter emphasizes the specific role of adults in nurturing this sense of connectedness.”

What are the benefits?

School connection is linked to better mental health outcomes (lower levels of depression and anxiety), fewer discipline problems, enhanced academic performance, higher graduation rates, and increased self-esteem. There is also a reduction in negative behaviours including bullying, violence, vandalism and substance use, according to authors Martha Evans, Carol Goodenow and Kathleen Grady in articles written between 1993 and 2023. These benefits are seen in students from kindergarten through to the end of high school. In addition, research by Camille Farrington found that students with a strong sense of belonging tend to more easily bounce back from academic setbacks. They will work on ways to overcome their hurdles as opposed to becoming derailed by them and are more open to reaching out for help when they need it.

The impact of parent involvement

Parents and guardians play a vital role in student success through their attitudes and the support they provide, according to an article by Vania Hasegawa in 2023. Through active involvement in their child’s school life, they foster academic and social success as well as personal growth. This is supported by an American Psychological Association (APA) study. It showed that in addition to parental involvement positively affecting academic performance, there is also a major effect on overall mental health and well-being.

Strategies to helping children feel connected at school

Ariana Hoet, Ph.D. and Whitney Raglin Bignall, Ph.D. from the Kids Mental Health Foundation make some recommendations in their 2024 article “Three Ways Parents and Educators Can Build Connection at School.”



1. A child’s connection to school is enhanced if they perceive it is valued at home.

There are many ways for children to come to learn that connection to school is also a family value. Having regular discussions or check-ins about school is one way to develop that. A useful time may be when you are en route to an activity when you aren’t distracted by other things. The more interested your child perceives you to be, the more likely his or her interest will similarly develop. Hoet and Bignall advise, “Ask your child how school is going and try to keep questions open-ended versus yes/no questions. You might ask about who they spend time with at school and what they do together, what projects they’re working on, or something fun they learned this week. Try to give kids your full attention so you can absorb what they’re saying.” It is also helpful to follow up. “This shows that you’ve listened and that you care about their school life.”

2. Belongingness and connection to school may be helped by having opportunities to connect with peers outside of school.

Having students connect with classmates outside of school can help them also establish a more positive association with their

school. Shared experiences or interacting at extra-curricular activities with peers can help to deepen this bond and further create a sense of comfort through familiarity.

3. Parental involvement enhances student engagement in school.

When students see parents involved with their school at whatever level they can, it resonates for their children. Therefore, signing tests, responding to communication logs or checking online classroom forums together, attending activities or volunteering at the school or on field trips all contribute to building that important relationship.

Belonging is a fundamental human need, and children need to be in an atmosphere where they feel valued. School is not just about mastering the curriculum! It is about the collaboration of the adults from home and school, working together to promote academic success and positive mental health by building a community where every student feels like they fit, are valued and matter. ■

For more ideas or free downloads for parents and teachers: [KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org](https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org).

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

SEL program helping forge connections amongst Elizabeth Ballantyne students

by *Jordan Stoopler*

When the homeroom bell rings at Elizabeth Ballantyne Elementary School (EBS) come 9 o'clock, students know the drill. They gather in a circle around the designated green carpet for their 10-minute "Morning Meetup." The ritual – consisting of a greeting, an opportunity to share thoughts or feelings about a certain topic, community check in and quick connect activity – is conducted as part of EBS' schoolwide social-emotional learning program (SEL).

"Everybody feels centred, grounded, heard and seen before they even start their day," said kindergarten teacher Eliane Shrybman, working at this English Montreal School Board (EMSB) school in Montreal West. "We want our students to have emotional literacy, and we believe it starts from a young age."

The school has long been a strong proponent of SEL, an educational method that teaches how to manage emotions and build relationships, among other skills. EBS has implemented a number of different variations of the program over the years, ultimately settling on the Harmony SEL

Based on a curriculum coming out of the US-based Harmony Academy, it prioritizes the understanding of one self's own emotions before collaborating and understanding those of their peers.

"The main goal of the program is to build connections and comfort amongst our students," said special education technician Carmelina Colafabio. "It's about allowing the children the freedom of speech and to feel comfortable sharing their feelings."

The implementation of the Harmony SEL program at the school began gradually in March 2024, following a visit EBS staff made to two schools in San Diego, California. The school was the recipient of the John Killingbeck Scholarship, as awarded by the Leadership Committee for English Education in Quebec. Thanks to the grant, Shrybman, Colafabio, Grade 4 teacher Daniela Colafabio, EBS principal Sam Servello and EMSB Special Education Consultant Allison Holloway had the chance to see the program in action and learn from like-minded educators, further inspiring their work back home.

"We looked for schools that had a great program that seemed to be successful," said Shrybman. "We wanted to learn from them. We sat in on their classes and watched it happen at different ages."

"Between first implementing the program in March and the end of the school year in June, we saw tremendous growth amongst our students," said Daniela Colafabio. "Other teachers saw us doing it and that really helped them commit to it as well."

The program is not only student-centred, but oftentimes is student-led, teaching them to solve their problems themselves with minimal to no interventions from a teacher. The benefits of the program also often can be felt outside the classroom, in the schoolyard or even at home.

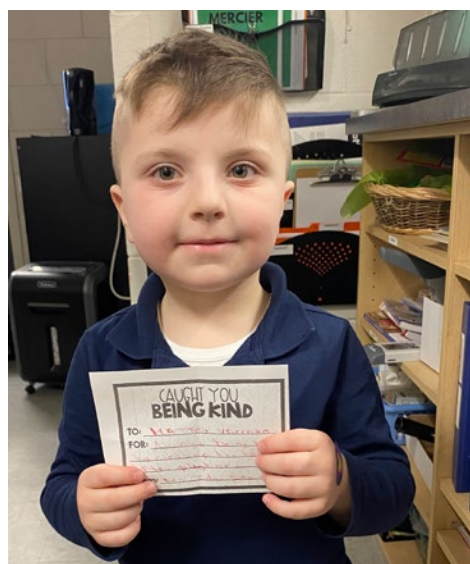
"We might be there to say how can we help, but they are coming up with the solution, which is really nice to see," said Daniela Colafabio.

The school hopes to further build upon the program during this school year. They have already gradually started a class buddy-up



A sign displaying details of the "Morning Meetup." Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Ballantyne Elementary School

system, which sees different grades engage in group activities together within the school day. EBS staff is also hoping to have designated Harmony kits, featuring connect cards, conversation starters and other material, available in all classrooms. ■



Matteo Vaccaro, a pre-K student at Honoré Mercier Elementary during the 2023-2024 school year, was "caught" willing to help clean up the classroom after playtime without being asked. "Even at this young age, the students were so excited to model kind acts," said Mary Poullas, personal development and community involvement animator at the school. Photo courtesy of M. Poullas

A fun way to 'catch' kind acts

by *Mary Poullas*

As a fun initiative to get the students excited about showing kindness while creating a positive school community, we are always on the lookout for random acts of kindness.

In the "Caught You Being Kind" program, which has been ongoing at Dante and Honoré Mercier elementary schools for the past two years, we discreetly "catch" students being kind to others and enter them in a weekly contest.

The adult who notices a kind act fills out a coupon describing it and places it in the

Caught you Being Kind box in the main office. Once a week, a winner is selected by the personal development and community involvement animator in a blind draw. There is much anticipation for the winner to be announced over the school intercom! The winner is delighted to receive a small prize that they are encouraged to share with a friend.

Taking notice of those moments shows children that we value their actions: Both the big acts of kindness and the small, every day, quiet acts of kindness.

My favourite thing about the "Caught You Being Kind" approach is that it really

motivates the students to try their best, and it provides a good model on how to interact with and treat others. ■

Mary Poullas is a personal development and community involvement animator with the English Montreal School Board.

St. Raphael implements program fostering positive learning space

by *Olivia Integlia*

In June 2024, St. Raphael Elementary School of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) launched the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program (PBIS).

The PBIS program was first developed by researchers at the University of Oregon. By the mid-1990s, the program began being implemented in numerous schools across North America.

“PBIS is considered a framework that is often used in schools to promote positive behaviour,” explained Cindy Mendes, a behaviour management specialist at the EMSB. “It’s targeting improving the school culture and increasing overall academic achievement.”

As part of the three-year time span to realize the program, one year was dedicated to staff training. “During that training, we were lifting out the roles or responsibilities [of the program],” said Mendes. “We figured out what our expectations were going to be.”

The program was then implemented during the 2023-2024 school year. “We started to

teach; we displayed the expectation; we created lesson plans; [and] we had scheduled trainings with the rest of the staff,” she added.

At the end of the year, the program was officially launched.

Currently, St. Raphael is in the maintenance phase of the program, where data is being collected to assess the program’s success.

The PBIS program is designed as a pyramid model, with three tiers, each of which targets different needs and behavioural challenges.

“Tier one is able to support between 80 and 90 percent of your student population,” explained Mendes. It provides general school life strategies accessible to all students.

If tier one is unsuitable for the group’s needs, the PBIS program implements the second tier of the model, specifically targeted toward students with different behavioural challenges (typically between five and 15 percent of students), where intervention occurs in smaller group settings and students receive feedback on their behaviour regularly.

The third tier (targeting less than five percent of students) implements a one-on-one approach to addressing behavioural challenges in schools. “You’re going to have a more intense, personalized intervention for the students who have more chronic or severe behaviour challenges,” she explained.

While St. Raphael is still in the early stages of the program, Mendes said the school has adapted quite well.

“This [program] was piloted at St. Raphael, knowing that the team is already very strong and that their knowledge, experience, and skill set could support PBIS.” The program requires consistency to achieve positive results in students’ behaviour, she said.

Mendes hopes the program will be refined each year to the needs of the school to ensure students adopt skills beneficial to them equally at home as in the classroom. ■



At St. Raphael Elementary School, from left, back row: Dr. Léna Moïse, school psychologist; Gail Callender, assistant director of Student Services; Jackie Alvarado and Cindy Mendez, both behaviour management specialists; Michelle Aubin, former educational consultant; Kathy Roach, community worker at the CIUSSS du Centre-Ouest-de-l'Île-de-Montréal; Jasmin Skerritt, behaviour management specialist; and principal Joe Anne Désir. Front row: Grade 4 students. Photo courtesy of St. Raphael

Some facts and tips for parents around ‘sexting’

by *Victoria Della Cioppa*

“Sexting” – sending sexually explicit messages or images through electronic devices – has become a prevalent behaviour among teens. A “sext” can range from a suggestive message to a nude photo. It includes the original transmission of words, images, photos, videos or audio recordings, their receipt and/or their retransmission or forwarding.

Understanding why youth engage in sexting is crucial for parents. Many teens do it for validation, to explore their sexuality or to express sexual intimacy. It can be a way

to discover one’s own sexuality, limits, empowerment, confidence or how to further a relationship. However, it can lead to serious consequences.

The risks of sexting include emotional distress, cyberbullying and even legal consequences. Once shared, content can easily spread beyond the intended recipient. Youth are not always aware that they are engaging in illegal activity when they send a sext, even if it is within the confines of a secure relationship. In Canada, sending or receiving explicit content involving minors can result in charges of child pornography.

Given these risks, it is important for parents to approach the topic of sexting proactively. Creating an open environment where your child feels comfortable sharing

their thoughts and emotions is essential. Let them know you are available to listen without judgment.

It’s also important to discuss the concept of enthusiastic consent, emphasizing that it is essential in both physical relationships and digital communications. Explain that sending a sext without mutual agreement can violate trust and lead to negative outcomes. Parents can educate their teens about the qualities of healthy relationships, such as respect, trust and communication, and highlight how these qualities extend to online interactions.

By setting clear boundaries around sexting and helping your child understand the permanence of digital content, adults can reduce the potential for regret. Fostering

open dialogue and providing guidance can help your child understand the risks of sexting and develop healthier relationships both online and offline. ■

For more information:
www.mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/sexting.

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

The emotional growth that comes with parenting a child with special needs

by *Stephanie Paquette*

Raising a child with special needs profoundly impacts not just the individual parent but also the couple and the entire family dynamic. It brings unique challenges to relationships, often surfacing as fears, reactive parenting or the exhaustion that comes with managing your child's ongoing care needs.

The experience can also serve as a mirror, reflecting unhealed parts of yourself that may need attention. Your child's behaviour offers valuable insight and presents opportunities to reflect on your own vulnerabilities while cultivating patience, resilience and emotional regulation.

As parents, we often interpret our child's behaviour through the lens of our own past experiences. When their needs or actions trigger frustration, anxiety or a sense of being overwhelmed we might discover that these emotions may stem from unresolved wounds within ourselves. Recognizing this connection can be difficult but also incredibly empowering.

Our children mirror our emotional state, encouraging us to explore the root causes of our reactions. In doing so, they invite us to heal, not just for our own well-being but for theirs as well.

One essential strategy for navigating this journey is learning to regulate our own nervous system. When we are dysregulated, it becomes harder to create the calm and

supportive environment that benefits both us and our children. Mindfulness practices, deep breathing, self-compassion and other self-care techniques help enhance emotional regulation. With greater calm, we are better equipped to respond to our own needs and those of our children with patience and understanding. Though regulating the nervous system can be challenging, with continued practice it becomes a more intentional and smooth process.

Couples and families face their own set of unique challenges. The demands of raising a child with special needs can place significant strain on even the strongest relationships. Open communication, teamwork and creating space for each partner's needs are crucial to navigating these pressures.

Despite the challenges, this journey can deepen emotional bonds, foster personal and relational growth, and offer profound insights into ourselves. It is a transformative experience that invites healing, empathy and a stronger sense of connection for everyone involved. ■

Child Mind Institute is a website that offers parents a variety of resources related to their child's mental health, learning needs and/or special needs: childmind.org/resources.

Stephanie Paquette is a social worker with the Student Services department of the English Montreal School Board.



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A supportive space for teens to explore identities, build confidence, and enjoy games, movies, and mentorship. Ste-Thérèse.

Art & Wellness (Teens & Young Adults):

Join us for art-making and wellness activities with snacks and all materials provided. Deux-Montagnes.

Autism & Arts in the Laurentians (AAL):

A free weekly arts program for autistic teens and young adults, offering activities like painting, crafting, and music. LRHS and Laurentian Elementary School, Lachute.

Convos & Crafts (Teens & Young Adults):

A creative, relaxed space for neurodivergent youth to make new friends and express creativity. Parents & siblings welcome. Deux-Montagnes.

Support Group for Parents of Neurodivergent Children:

A safe space for parents to share experiences, receive guidance, and connect with others. Online or in-person in Deux-Montagnes.

Living Without Violence (Men's Anger Management Program):

A confidential support group for men looking to manage anger and improve communication and conflict resolution skills. Free and confidential.

Contact us: info@4korners.org | 450-974-3940

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Chabad Lifeline

The Chabad Lifeline Recovery and Prevention program supports youth at risk and their families through its programs treating addiction of all kinds including alcohol, drugs, gambling, gaming and more. Services are accessible to everyone as a non-sectarian agency offering a full range of treatment options and youth-at-risk programs, all at no charge. Its Youth Department offers support and services to youth between five- and 20-years-old living in at-risk environments affected by addiction and/or to youth who may have substance use concerns or mental health challenges themselves. Screening, assessment, evaluation, intake and individualized treatment plans alongside individual and family counselling is available. Chabad Lifeline is a community-based, not-for-profit organization which does not receive government support.

Info
514.738.7700 or chabadlifeline.com.

Camp Lift

The skilled facilitators at Camp Lift believe that cultivating a healthy mind in a healthy body is the best way to promote academic success and prevent school drop-out. Serving a cross-section of high schools across greater Montreal, Camp Lift offers a variety of programming focusing on the positive development of physical and mental health through a wide range of extracurricular programs and services. The programs are designed to develop the individual potential of each participant exploring topics ranging from healthy eating habits, meditation and yoga to a variety of sports designed to propel students towards maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Summer and winter camps also allow youth to learn and grow in a safe environment supervised by qualified facilitators.

Info
camlift.com.

4Korners

Working to serve and enrich the lives of English-speaking communities across the Laurentian region, 4Korners aims to strengthen community vitality through various programs with a focus on access to health and social services. Maintaining partnerships with various community partners, 4Korners provides cultural and creative community programs and activities centered on mental health, parental and caregiver support and healthy lifestyles for children, youth, seniors and caregivers. Programs and services promote stimulating social interactions, learning new skills and access to resources and information alongside encouraging youth through training, internship programs, entrepreneurship and work placements.

Info
450.974.3940 or 4korners.org.

Hand-in-Hand

The Hand-in-Hand Program, run through the Saint Columba House in Pointe St. Charles, services adults living with disabilities from 25 to 70 years old. Participants enjoy cultural, recreational and leisure activities at no charge. Additionally, supportive programming focuses on improving skills in many areas including mathematics, literacy, art, creativity, communication and physical fitness. A summer day camp runs for a six-week session, offering day trips alongside a range of educational activities.

Info
514.932.6202 or saintcolumbahouse.org.

Do you have a resource to recommend?
Email us at info@inspirationsnews.com.



From left: Alan Maislin, former president of the board of directors of CIUSSS West-Central Montreal; Lionel Carmant, provincial minister responsible for Social Services; and Dr. Lawrence Rosenberg, president and CEO of the Integrated Health and Social Services University Network for West-Central Montreal, enjoy a view of the skylight in one of the calming areas at the clinic in April 2024. Photo courtesy of CIUSSS West-Central Montreal

Unique medical/dental clinic caters to neurodiverse patients

by *Sue Montgomery*

A new medical and dental clinic is proving popular for people with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorder since opening in late 2023 and early 2024.

The first-of-its-kind clinic, located at CLSC René-Cassin in Côte Saint Luc, has been a “miracle” for Brenda Held, whose son Mitchell, 54, is neurodivergent.

“The dentist was totally amazing,” she said of her son’s first visit to the clinic. “She gave him all the control, and he felt he wasn’t being pushed into a situation he didn’t want to be in.

“We were totally amazed by the way she handled him, and that made all the difference.”

Held said visits to the dentist used to be a nightmare for her son, with him often having to be anesthetized for a tooth extraction.

The clinic offers a dentist three days a week and doctor once a week, plus a full-time nurse to perform blood tests and other procedures. Staff is trained in communication skills and use specialized treatment tools for patients, whose needs are diverse.

Over 300 dental appointments and 141 medical appointments have been booked since opening first the medical clinic in December 2023 and then the dental clinic in January, a month later.

A key feature of the clinic is a calming room, known as the Snoezelen room, which has sensory objects and tools to help create a calming and welcoming environment for the patients, says dentist Dr. Christina Angelopoulos. It serves as the waiting room and helps patients transition into the dental chair.

“We cater the length of each appointment to the level of comfort and needs of each patient,” she said. “In order to do this, we

lengthen the appointments accordingly and allow for the patient to return as many times as needed in order to become desensitized to the environment.”

The CIUSSS West-Central Montreal, with support from the Jewish General Hospital Foundation, teamed up with the Azrieli Foundation to create the specialized clinic.

“General healthcare is absolutely fundamental to well-being but has remained an unmet need for neurodiverse individuals for far too long,” stated Naomi Azrieli, chair/CEO of the Azrieli Foundation in a press release.

The clinic is open Monday to Friday, and Quebec’s health insurance covers its services. Dental patients do not need a referral. The medical clinic doesn’t accept anyone who already has a doctor or who is not on the waiting list. ■

Using art to create moments of mindfulness

by *Danika Swanson*

Mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, to the present moment, without judgement. In previous editions, we have practiced mindfulness by focusing our attention on various things including the breath, sounds, emotions, and most recently, music. Inspired by the theme of art in this edition of *Inspirations*, for this column, we will learn a different mindfulness exercise by focusing our attention on a work of art.

While creating art can be a mindfulness practice, especially when we shift our attention to the process and not the outcome, the practice we're exploring here is a variation of mindful seeing – practicing mindfulness through looking at art. This practice is particularly beneficial for strengthening attention and focus, and perhaps enhancing your appreciation for art!

You can try this practice anywhere you have art to look at: in your house, on your phone or at one of Montreal's many beautiful museums. Pick a piece of art and

ideally a place where you can minimize distractions.

Start with one minute, and then see if you can increase the duration in subsequent practices. I recently read about an art history professor who asks students to look at a work of art for a full three hours! While that is unrealistic for most people, see what happens if you can work your way up to 10 minutes. You will likely feel a bit impatient and uncomfortable, as we are unaccustomed to such focused attention, but remember, a little outside of our comfort zone is where we are most open to learning and growth, and in this practice, possibly seeing something from a new perspective.

Practice:

Start by finding a comfortable position. You can be sitting, standing or even lying down if the art is on your phone. Take a few mindful breaths and ground yourself by noticing where your body is in contact with the floor or a surface beneath you.

Bring your attention to your chosen work of art. Start by looking at the painting or

picture as a whole. Then let your eyes go where they want to go. You can zoom in and out as you wish.

As you continue to look, see if you can notice:

- ▶ As much detail as you can about the image (different colours, lines, shapes, shades, textures, patterns, etc.)
- ▶ An aspect that brings you enjoyment or calm.
- ▶ Any emotions that come up. How do you feel when you look at this piece of art?
- ▶ Something you might have missed at first glance.

If you are guiding your child in this practice, you can offer them vocabulary to describe the things they notice and invite them to look for certain colours, shapes or other details.

When your time is done, notice how you feel. What was it like to look at art mindfully? Did you discover something new about your chosen piece? What did you notice, if anything, in your body as you looked at the artwork? ■



A piece of artwork that is about looking at art mindfully by Ellora Swanson.
Image courtesy of D. Swanson

For an interesting resource on how to use mindfulness while viewing art, read this article from Getty, a global arts organization based in Los Angeles: www.getty.edu/news/how-mindfulness-is-unlocking-a-whole-new-way-of-seeing-art.

Danika Swanson is the personal development and community involvement consultant for the English Montreal School Board and was trained by Mindful Schools to teach mindfulness to elementary and secondary students.



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Art therapy sessions at EMSB a win-win for both Concordia interns and schools

by *Jordan Stoopler*

Juliana Duimstra returned to elementary school last September during her year-long practicum, required as part of her two-year Master of Art Therapy program at Concordia University.

Duimstra spent eight months at Westmount Park Elementary of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) during the 2023/2024 school year, holding weekly 45-minute one-on-one art therapy sessions with students across all grade levels. Overall, 19 students, who were recommended by the school team to participate with parental approval in this program, benefited from 13 weeks of sessions held during either the fall or winter/spring blocks.

A second art therapy intern from Concordia simultaneously worked with students at the board's St. Gabriel

Elementary School. The Pointe St. Charles school has had a long-standing partnership with the Concordia Arts Program and is happily hosting another art therapy intern for this academic school year.

"In our therapy, we really tailor it to what the students' needs are," said Duimstra. "Often, we'll start with an open assessment, seeing what materials kids are drawn to and figure what the goals of their therapy will be. Some activities are more mindfulness-related, such as drawing your breath to visualize breathing. For others, using sensory materials, such as clay or fabrics, was really a good outlet for them to express their anger or just be present and grounded in the moment."

Duimstra noticed recurring symbols and imagery in students' artwork, relating to their daily lives. While some were too young to truly understand what they were communicating through art, Duimstra says

witnessing their evolution over time was incredibly powerful.

"There were some kids who were really shy or non-verbal at the beginning, and I really saw how the art-making was making them feel comfortable," she said. "By the end, they were sharing more with me. Some were struggling with anxiety and found tools to overcome their fears, which was really encouraging."

"We're fulfilling two purposes," said Dr. Karla Dockery, a psychologist at the EMSB, who co-supervised the two art therapy interns last year. "We're helping to train other professionals currently going through their Master's program, but we are also benefiting from it in that we are able to offer it to our students as well. We're happy to partner with Concordia to do that."

Having graduated from Concordia in June, Duimstra is taking with her valuable



The art therapy space at Westmount Park Elementary School. Photo courtesy of the school

practical lessons from her internship at Westmount Park Elementary School.

"I'm really grateful that I got to work with a variety of students with different needs," she said. "It was really beneficial to see art therapy in practice after learning the theory in school. It solidified my interest in working with children." ■

How the power of art has shaped artist Sarah Aspler

by *Olivia Integlia*

When Sarah Aspler was just eight, she turned to art as a source of expression.

Having been born with a non-verbal learning disability, Aspler recalled that art became a way to communicate her thoughts and feelings. "When I was hungry, I would draw something like food," she said.

Her parents wasted no time enrolling her in art school. It was really at La Palette Art School and Gallery where Aspler was able to experiment with different art mediums, she explained. She dabbled in drawing, painting, ceramic art and jewelry making – never restricting herself to just one.

For Aspler, art was not only a tool, but it also became an integral part of her liveli-

hood. "I started painting or drawing what I [saw] around me, whether it was nature or people," she said.

As she refined her skills, she recognized a lot of its benefits. For one, Aspler says that art allowed her to develop an understanding of spatial visualization. She previously struggled with drawing in a straight direction, as part of a developmental delay. "If I was looking at a painting, it would look two-dimensional," she explained. "I couldn't really see the way the lines were going." Art has trained her brain to see perspective, she said.

Aspler, who also suffers from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, said that art can be good for the mind as well. "It really makes you zone in on what you're doing."



Sarah Aspler, artist, jewelry designer, sells her jewelry at the Curling Club in Baie-D'Urfé on October 19. Photo: Andreas Kurz

She often turns to art when she is feeling overstimulated. "I'll just go and do some art because it brings [me] back to the present, and it helps [me] calm down."

Today, Aspler is pursuing a career in art. She's currently a student at Concordia University specializing in art history. She also hopes to inspire others to explore various art mediums for their benefit. ■

Imagine Festival attended by 300 this summer

by *Samara O’Gorman*

Despite the sweltering heat this past summer, friends and family joined together to support Imagine Festival, a biennial arts event that celebrates creativity and inclusivity. On August 4, nine artists graced the Dunany Country Club in Wentworth with their craft.



Attendees admire the art donated by Dunany Studio Artists. Photo courtesy of Jaime Bisailon

The festival attracted around 300 people, according to 4Korners, a charitable organization based in Deux-Montagnes focusing on access to health and social services for the English-speaking population in the Laurentians, which organized the event. Festivalgoers were treated to musical performances and beatboxing sessions.

The day began with a free follow-along paint workshop led by Carol Lyng. Nearly 50 participants engaged in the workshop, leaving with their own unique creations.

In the afternoon, Autisme Karaté took centre stage with a lesson in martial arts.

The festival held a 50/50 draw, with the proceeds going directly back into supporting future programming. The silent auction was another highlight, featuring paintings donated by local Dunany artists.

“It was beautiful to see the community come together for this inspiring event,” said Jaime Bisailon, Neurodiversity Program manager at 4Korners and the lead organizer of Imagine Festival, an event that was created by Julie Chou and her son

Ben. “The artists really outdid themselves creating amazing work to exhibit and their efforts paid off. It was heartwarming to see people come together and celebrate different abilities. It was an eye-opening event that brought a lot to the lives of the participants and festivalgoers.”

In addition to the activities offered, the 4Korners and Uni-Diversity kiosks brought valuable resources and insights to the festival. A member at the 4Korners booth shared inspiring solo travel tips, encouraging others to explore the world with confidence.

The personal impact of the day was shared by Danielle Desrosiers, the mother of the master of ceremonies, Carly Hay: “For one day, we were invited into a beautiful dimension, where we are guaranteed to be loved, accepted and appreciated for who we are. As a special needs mom, a day like this brings us hope that the world we live in can be a bit more kind to our special children.” ■

For more information on Imagine Festival and 4Korners, visit 4korners.org.



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Festival sparks creativity with contest

Neurodiverse students from across the Laurentians were invited to submit a piece of artwork to be displayed at Imagine Festival and to also be entered in a contest to win a gift card. One thousand dollars in prizes was distributed in different categories: by age group, school and then at random. Various types of art were submitted, such as paintings, drawings, sculptures and digital art. Shown here is a drawing by Jaxson Morin, a Grade 3 student at Morin Heights Elementary School. Photo courtesy of 4Korners

- Kristin McNeill

A book about the value of being yourself

by *Roanne Weisman*

Compassion, clarity, creativity, communication: These four words summarize several important messages of hard-earned wisdom in Shelley Lippman's book, *As Is: Accepting, Forgiving and Empowering Your Child With ADHD... and Yourself*.

Lippman, who is a certified transformation coach and positive psychology practitioner, has written a book infused with compassion for parents and their children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She freely shares the joys and challenges she and her husband experienced raising their two sons with ADHD, along with their neurotypical daughter. Reading this book is like having an intimate – yet very useful – chat with a wise good friend: A chat that offers more than solid advice; it also offers hope.

Both of Lippman's sons were able to follow their passions and become successful

business owners, earning recognition among Forbes "30 Under 30" for retail and e-commerce in 2021.

The clarity of Lippman's information goes far beyond her own parenting experiences. The book is filled with pages of useful information from a multitude of experts, as well as a comprehensive "toolbox" of practical advice on many topics, as evidenced in the chapter titles alone: "Accepting," which covers awareness, compassion and connection; "Forgiving," including gratitude, curiosity and pausing (instead of instantly reacting); "Empowering," which shares advice for focusing on strengths; "Self-advocacy" (for parents as well as children); and "Flourishing."

Throughout, Lippman offers ways that parents can be creative with their children, helping them to *uncover* (rather than discover) the passions and strengths that may have been hidden. In the last chap-

ter, the author talks about strength-based parenting, helping children manage what can seem like a roller-coaster of emotions; using tools of communication to build the force of optimism, in order to envision and create positive futures for themselves; and the resilience to bounce back when life throws curveballs.

Among the many expert quotes in the book, Lippman offers this in the last chapter, by Catherine DeVrye: "Like tiny seeds with potent power to push through tough ground and become mighty trees, we hold innate reserves of unimaginable strength. We are resilient."

Lippman's important book demonstrates beyond doubt that this is true of all children and their parents, no matter what challenges they may face. ■



Photo courtesy of Shelley Lippman



Un nouvel ascenseur pour le théâtre Centaur

par *Emmanuelle Assor*



La donatrice Marisa Testa, à gauche, et Eda Holmes, directrice artistique et exécutive du théâtre Centaur, lors de la cérémonie d'inauguration du nouvel ascenseur à accès universel, le 4 octobre. Photo : Sean Ryan, théâtre Centaur

Depuis le mois d'octobre 2024, le théâtre Centaur est heureux de s'être doté d'un nouvel ascenseur ultramoderne à accès universel, permettant aux spectateurs en fauteuil roulant (ou utilisant un dispositif de mobilité autre) d'accéder facilement et dignement au bâtiment. « Cet ascenseur, synonyme d'accessibilité et d'inclusion, est un ajout très important pour le théâtre Centaur. Pour la première fois en nos 56 ans d'existence, nous sommes fiers de pouvoir accueillir tous les spectateurs et toutes les spectatrices qui ont besoin d'un accès plus direct à notre bâtiment », a affirmé Eda Holmes, directrice artistique et exécutive du Centaur.

Un ascenseur en hommage à la résilience

Grâce à un généreux don de la mécène Marisa Testa, il a été possible de rénover le

Centaur pour y ajouter cet ascenseur plus spacieux et accessible pour les fauteuils roulants. Marisa Testa voulait honorer son mari Tiziano Giacomini, décédé en avril 2002, avec ce geste très significatif. Tiziano était un homme très apprécié de tous, reconnu pour son humour, son éloquence et son amour pour les arts, en particulier pour le théâtre. De cette passion partagée avec Marisa est né un grand amour, une complicité sincère et de nombreuses activités culturelles qui les ont menés à un réel engagement communautaire.

Cet ascenseur a aussi été inauguré en hommage au frère de Tiziano qui s'est déplacé en fauteuil roulant les cinq dernières années de sa vie. Symbole de la résilience des membres de la famille Giacomini, mais aussi de la compassion de la famille Testa, le nouvel ascenseur représente la durabilité des liens que

l'on tisse grâce à l'amour et au désir de vivre ensemble. « En dévoilant ce nouvel équipement, nous honorons non seulement la mémoire de Tiziano, mais aussi l'impact profond de sa vie et du dévouement constant de la famille Testa envers notre communauté. Au théâtre Centaur, l'héritage de Tiziano Giacomini se perpétue et se retrouve quotidiennement dans les histoires inclusives présentées sur scène. Propulsé par le désir de faire mieux et d'aller plus loin, le Centaur a pour objectif d'être un lieu inclusif où tout le monde se sent comme chez soi », a conclu Eda Holmes. ■

All the Light We Cannot See casts blind actress in lead role

by *Ishini Fernando*

All the Light We Cannot See is a four-part miniseries, directed by Shawn Levy and developed by Steven Knight, first released in 2023 on Netflix. Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Anthony Doerr, the historical drama is set during World War II and follows the lives of its two protagonists Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a French girl who became blind at a young age, and Werner Pfennig, a German orphan boy and talented radio technician.

The film traces the main events that shape the characters from their childhood to their teens, such as when Marie-Laure escapes from Paris with her father during the German occupation, or when Werner is forced to enlist as a soldier by the Nazis.

In the drama's present time, they are both living in the French town of Saint-Malo,

facing regular bombings and a dire reality. Their fates become seemingly entwined as Werner works for the Nazis to track down illegal radio broadcasts used to transmit coded messages, while Marie-Laure broadcasts messages under the guise of reading book chapters to help the resistance. But, while Werner listens intently to Marie-Laure's regular broadcasts, it quickly becomes clear that the last thing he wants to do is give her up. In fact, as the story progresses, viewers will be able to feel their special connection despite their individual missions in war.

This drama series depicts themes of hope, perseverance, moral conflict and courage. A true viewers' delight, *All the Light We Cannot See* was recognized with Emmy nominations for its cinematography, music composition, sound editing and special

visual effects. But what makes the series truly ground-breaking in the film industry is its cast; the leading role of Marie-Laure LeBlanc was given to first-time actor Aria Mia Loberti, who is blind. Even the child version of the character is played by blind young actress Nell Sutton. According to an interview with *Radio Times*, Levy and Knight had taken the decision to cast blind actors early on, inspired by *CODA* – an award-winning film whose main cast includes deaf actors. They had known there might be a challenge to find the right fit as there are still too few blind actors in the industry, where visually impaired characters are commonly performed by sighted actors. Fortunately, through an open casting call, they found their stars in two newcomer actors, who were able to show audiences a realistic portrayal of living with blindness.

Beyond casting efforts, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Levy brought on board a blindness and accessibility consultant, named Joe Strechay, who is blind himself, to ensure the script and direction represented living with blindness accurately. They also worked closely together to make the set accessible to and considerate of the blind actors, paying close attention to details. Levy admitted in the interview that collaborating with Strechay and Loberti allowed him to realize how much of what he had seen on film about blindness is incorrect.

While the miniseries is a gripping and captivating watch – and challenges viewers to look past what they initially see – it is also a great example of how filmmakers can improve representation of the blind and work better with visually impaired actors. ■

Theme for this year's The Art Seen: Expand your horizons

by *Anna Persichilli*

Now in its second year of operation, "The Art Seen," an innovative art-based social integration program (SI) designed for neurodivergent artists, continues its mission to enhance the visibility of neurodivergent talent in the art community, where representation has often been lacking.

Thanks to this collaboration between the English Montreal School Board's (EMSB) Wagar Adult Education Centre and the Visual Arts Centre in Westmount, where it is located, a distinctive art program now thrives.

My students don't fit the typical mold of artists you might encounter in the Montreal art scene, and I'm dedicated to changing that narrative. The primary goal of the SI program is to provide meaningful integration services for adults with intellectual disabilities. Over the past year, students have produced a wealth of artwork in "Studio F" at the Visual Arts Centre. Within the Art Seen program, which is a community class attached to Wagar, students create unique art, participate in exhibitions throughout the year, engage in art talks and apply their life skills to benefit the community.

This past spring, for instance, students visited a nursing home in Ville St. Laurent

to create and paint wind chimes for the residents' outdoor deck.

The Westmount community has wholeheartedly embraced the students: You might see Antoine and Jonathan stroll to the nearby Café Myriade to order a coffee; or students and teachers shopping at the Metro grocery store across the street to prep for our cooking class on Thursdays back at Wagar. The city of Westmount's greenhouse and library have also served as sources of inspiration, and you will often find students sketching in the park.

Throughout the school year, Art Seen students hosted linoleum printmaking workshops for peers at their own school and other EMSB adult education centres, such as John F. Kennedy Adult Education Centre, to explore new artistic media.

One of the most memorable aspects of the program has been the art exhibitions. Typically, in a school setting, artworks are posted onto bulletin boards in the hallways. This year, Art Seen students proudly showcased their work at the Annual Student Exhibition and their own year-end show at the McClure Gallery (located on the main floor of the Visual Arts Centre), both of which were a resounding success. Students felt immense pride as family, friends, and

community members celebrated their creativity.

Jorden Harris-Bignel and Matthew Brotherhood, Art Seen artists, served as art curators for the year-end exhibition. "We're in an art gallery... I feel like a real artist," said Victoria, an Art Seen student. And she is a real artist! It's essential that we recognize her as such.

The inspiration for the Art Seen program came from a video about "Creative Growth," a successful art program for neurodivergent artists in California. I was so inspired that I felt a similar initiative was essential for our neurodivergent students at Wagar. While neurodivergent adults are often encouraged to pursue standard jobs in the community, many possess artistic talents that deserve cultivation and recognition.

Unfortunately, there are very few continuing education art programs for neurodivergent artists. Art Seen provides a safe space for them to thrive. Since its inception, students have been fine-tuning their professional art skills and engaging in work skills tasks at the Visual Arts Centre, including organizing studios, recycling and even contributing to the summer day camp for kids. This year, the students are invited to delve

into pottery, marionette making, stop-motion and installation art. The theme for this school year is for students to expand their artistic horizons. Stay tuned! ■

An interview is required to be accepted into the EMSB Art Seen program. For more information, contact Jennifer Campbell (jcampbell@emsb.qc.ca) or Demetra Droutsas (ddroutsas@emsb.qc.ca) at Wagar Adult Education Centre.

Anna Persichilli is a Social Integration teacher at the English Montreal School Board's Wagar Adult Education Centre.



Art curators Matthew Brotherhood and Jorden Harris-Bignel installing the year-end show with Visual Arts Centre executive director Amber Berson.

Samara O’Gorman is back this year with *Leading With Your Heart 2.0* and a poetry workshop

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

Leading With Your Heart 2.0

This assembly-style presentation encourages elementary school students to cultivate self-confidence and pursue their true passions while addressing crucial topics. The Q&A following offers students the opportunity to learn more from Samara.

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“Samara’s unique style captured the attention and curiosity of her audience.”

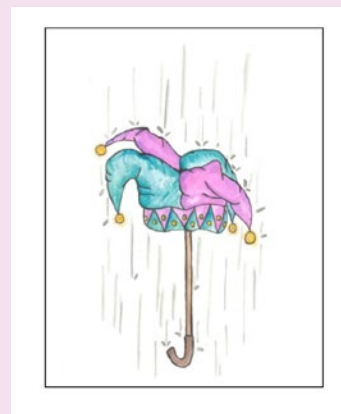
-Dina Vourdousis, principal,
Carlyle Elementary School

Poetry Contest!

Share a short poem on a topic of kindness, friendship and supporting one another and be eligible to win a signed copy of Samara’s new poetry anthology *July’s Return*, and have your poem published in the Spring - Summer 2025 edition of *Inspirations!*

Your submission must Include:

- Your name, age, school (if applicable) poem with a title
- This contest is open to all students of all ages
- **Send your poem to:** info@inspirationsnews.com by January 17, 2025



April

*“April is a jester
in weather’s court;
never certain of rain,
and never certain of sun.
Always certain
of uncertainty,
that – is her fun.”*

- Samara O’Gorman, *July’s Return*

“Seeing how captivated students are by my poetry motivated me to bring it back to them on a more personal one-on-one level in the classroom.” – Samara O’Gorman

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A glimpse into autism expert Francesca Happé's research on autistic women and girls

by *Paul Karwatsky*

Dr. Francesca Happé, a renowned expert in the field of autism research, has made significant contributions to our understanding of autism spectrum disorders through her role as professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at King's College London. With a career dedicated to the study of the cognitive and social challenges associated with autism, Dr. Happé has been instrumental in shaping both academic thought and public policy. Recently, I sat down with her to discuss the latest advancements and challenges in autism research.

This Q&A is part of a larger article that delves into Happé's career trajectory and the advancements in autism research and knowledge spanning her career. The following article has been adapted and condensed for Inspirations' purposes. The whole interview can be found by visiting www.summit-scert.com/news and clicking on "Urging a Deeper Dive..."

Interviewer Paul Karwatsky (PK): What is the value of expanding the spectrum? It could be a very layman question, but why is that? To recognize those that might be getting through life all right, despite not having a diagnosis, what is the importance of expanding the breadth of our diagnostic net?

Francesca Happé: Yeah, so it's really about people that we're missing. It's not that I'm trying to redefine autism to make it broad. But the one percent say of people who as children and young adults are autistic, they don't just disappear when they get older. So, the other area that we really thought that there was an under diagnosis, historically has been for women and girls.

So then why were we worried? Well, we knew that autism was diagnosed later, on average, in women and girls than in boys. We knew that those girls who were getting diagnosed often had something else that was acting as a red flag. So maybe they were also hyperactive or had ADHD.

That wasn't so true for the boys. And we know that diagnosis really matters. We know that later diagnosis is at least associated with poorer mental health. And autistic people themselves tell us when they get their diagnosis, it can be a moment of sadness to think about time lost or misunderstood them, but it's often an important moment of revelation and self-understanding.

And of course, if you understand yourself and if other people can understand you better, you're going to have a better life.

I think understanding that autism can look different in different groups, and that we, all of us, often carry biases. So, the under recognition of autism in women and girls was a lot about the unconscious biases we carry.

We'll look at a boy who's struggling at school socially, and we'll think, could this be autism? But we'll look at a girl who's struggling socially, we'll think, oh, it's social anxiety or she's shy. So we don't come with a fair lens. And we also have stereotypes about autism. We think the social difficulties in autism are going to show up by somebody being socially aloof. But actually they may be socially very clingy. And that's something that's sometimes seen in autistic girls, also autistic boys. But it's not the stereotype of how socialization can be difficult for autistic people, but it's absolutely there. And it was there from the first descriptions of autism. In fact, we listened to people like Lorna Wing, who was working so long ago, making us aware that there were lots of different ways of being autistic.

PK: What are some of the greatest challenges that girls face, but particularly women as they grow into adulthood who are on the spectrum; what are some of the main challenges they face right now?



Photo: Linda Nylind, courtesy of SCERT |

Francesca Happé: Everyone is different, of course, and anything that I can say about an autistic woman could also be true for an autistic man. But I think that there's a particular concern that many autistic women may be very vulnerable and may be vulnerable in relationships. For example, [they] maybe have more experiences of domestic or other violence.

An autistic friend of mine said to me: "It's the things that you don't teach that I can't learn."

So if you teach something explicitly, then I'll get it, I know it. But it's all that stuff that neurotypical seems to just know, without anybody ever sitting down and teaching it in school. She doesn't know that stuff. And if you think about some of the things that happen in an intimate relationship, how do we know what's normal?

How do we know what's okay and what's not okay? Maybe by chatting with friends. You definitely wouldn't want to base it on what you see on the TV or in films. If you have an abusive partner who tells you, "This is what everyone does in their relationship," and you don't have any other benchmarks, you maybe don't have some close friends to talk to about it, then you're really vulnerable in that way. And I've

also met autistic women who, particularly before their diagnosis, because they feel different or because social situations can feel very stressful, they may use alcohol or drugs to try and relax and cope. They may float to the margins of society and hang out with people who are, you know, drug users; people who will accept them but maybe also abuse them. But it's also true that autistic men and boys can be very vulnerable to exploitation. But in every case, I think a diagnosis is worth having. If your autistic traits are causing you difficulties, then a diagnosis will help you and other people to understand the ways in which you might be struggling and what accommodations can be made. ■

Dr. Francesca Happé was to be the keynote speaker at the SCERT Conference on Neurodevelopmental Conditions on November 15, an event hosted by the Summit Centre for Education, Research, and Training (SCERT), a division of Summit School in Montreal. Her talk was about the latest research in autism, with a special emphasis on women and girls.

Paul Karwatsky is a former CTV News anchor and parent of two children on the autism spectrum.

Researching ways autistic people use different ‘styles’ to process information

by *Anna-Francesca Boatswain-Jacques* and *Jacob A. (Jake) Burack*

The motto of the McGill Youth Study Team (MYST) is “excellence in the study and education of all children.” The team is directed by Dr. Jake Burack from the department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University and includes graduate students from the School/Applied Child Psychology and Human Development programs, as well as undergraduates and other volunteers. The starting point of all our work is that of a shared humanity among all people, regardless of place of birth, ethnicity, race, culture, history, experiences, status and well-being.

From within that universal and humane framework, we embrace group and individual differences in attempt to create a society that is ideally inclusive, empowering and enabling for each person in their own

way. Rather than concentrate primarily on deficits or challenges, our focus is on the strengths inherent in all people. In that framework, we work and collaborate with a range of communities, such as Indigenous youth, people experiencing homelessness, those living in poverty and intellectually disabled youth. Across all these groups, we challenge often prevailing deficit or pathologizing narratives and focus on alternative ways of being.

Our work with the autistic communities highlights the foundational values of our research approach. Over the past few years, we have shown through experimental research that autistic children and adolescents attend to information in different ways than do others – not because they are not as good at it or even because they

are better (which they are in some cases), but because they use different styles, have different biases or are motivated by different factors. In fact, we argue that autistic people may be more “data driven” and even more efficient attenders in certain situations because their styles can lead to less distraction from the task at hand. We have termed this approach as “utilitarian,” to reflect its useful and practical nature.

Through this research, we have debunked certain myths about inherent deficits in autism. The first myth was that autistic people cannot process whole images or see beyond the simple sum of parts (such as missing the forest and seeing merely the trees). Along with others, our team has challenged this idea, showing that autistic people can process the full picture just as well as anyone else of the same developmental level when they are instructed to do so. The true difference, rather, lies in situations where they have the choice to process either the big global picture or the smaller local details. Non-autistic people almost always begin processing the global picture by default while autistic people tend to prefer more fine-grained local approaches. So, the question is not about better or worse, but, instead, about different default styles.

A second myth was that autistic persons cannot integrate information from different senses, like sight and sound. We debunked this myth by showing that sounds and sight can be processed just as accurately and quickly by autistic people as non-autistic people. Although performance was similar between the groups, their brain activity was quite different. In fact, the brain activity of autistic people showed a much quicker response to incompatible sight-sound combination and showed greater activity in areas linked to perception. These findings show that sensory integration is processed by autistic people but in different ways than among non-autistic persons.

A third common myth is the belief that autistic people cannot follow the eye gaze of others, which is a critical social behaviour.

While researchers have shown important differences in the use of eye gaze between autistic and non-autistic people, the reality is more complex than simply stating what each group can and cannot do. Instead, we found that autistic people follow eye gaze when there is clear reason or incentive, and they benefit from doing so. This style of attending to eyes is different than that of non-autistic peoples who follow eye gaze more automatically.

In choosing to explore “how” – not simply “how well” – people process information, we seek to discover the mechanisms underlying different ways of thinking observed in autistic people, thereby allowing us to learn more about the development and workings of the mind more generally. In proposing utilitarian processing – a new way of thinking about the differences between autistic and non-autistic people – we argue that autistic people are less swayed by prior knowledge or assumptions that generally affect how others think. Rather, we suggest that autistic individuals actively choose relevant information based on their immediate context. Accordingly, they can more accurately process the available information, thereby leading to unique insights that others might miss. The goal of all this work is to facilitate a more inclusive and empowering worldview by better understanding how diverse styles of processing can lead to different ways of seeing and interacting with the world. ■

If your neurotypical or neurodiverse children would like to participate in this research, please contact us at mcgillmystlab@gmail.com for more information.

Anna-Francesca Boatswain-Jacques is a Ph.D. student in the School/Applied Child Psychology Program in the department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University.

Jacob A. Burack, Ph.D., is a professor in the department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University; director, McGill Youth Study Team (MYST); and scientific director, Summit Center for Education, Research, and Training.

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Advertorial

Segal Centre treats Montrealers to a Leonard Cohen experience with *The Secret Chord*

by Samara O’Gorman



The cast of *The Secret Chord* at Soulpepper. Photo: Dahlia Katz

Leonard Cohen shared his soul with the world through his poetry and music, expressing a deep and timeless humanity that resonates with everyone. His words and melodies continue to touch hearts, particularly in Montreal, his birthplace.

We now have a unique opportunity to experience his music and writing once again at the Segal Centre. Thanks to Soulpepper’s concert production *The Secret Chord: A Leonard Cohen Experience*, this special

tribute will run from December 8, 2024, to January 12, 2025. Co-created by Frank Cox-O’Connell, Marni Jackson, and Mike Ross, the production showcases Cohen’s extraordinary life, music, and poetry, featuring a talented lineup of artists.

Leonard Cohen constantly reinvented himself throughout his long career, helping generations of fans understand the changing society around them. His extraordinary life, music, and poetry will be celebrated by a remarkable company of artists.

– Segal Centre

to the Segal: “A Leonard Cohen retrospective on stage has been long overdue. For fans of the Bard of Montreal, *The Secret Chord* is a chance to hear his lyrics and music as if for the first time and rediscover their genius. It’s a moving testament as to why he remains one of our county’s greatest music icons.”

The show is for all ages and is committed to accessibility and inclusion. The Segal offers various services to ensure all patrons feel welcome and comfortable during their shows. These services include visual stories, enhanced sound devices, braille reading

materials, audio-described performances, ASL-interpreted performances, and more. The theatre continually strives to improve and research better ways to create a space where everyone can enjoy. There will be two audio-described performances for *The Secret Chord* that will occur on December 22, 2024, at 2 pm and 7:30 pm.

For a full list of accessibility offerings, patrons can visit: www.segalcentre.org/en/accessibility



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Commission scolaire Lester B. Pearson School Board

Fun 15 promotes awareness and acceptance at Edward Murphy Elementary

by *Jordan Stoopler*

After eating lunch, the majority of Edward Murphy Elementary School students head outside to run around, play and let loose in the schoolyard. For a handful of students, however, their lunch break is spent in a quieter setting indoors as they take part in the Fun 15 with Friends extra-curricular activity.

The program, which ran from the end of March through late April, paired students on the autism spectrum with student mentors and staff volunteers. They socialized by taking part in activities together, ranging from colouring, board games to ice-breaking activities.

“We were looking at ways we could help our autistic students socialize and find ways to connect with the other children,” said Alana Goodings, who has taught one of the school’s WINGS classes for over a decade.

This English Montreal School Board program, which stands for Working on Individual Needs to Grow and Succeed, is made up entirely of students on the autism spectrum. Goodings spearheads the Fun 15 program, which she started in 2017, along with teacher Pamela D’Adamo. “There aren’t too many integration opportunities when you are in class. I’ve been really excited for the opportunities to help our kids connect.”

The student mentors, from pre-K to Grade 6, typically volunteer once a week over the five-week period.

“I love interacting with other kids, while also learning about autism along the way,” said Kiara, a repeat volunteer. “It makes me feel happy.”

“We pair them with purpose so that, hopefully, some genuine connections and friendships can be formed,” said Goodings. “They all have a common recess, but often, what we see is the WINGS students isolate themselves. They don’t really have the social skills. By creating those connections, the hope is that outside, there is some recognition and respect. When we see that, we are very happy.”

“Whenever they see other students walking by, my WINGS students are always high-fiving them since they recognize each other now,” said D’Adamo. “I find this program has made a difference.”

For 10-year-old Olivia, the Fun 15 program has allowed her to make friends with those outside of her WINGS class. She particularly enjoys playing board games (Zingo! is her favourite) and helping “plant” flowers in the Friendship Garden located just outside her classroom.

“I just want to do it over and over and over again,” she said. ■



Students in Alana Goodings' WINGS class enjoy a Fun 15 with Friends activity with students from other classes.

Galileo students create ‘Skills for Life’ videos

by *Lisa Trotto and Vera Tronca*

An innovative initiative is underway at Galileo Adult Education Centre designed to empower special needs adults by blending creativity with essential life skills. It’s called “Skills for Life: Empowering Adults with Special Needs.” The idea was sparked by the US-based PEERS, an evidence-based social skills intervention program aimed at helping students with diverse needs and other social challenges develop meaningful friendships and improve their relational skills.

Inspired by this, Social Integration (SI) teachers, Lisa Trotto and Vera Tronca decided to collaborate and adapt one of its core components, which is to produce educational videos featuring students acting out two contrasting examples of behaviour – one appropriate and one inappropriate. They took it a step further by aligning the project with the adult population and tailoring it to address their unique needs.

Students have provided direct input on the social challenges they face, including how to introduce yourself to a new group, enter a conversation and keep one going, handle

conflicts, ask for help and more. This student-driven approach increases engagement and autonomy, allowing students to see themselves and their peers modeling real-world social scenarios.

Students have embraced the creative process of scripting, staging and performing these skits. From brainstorming sessions to final video recordings, the project has become a collaborative experience fostering teamwork, creativity and, most importantly, self-confidence.

“Skills for Life” allows students to learn critical social skills through acting and peer interaction, while also gaining experience as digital creators, actively participating in their own learning. These experiences reinforce the lessons taught, while the videos themselves serve as invaluable resources for others navigating similar challenges.

Students will also take part in designing the website that hosts these videos, transforming it into a resource hub for adults with special needs. It will become a digital “Life Navigator,” featuring video guides on social,



Social Integration students work to complete a video in the “Skills for Life: Empowering Adults with Special Needs” production. Photo: Lu Termini

life and work skills. The website started with only two videos, but the library will continue to grow as students create more content.

“Skills for Life” is more than just a project. It’s a movement that empowers our students to be both the learners and the teachers, sharing their experiences in a way that resonates far beyond the classroom.

We look forward to sharing their incredible work and the positive impact it will have on the broader community. ■

Check out our website. There’s much more to come! <https://sites.google.com/emsb.qc.ca/skillsforlife>.

Lisa Trotto and Vera Tronca are Social Integration teachers at Galileo Adult Education Centre, which is part of the English Montreal School Board.

New playground unveiled at Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools

by *Olivia Integlia*

On September 25, Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools held an inauguration for its first-ever inclusive playground.

The project has been in the works since December 2016, according to Mehrnoosh Movahed and Keiko Shikako, the two lead researchers assigned to the task of helping design the playground.

Movahed is a medical resident at the University of Ottawa and previously a research associate at the Participation-Knowledge Translation in Childhood Disability Lab at McGill University, and Shikako is an associate professor with McGill's School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, and Canada Research Chair in Childhood Disability: Participation and Knowledge Translation.

The process of designing such a playground is lengthy. "We did a massive review of both the research and the guidelines, policies, frameworks – anything that existed about inclusive playgrounds," explained Shikako.

Movahed and Shikako then created a questionnaire booklet for students, parents, staff and experts to provide their input on the playground's design.

The outcome includes several unique features.

The playground has a non-static slide, various sensory elements, a music area and a wheelchair accessible swing and merry-go-round. Several of the structures can accommodate ambulatory and non-ambulatory children together.

The non-static slide was included to allow children who are deaf or hard of hearing to play on a slide that does not produce static, something that would normally interfere with the electronic components of cochlear implants, explained Movahed.

Every detail was carefully thought out to ensure it was an inclusive space. Movahed described how the playground has sensory tiles allowing children using canes to easily navigate the space. Shikako eagerly added that the contrasted colours chosen for the playground floor were also considered to accommodate students with visual impairments.

Moreover, the playground was designed to ensure that wheelchair users and ambulatory children can play together.

"The ramps are double-sided, so you could have a child in [one] wheelchair and two children in wheelchairs going in different



Keiko Shikako, left, and Mehrnoosh Movahed at the September 25 inauguration of Mackay and Philip E. Layton schools' new playground. Photo courtesy of M. Movahed

directions, but you could also have ambulatory children and adults going with them," said Shikako.

While the playground is now complete, the schools' vice principal, Bob Simpson, said the next step is to introduce the students to the space.

"The primary concern, as always, is safety," he said, adding that the school will likely bring students out in a structured format to teach them how to use the equipment.

"There'll be certain rules and expectations that we will go over with the students [...]"

either through physical education, with the rehab team, or class-by-class with some supervision."

The research and design of the inclusive playground, created to meet the diverse needs of all students, was made possible through the funding of the Habilitas Foundation, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Rehabilitation of Greater Montreal and private donors. The \$3-million project had the tagline of "Every Child Has the Right to Play." ■

Wagar raises over \$2,000 for cancer research

by *Laura Hutchinson, Danny Olivenstein and Charles Changizi*

The Wagar Adult Education Centre satellite school in Montreal North raised an impressive \$2,210 for the Terry Fox Foundation, combining the efforts of students and staff to make a meaningful contribution to cancer research. The school, which supports and educates adults with special needs, participated in the annual Terry Fox Run, empowering its students to actively engage in charitable efforts.

The Terry Fox Foundation, inspired by the legendary Canadian's "Marathon of Hope," funds critical cancer research. Wagar's involvement exemplifies its dedication to important causes, while reinforcing values of perseverance and compassion that align with Terry Fox's legacy.

The school's fundraising efforts were driven by students, who raised half of the final amount. In addition to honing their organizational and leadership skills, the students demonstrated their ability to positively impact their community.

The final total was reached thanks to the generosity of one of Wagar's teachers, who matched the students' efforts, doubling the amount raised. This act of kindness not only boosted the overall contribution but also served as an inspiring gesture of solidarity within the school community.

Teachers were in awe over the students achieving such a remarkable feat, and in the spirit of Terry Fox, proving that the underestimated once again proves the impossible

to be possible through perseverance.

It's a great example of what we can achieve together, regardless of the challenges we face.

The success of the fundraiser has instilled a sense of pride throughout the school and inspired the community to continue participating in future charitable events.

Through this effort, Wagar has shown that inclusivity, teamwork and a shared goal can make a significant impact in the fight for a better future. ■

Laura Hutchinson, Danny Olivenstein and Charles Changizi are teachers at Wagar Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board.



Adriana and Lenny take a second to pose during their Terry Fox Run on October 4. Wagar students met in a nearby park to complete the 5-km walk.

McGill group tackles speech and communication challenges

by *Randy Pinsky*

What do Olympic medalist Michael Phelps, actress Emily Blunt and golf legend Tiger Woods have in common? All have speech impediments yet overcame these challenges to have illustrious careers.

In 2017, a group of students at McGill University interested in helping those with speech and communication challenges, launched the McGill Undergraduates for Communication Disorders Awareness (MUCDA) student club, the first such group at the university.

A hub for those considering a career in speech therapy, MUCDA regularly promotes internship opportunities and coordinates career panels. In addition to fund-

raising for the Montreal Children's Hospital Speech-Language Pathology Department, last year, they co-hosted an interactive workshop with the McGill American Sign Language Club, "offering a unique perspective on language and inclusion."

One of their main initiatives is the "Buddy Program," which matches individuals struggling with communication disorders with volunteers for conversation-based activities, with the aim of breaking social isolation and building community.

The term "communication disorders" covers both speech and language challenges. As noted on the MUCDA site, while speech disorders relate to sound and fluency articulation and may take the form of stuttering, language disorders refer to the execution and comprehension of words and grammar. It is possible to have either or both.

This summer, MUCDA co-president Ava McKenzie gained first-hand experience job-shadowing a speech pathologist at CanSpeak Therapy in her hometown of New Jersey.

"Individuals with communication disorders are often very smart; they just can't communicate ideas as easily as others can," shared McKenzie, a psychology major minoring in linguistics and Hispanic studies.

"Trying to finish the sentence for someone or talk over them does not help and is just plain rude," she said, adding that the more someone gets interrupted or rushed, the less fluent they become.

Montrealer Bassel Atallah has never let his speech impediment stop him. Working as a lecturer in English Literature and Communications at Dawson College,

McGill and Concordia and now as the associate dean of Creative and Applied Arts at Dawson, he shares his journey with students, making discussions regarding fears of public speaking all the more relatable.

In 2017, Atallah presented "Breaking the Self-Imposed Silence in Our Personal and Professional Lives" at the Canadian Stuttering Association's annual conference, sharing strategies for confidence building, contesting negative self-talk and improving public speaking.

"Remember that these are people with the same capabilities [as anyone else]," said McKenzie. "Don't immediately underestimate or judge them because they are different." ■

Shriners and London hospital join forces for pediatrics

Quebec-based Shriners Hospitals for Children Canada, which specializes in pediatric bone and neuromuscular disorders, has spread its expertise to Ontario to better serve children dealing with complicated health issues. A partnership between Shriners and the Children's Hospital at London Health Sciences Centre aims to provide families in southwestern Ontario with care closer to home and free up appointments for new Quebec patients at the MUHC Glen site, where the Shriners is located. The affiliation will provide more opportunities for research into complex disorders as well as teaching the next generation of pediatric orthopedists.

- Sue Montgomery



A community collaboration creates fun, new café

Pigeon dans le parc, a café that opened in Hampstead Park in July, was born after social enterprise Zera Café was awarded the Azrieli Foundation's INfinity prize, which encourages social enterprises to grow their business while creating work opportunities for neurodivergent individuals. The owner of Pigeon Café, Jonathan Dresner, sourced equipment and products, while Zera Café supplied the staff, and the town of Hampstead offered up a snack bar that wasn't being used. From June to the end of September, visitors could grab a sandwich and a coffee as well as Zera Café's ready-to-eat meals from the freezer. It is anticipated that Pigeon dans le parc will re-open in May 2025. Elana Warshawsky, assistant job coach, left, and Lindsay Oksenberg, café associate, serve clients at Pigeon in the Park on July 2. Photo courtesy of Zera Café

- Kristin McNeill



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Photographer snaps (up) Entrepreneurial Award

by *Randy Pinsky*

It takes a particular talent to excel in photography: intuition, the ability to capture the essence of an emotion or the intensity of an action. To evoke a story in visual form. It takes persistence and a relentless drive for quality.



Andreas Kurz in the Village on Ste. Catherine St. in September 2019. Photo: Sam Belanger

These were the characteristics that motivated Steven Atme to nominate autistic photographer Andreas Kurz for the *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award.

“What I admire most is Andreas’ perseverance, courage, determination and resilience,” said Atme.

As an autistic pianist and motivational speaker, Atme has leveraged his own experiences to become a mentor to many, including Kurz, understanding how art can be a conduit for connections and expressing emotions.

Kurz reflected, “I would describe my photography as being very colourful and slightly saturated while also having a gritty texture.” Each photo tells a story, and his goal is for viewers to feel as though they had been at the game or concert featured.

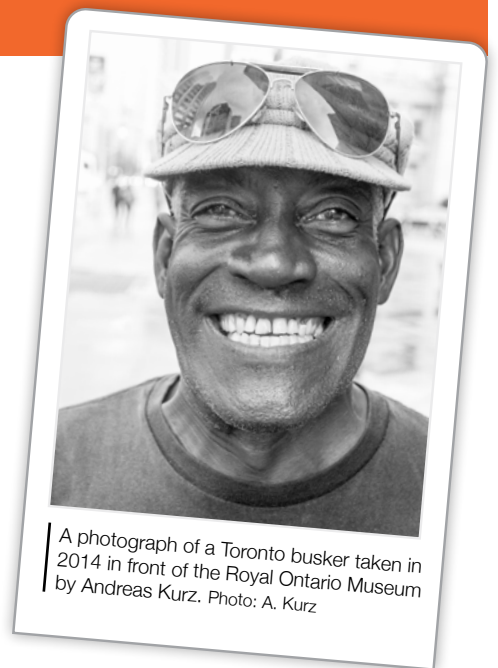
He feels his autism has been an asset with

his determination to capture just the right moment, whether at a family gathering, festival or event.

As part of the award, Kurz will be doing a photography internship at *Inspirations*. His first assignment was to photograph artist Sarah Aspler (featured in an article about art as therapy on p. 16) at the Baie d’Urfé Curling Club’s 28th Gathering of Artisans in October.

A graduate of Dawson’s Professional Photography Program, Kurz is pursuing this career while working full-time at Metro Warehouse in Ville St. Laurent.

He has overcome many challenges in a competitive industry and is making a name for himself; one of his shots of DJ Don Mescal was featured as an article cover for *Narcity Quebec* in 2021. A talent in photography also runs in the family. His grandmother attended Germany’s Bauhaus



A photograph of a Toronto busker taken in 2014 in front of the Royal Ontario Museum by Andreas Kurz. Photo: A. Kurz

Art School, and another ancestor was the royal photographer in Bavaria.

Kurz expressed his appreciation: “People with disabilities, including me, have a hard time putting ourselves out there, and Steven is giving us a chance.”

For his part, Atme said, “I really see potential in him. This accolade will take him far.” ■

Nominate your entrepreneur at info@inspirationsnews.com.



A sampling of lending materials provided by Miriam MateriaTech. Photo courtesy of Miriam

Miriam programs work together to provide library lending and work opportunities

by *Olivia Integlia*

Founded in 1973, Miriam (formerly Miriam Foundation) has developed many programs specific to providing support for neurodivergent individuals. One such program is Miriam MateriaTech, an educational library with over 3,000 resources for loan.

Their repertoire contains occupational therapy, and speech and language pathology materials, social games, pretend-play toys, puzzles, among many other things, said Jordanna Vamos, the manager of MateriaTech.

“Anything you can think of that can help people integrate, we have it,” she said, adding that the organization loans items specifically curated for adults. Most notably, the library has a section of special resources for individuals looking to practice skills such as sorting, packaging, shelving and filing, in anticipation of entering the workforce.

MateriaTech caters to a wide range of clients. “We do service the therapists within our building, but we also work with community organizations, schools, parents from our programs, but also outside of

► Continued on p. 31

Yes, Chef! A success story

by *Tania Piperni*



Eugenio Nicita, left, and Corrado Nicita at their family-run restaurant San Marzano in Rivière-des-Prairies in September.

Corrado Nicita is currently 23 years old, working as a line chef in his family-run Italian restaurant, San Marzano, in Rivière-des-Prairies. This is a success story of a young man achieving his passions by working hard to overcome challenges and striving to excel.

Corrado was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at 4 years old. He attended Leonardo da Vinci Academy elementary school; through differentiated learning, dedicated teachers and a supportive family he was able to flourish and reach his potential. Later, he attended John Grant High School for four years after which he switched to LINKS High School until he graduated at age 21.

His interests always included cooking, which he enjoyed learning in high school as well as at home, often cooking family meals. He enjoys watching *The Food Network* and looking through cooking magazines for new recipes; even telling his mom how she can improve her family recipes. Corrado's internship through the Work-Oriented Training Pathway (WOTP) program at school was working in a butcher shop, where he learned personal and food safety rules and the art of butchery

– skills that he has now transferred to his current job. According to Corrado, he also enjoys “exercising on the treadmill, playing guitar and eating healthy.”

Some challenges he has encountered are difficulty communicating, interacting with peers and self-regulation; however, he learned strategies to better regulate and learn. Now he can better communicate his needs and have a conversation with others.

Upon a recent visit to the restaurant, he greeted a few staff members from LINKS, asked thoughtful questions and made comments to further the conversation. He also expressed that his favourite is the salmon dish and described some of the prep work he takes care of. “I wash and cut vegetables, stuff the calamari and help make the arancini,” he told us.

According to his father, Chef Eugenio Nicita, along with all the food prep, Corrado has recently been added as line cook so that he prepares all the cold starters, such as the salmon tartare and caprese salad. Eugenio explained, “Corrado was ready for the next step. He has the safety knowledge, knife work skills, and he remembers all the steps in his head. I model how to plate the food, and he copies me exactly.” He went on to say that Corrado has even corrected his dad when he forgot an ingredient!

According to his aunt, co-owner Catia Nicita, Corrado asks her for a schedule on the days that he works so that he knows what time to be ready, what needs to be done and when he will finish. In this way, he continues to thrive on structure and routine now as an adult as he did in school.

However, through this work he has learned to be more flexible with schedule changes since restaurant life is filled with the unexpected. Catia explained that he does not like to take breaks, but she convinces him to take one to avoid becoming overtired. “He is extremely motivated to work at the restaurant,” she said, and takes pride in his work, which we saw first-hand when he served our table. Polite, always smiling and charming, he asked us if we were happy with our meal and then said goodbye when his shift was over.

Mom, Madeleine Valerio, is very proud and supports her son's career choice. She said, “Food and baking were always a reinforcer

when he was a child, so this passion has followed him, and he has found a career that he enjoys doing.”

The restaurant was opened by the Nicita family to carry on family traditions, support the community who, in turn, supports the restaurant and especially Corrado; but most importantly, Eugenio shared, “I was motivated to start the restaurant to give Corrado a purpose in life, to create a legacy and have a job forever. He is my personal sous chef.”

This is an inspirational story about a boy who, supported by his family and teachers, has become a man able to fulfill his dream of cooking. He happily goes to work each day, accomplishes his tasks, supports his community and is an incredible role model. Great job, chef! ■

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

Miriam programs ◀ *Cont'd from p. 30*

[them],” she explained. Materials are available for rent at a monthly fee of \$25.

MateriaTech is not only providing resources for neurodiverse individuals, but they provide employment opportunities as well, Vamos said.

“I think a lot of people may be overlooked if they're neuroatypical, not realizing that they have a ton of value,” she shared. As such, Vamos strives to make the hiring process at MateriaTech as inclusive as possible. “There's no reason to not try to hire people who otherwise wouldn't be given opportunities because of discrimination,” she said.

One approach she uses is hiring candidates through EmploymentWorks (a Senneave Family Foundation Initiative working out of Miriam) that equips neurodiverse individuals with essential workforce skills and provides real-world practice.

Vamos explained that individuals are regularly sent from EmploymentWorks to work for a few hours at MateriaTech. She then almost exclusively hires employees from the program.

This approach has been invaluable, said Lina Gharibah, the program coordinator of EmploymentWorks. “MateriaTech has consistently been the top choice for all my participants [...] this is due to the warm welcome from the staff, the structured environment, the valuable skills they gain and the inclusive, open-minded atmosphere.”

Vamos said MateriaTech is a hidden gem in Montreal and hopes to see it reach more and more people, recognizing that the neurodiverse community will be a big part of its growth. ■

For those interested in joining, contact: materiatech@goldlearningcentre.com.



by Elisabeth Prass

Working on respite care and addressing seclusion rooms guidelines

Another school year is upon us, and I would like to wish you and your children an exciting and fruitful year. I have spent the last few months fighting for our children's rights and will continue to do so until they have proper access to all resources they are entitled to receive.

I have also been working closely with respite organizations across the province to ensure that they are able to access the government funding promised to them. In 2023, the government announced \$50 million for respite services over five years, but during the first year, delays in administration meant many organizations were not able to apply for funding, and the unspent money from that year was not carried over.

I know how important respite can be for our families. My son with autism spectrum

disorder, who is 11 years old, has only had access to four weekends of respite since he was first diagnosed, 10 years ago; meaning that my husband and I have only had four weekends to ourselves in this last decade.

Seclusion rooms

At the end of August, I addressed a letter to Minister of Education Bernard Drainville regarding a promise he has failed to fulfil: to release guidelines regarding the proper use of seclusion or withdrawal rooms in the education system. In December 2022, the CAQ rejected an initiative that I put forward asking the government to hold consultations on this issue. That same month Minister Drainville committed that the guidelines would be released in early 2023. It is now Fall 2024, and still nothing has been done.

It is imperative for teachers and educational staff to receive proper training and directives to learn how to appropriately utilize those rooms and understand their purpose. Months later, I have yet to receive a response from the Minister. I vow to follow-up on this issue until the government releases its guidelines and provides training on the suitable use of these rooms.

This June, I was happy to hear that the Minister Responsible for Social Services, Lionel Carmant, made some changes to the administration of the Family Support Program, after I brought several issues to his attention last year, such as the excessive paperwork required and the fact that the program only provides between \$3.75 to \$5.25 per hour for families of special needs children to pay for respite or a babysitter. I don't know about you, but we'd have to go

back decades to find a reliable babysitter for that rate, much less one taking care of our special needs child.

Clearly the CAQ government is completely out of touch with the realities facing families, but I will continue to be your voice so that they make the right decisions for our families.

I would like to wish you a happy and healthy upcoming holiday season and a restful winter break! ■

Elisabeth Prass is member of the National Assembly of Quebec for D'Arcy-McGee and is official opposition critic for Social Services, Mental Health, People Living with a Disability or with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and for the Fight Against Homelessness. She is mom to a wonderful little boy living with ASD.



by Steven Atme

Personal growth through music

This upcoming New Year's Day 2025 will mark 20 years since my father, Elie, brought out a surprise for me and my sisters, Christina and Selina: an electric keyboard. It was my first love and passion, which gave me motivation to create musical magic.

I became self-taught, learning music by ear by listening to different media and music genres and composing pieces. On that very day, I knew what I wanted to do in the future and promised to help people through my music, in the area of creative arts and charity.

Many years have passed now. We've grown as people and increased our knowledge both in education and abilities. From my family to Summit School's original principal Gloria Cherney, then media teacher with experience in theatre/film, Jesse Heffring; (now director of Development at the school), I Can Dream Theatre and McGill Conservatory at an early age, I lived and learned beyond my expectations – with such pure joy and happiness leading to this point and forever more.

After writing 31 pieces, and then listening to them, I feel they show growth in the style, theme, technique and musical phrases of music. It shows both music and

how I have evolved. That's what inspired me to title my new album, *Evolution*, which contains my complete works in chronological order.

On October 16, 2023, I began the project and released the album on March 23, 2024 on streaming platforms and CD. The same day, I organized the launch concert at the Church of All Saints by the Lake in Dorval. I shared with audience members the background story behind each piece before performing it and had a chance to talk with them afterwards. It was a beautiful day and an achievement well-deserved.

There are some days I ask myself, "How did I get here? Is this real?" From having no voice and being recommended to stay in the closet to now, when my voice is heard and out in the world, this speaks high dynamics. Soon to be a 20-year-old promise on New Year's Day, I'll continue speaking for those who don't have a voice through my compositions and various



Steven Atme performs during his concert at the Church of All Saints by the Lake in Dorval on March 23. Photo courtesy of S. Atme

arts. I encourage you all, near and far, to create solutions to become resolutions. At the end, we have our very own evolution revolution. ■

You can purchase Evolution on Spotify, Amazon Music and all streaming platforms worldwide. For CD orders, contact Steven Atme at atmepianosphd@hotmail.com.

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



by *Nick Katalifos*

An update on two exciting projects

I hope the Fall season has been energizing and fulfilling for all students, their families, teachers and school communities at large.

I am happy to bring readers an update on two impactful projects here at the English Montreal School Board (EMSB).

Partnership brings inclusive playground to students

There are so many things that bring me pride in my role as an educator and as director general of the EMSB. The recently inaugurated accessible playground at the Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools, where children of all abilities can play together, is one of them.

Based on the notion that “Every Child Has the Right to Play,” this project fulfilled a pledge that was made by the EMSB soon after the new, state-of-the-art school opened in NDG in 2018. At its previous location on Decarie Blvd., the school’s playground was a gravel pit where only some children could play. The project came to be thanks to the Habilitas Foundation, the CIUSSS West-

Central Montreal and Pierre Boivin and his daughter Catherine Boivin, who co-chaired the fundraising campaign. This serves as a prime example of what can be accomplished when partnerships are developed.

A new housing project

I am also pleased to share the news that we have embarked on a new housing project for neurodiverse adults. In a coordinated effort between the EMSB and Autism House, a building owned by the EMSB will be renovated into apartments, where neurodiverse adults can live independently. The model also combines communal spaces and adapted services to help individuals make the transition towards living autonomously. The building is adjacent to EMSB’s St. Pius X Career Centre on Papineau Ave. in Ahuntsic-Cartierville.

The beauty of this project is that the residence is next door to the Career Centre, providing an amazing opportunity for residents to engage in education, training and work placement opportunities. And it makes use of a building that otherwise would be sitting empty. Hopefully this project will inspire others to put empty buildings to good use.

Patrick Millette of Autism House has provided more details on the project on p. 39 of this issue. Please read more about it, and we’ll be pleased to keep you posted on its development. ■

Nick Katalifos is the director general of the English Montreal School Board. He is a father of two young adults, one of whom is autistic.



by *Joanne Charron*

Artistic expression is open and freeing

I am so happy that this *Inspirations* edition is highlighting art! Art is a holistic and important experience that can be enjoyed by and adapted to all. Whether you are a participant or an observer, art is something that can be felt, touched, heard, seen and even smelled.

Whatever your ability, there is a way to create your internal vision through art. It has endless possibilities, which can be created in any form, expressed in any way. Creating art is also therapeutic for our well-being in so many ways - touching our mind, body and soul.

Art is tactile and so helps with sensory and motor skills. Whether you are just learning or honing your skills, the beauty of art is in its creation. Creations can be made at home

or in an instructional in-class setting, or with today’s technology, online. So many websites and apps are available to help you with your creations whether it be tutorials or adapted tools.

You can join online communities, as well as learn more about art for all abilities. We can also support the artists in our community, for example, the mouth and foot artists. My personal experience with art and my quadriplegic son was just to have fun and see what works for him and what he enjoys most. For his ability, finger painting was a joy, and plasticine was an experience better thrown than sculpted!

I bought him adapted crayons which, with a little help, was fun but he eventually grew out of it. I also purchased a head mount so he could paint with a brush. What he found easier was creating art via the computer with adapted switches, which was a whole new world to creating art.



We continually look for ways that would be fun for him to explore art and that are within his abilities. Everyone is different, but there is something out there for everyone. Art can just be what you want it to be; there is no right or wrong. It’s freedom; it’s inspirational! ■

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.



Selma, left, and Uma Gahd hosting Cabaret Dragcessible, with Brooke Nancekivell, American Sign Language interpreter, and Catherine Langevin-Pépin, Langue des signes québécoise interpreter at the MAI on October 17. Photo: David Wong

Cabaret Dragcessible welcomes diverse performers to the stage

On October 17 and 18, the House of Gahd and the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) joined forces to present Dragcessible, a cabaret-style event that showcased the dazzling talent of local drag queens and kings of all abilities.

The MAI offers programming, audience development and community exchange activities that foster inclusion and offer a different perspective on “we.” Over the years, *Inspirations* has covered several of their shows, to great and memorable review.

Dragcessible was conceptualized by **Claudia Parent**, MAI’s director of Accessibility and Innovative Practices, and hosted and curated by **Selma and Uma Gahd** of the House of Gahd – pillars of the Montreal drag scene for over 10 years. Billed as “two nights to celebrate diversity with audacity,” it shined the spotlight on deaf, autistic and mobility-impaired drag

queens and kings, some experienced and others, emerging artists.

A team of American Sign Language and Langue des signes québécoise interpreters interpreted each act, except those performed by deaf artists who signed their own lyrics. Sensory items such as fidget toys, weighted items, sunglasses and headphones were available, and cabaret-style seating made the room accessible. Tickets were sold on a sliding scale. The sisters applauded the MAI for its easy access, noting the many venues in Montreal that are on the third floor of walk-ups.

Uma explained that “drag is all about breaking the rules.” The sisters invited mobility-impaired performers to participate in the show knowing that the accessibility backstage was not perfect. They worked with the talent to meet their needs, which included installing grab rails and specialty stairs to facilitate entrance onto the stage and having someone backstage to help. “We have to get them here now with everything we can do and then listen to what we can do next time to make it even better,” said Uma.

A rocking experience at Théâtre Outremont

Théâtre Outremont and Autisme Sans Limites (ASL) joined together on October 20 to present an adapted screening of *L’Énergie positive des dieux*. Released in 2021, the documentary chronicles the experiences of four autistic young men who front rock band Astérotypie, writing powerful lyrics through poetry and performing them with emotion, in their own unique style.

Adapted features of the event included a relaxation area outside of the screening room, ease of entering and exiting the theatre as needed, and the room was not completely dark.

A panel discussion that took place on stage following the screening was led by **Marie-Claude Leblanc**, executive director and counsellor at ASL. She was joined by several ASL members who shared their thoughts about the benefits of music, the messages of the film and the adapted features of the event and how they could be improved.



Luka Cruz-Guerrero, Nassourou Ismaël Boulama and Marie-Claude Leblanc after a screening of *L’Énergie positive des dieux* at Théâtre Outremont on October 20.



From left: Author John Lee Clark sharing his thoughts with protactile and ASL interpreters Angel Dalys-Fine and Jordan Goldman at his book launch at the MAI on October 22.

Meeting a protactile advocate

John Lee Clark is a deaf-blind author who recently moved to Montreal from the USA to work on his Ph.D. at Concordia University. Clark was born deaf into an American Sign Language (ASL)-speaking family and was blind by adolescence. He is now an advocate for the protactile movement.

Protactile is an emerging language that was initiated in 2007 by deaf-blind community members. While sign languages relies on visual information, protactile is based on touch and is practiced on the body.

On October 22, the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) hosted the launch of Clark’s latest book, *Touch the Future*. Clark expressed his stories, poems and thoughts using protactile, which was translated live to English by protactile interpreters **Jordan Goldman** and **Angel Dalys-Fine**. It was then translated to ASL through an ASL interpreter and a Langue des signes québécoise-ASL interpreter.

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.

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Federal organization working to instill accessibility standards across Canada by 2040

by *Sue Montgomery*

In 2010, Canada ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and, through its Accessible Canada Act, has committed to removing barriers to accessibility for people with disabilities by 2040.

But the Act, which came into effect in July 2019, only applies to organizations under federal responsibility such as Crown corporations, banks, airlines, railways, roads and marine transportation providers, and the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors. It also applies to the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP and the House of Commons and the Senate, among other government departments.

Accessibility standards are being drawn up by a body created under the Act called Accessibility Standards Canada (ASC).

These standards are developed and revised by technical committees of 12 to 18 experts, a majority of whom have lived experience and who know first-hand the challenges and frustrations of trying to use places and services that aren't accessible.

The common practice of standards design has been to accommodate 75 percent of the population. The aim of ASC is to provide the standards, in the form of technical requirements and equity-based guidelines, for making products, services, programs and facilities accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities.

This is known as “the curb cut effect,” an accessibility feature that benefits more people than it was originally intended for. An actual curb cut (the portion of the curb that is graded down to the level of the street) is intended as a path for wheelchair users. However, it also benefits people pushing strollers, pedestrians with walking aids, cyclists or people carrying heavy packages.

While these standards are voluntary when initially published, ASC encourages every organization, from private business to federal and non-federal organizations, to implement them. The standards would become mandatory for all federal organizations if the minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities chooses to adopt them into regulations.

The standards focus on seven priority areas, including employment, transportation and built environment.

To help provinces and territorial governments get on board, ASC has been working with them as well as with First Nations, Inuit and Métis organizations to standardize accessibility across all Canadian jurisdictions.

So far, it has signed eight memoranda of understanding with six provinces: Alberta (1), Nova Scotia (1), Manitoba (1), Saskatchewan (1), British Columbia (2) and Ontario (2).

“As you can see, we're part of a culture shift seeking to influence change,” said Dino Zuppa, acting chief executive officer, Accessibility Standards Canada. “We're creating standards, funding accessibility research and even sharing our expertise and knowledge free of charge through our website. We're part of a momentum for inclusivity that aims to foster lasting and meaningful change for all Canadians, including people with disabilities.” ■

Share your experiences with accessibility in the Greater Montreal and surrounding areas with us. We're interested in knowing about both negative and positive ones! For a personal opinion, visit the *Inspirations* website to read “The right to accessibility is for all” by Wendy Singer.



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by *Mike Cohen*

Report on Parliament

News about employment and housing

Canada's Minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities, Kamal Khera, recently announced the launch of the Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities. It aims to close the employment gap between persons with disabilities and those without by 2040.

Representing a key action of the Disability Inclusion Action Plan, it contains measures organized around three goals:

1. Individuals. Help them find and maintain good jobs, advance in their careers or become entrepreneurs;

2. Employers. Help them to diversify their workforces by creating inclusive and accessible workplaces; and

3. Enablers. Increase the supply, capacity and reach of individuals and organizations that support disability inclusion and accessibility in employment.

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the Accessible Canada Act coming into force, considered as one of the most significant achievements for disability rights in Canada to date. Khera has allocated \$6.5 million in funding under the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities that will go to seven organizations across Canada. They work with Indigenous, Black and racialized Canadians with disabilities to provide innovative and culturally relevant

supports to help increase access to training and improve employment outcomes for members of these communities facing additional and unique barriers.

“The Employment Strategy is about fairness,” she said in a statement. “This is a plan with concrete actions aimed at strengthening our economy and communities so that all Canadians, regardless of their abilities, can succeed in the job market.”

Sameer Zuberi, the Liberal MP for Pierrefonds-Dollard, serves as the parliamentary secretary to the minister.

Mental health

Ya'ara Saks, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health, states that the government of



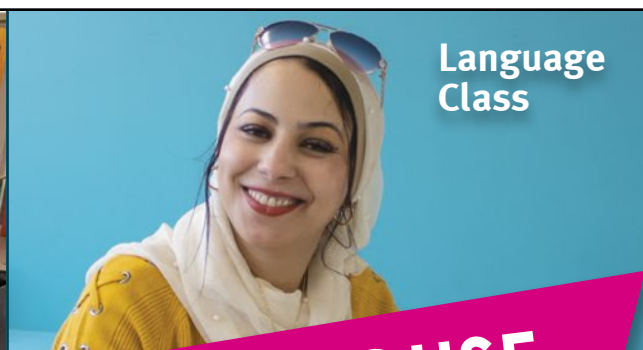
Minister Kamal Khera is seen here with her parliamentary secretary and Pierrefonds-Dollard MP Sameer Zuberi at a meeting earlier this year.

Photo courtesy of the office of Kamal Khera

► *Continued on p. 42*



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La CCHM promet une alimentation saine, l'autonomie et la capacité d'agir des personnes

par *Hatice Zula Avci*

La Cuisine Collective Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (CCHM) est une organisation à vocation sociale qui se distingue par son modèle unique de cuisine collective et d'insertion professionnelle. Depuis sa création, la CCHM s'est engagée à lutter contre l'insécurité alimentaire tout en offrant des opportunités de réinsertion à des personnes souvent marginalisées, ou celles vivant avec des défis mentaux ou des handicaps.

Pourquoi choisir d'être une entreprise d'insertion sociale? Parce qu'à la CCHM, on croit profondément que la dignité de chacun passe par l'inclusion et l'entraide.

En tant qu'entreprise d'insertion, la CCHM accueille des individus de divers horizons, y compris des personnes neurodivergentes et celles faisant face à des difficultés particulières, comme l'autisme. Dans cet organisme, elles trouvent un environnement bienveillant où elles peuvent s'épanouir. L'objectif est de leur offrir une expérience de travail enrichissante, leur permettant de développer des compétences culinaires et sociales tout en favorisant leur intégration dans la société. Comme le souligne le directeur général de la CCHM et de la Fondation de la CCHM, Benoist De Peyrelongue : « Nous croyons en l'équité pour tous. Notre mission est d'ouvrir nos portes et de rappeler que chacun mérite une place légitime dans la société. »

À travers ses ateliers de cuisine collective, ses jardins urbains et la distribution de repas à petit prix, la CCHM crée un

véritable réseau de soutien pour les plus vulnérables. Chaque Noël, elle distribue 140 paniers de réconfort et produit 60 000 repas pour des familles qui, sans elle, pourraient se retrouver sans rien.

Au sein de la cuisine collective, les participants ont l'occasion de préparer des repas sains et accessibles pour eux-mêmes et leurs familles. Mais ce n'est pas qu'une question de nourriture; c'est un lieu de socialisation, de partage et de soutien. Les intervenants jouent un rôle essentiel en interagissant avec les groupes dans un cadre sécurisant, permettant ainsi à chacun de s'exprimer et de se sentir valorisé. ■

Pour plus d'informations, consultez le site lacchm.com.

Hatice Zula Avci étudie à l'École secondaire Henri-Bourassa et souhaite faire carrière en médecine.



Après un début de journée sous la brume, le ciel s'éclaircit pour faire place à une superbe matinée au Marché public de Pointe-aux-Trembles, le 14 septembre. Photo courtoisie de la CCHM

Projet novateur en logement : une lueur d'espoir pour les jeunes adultes autistes au Québec

À Québec, la crise du logement pour les adultes autistes devient critique. Un rapport récent, Un chez-soi dans la communauté, mandaté et réalisé par la Maison de l'autisme, l'Université de Montréal et le RTSA, révèle que 59 % — donc près de 2 personnes sur 3 — des individus autistes ne vivent pas dans la situation résidentielle souhaitée, que ce soit à court, moyen ou long terme. Cette statistique souligne l'urgence de solutions de logement adaptées aux besoins variés des jeunes adultes autistes. Alors que la prévalence de l'autisme augmente, et que bon nombre d'enfants diagnostiqués au cours des 25 dernières années deviennent maintenant adultes, le Québec fait face à un défi croissant pour accueillir cette population.

La Maison de l'autisme, un organisme à but non lucratif, prend les devants pour s'attaquer à ce problème en développant un projet de logement novateur axé sur l'apprentissage expérientiel de la vie autonome. Le projet de logement de l'organisation repose sur la conviction que l'autonomie

s'apprend mieux par la pratique. En plaçant les participants au cœur de leur apprentissage, le programme permet aux jeunes adultes autistes de développer activement leurs fonctions exécutives, leur autonomie et leur indépendance. Cette approche immersive favorise à la fois la confiance et la compétence. L'objectif de cette plateforme de formation transitionnelle est d'aider ces personnes à atteindre une indépendance à long terme, les préparant ainsi à passer vers des solutions de logement permanentes.

En janvier 2023, la Maison de l'autisme et la Commission scolaire English-Montréal ont conclu une entente pour transformer un bâtiment abandonné de 20 000 pieds carrés dans le quartier Ahuntsic de Montréal en un centre de transition pour favoriser l'autonomie. Situé à l'angle des rues Sauvé et Papineau, le bâtiment devrait ouvrir d'ici 2026-2027. Il comprendra 20 appartements, offrant aux résidents des séjours de deux à trois ans.

Le modèle combine des espaces communs, des appartements indépendants et des services adaptés pour créer une plateforme

transitoire vers l'autonomie. Les résidents participeront à des ateliers et événements hebdomadaires pour développer les compétences nécessaires à une vie autonome. À la fin de leur séjour, ils seront mieux préparés à retourner chez eux avec une autonomie nouvelle, à déménager dans leur propre appartement ou à intégrer une résidence spécialisée.

Cette initiative novatrice va bien au-delà du simple logement temporaire, créant un espace d'apprentissage et de développement personnel. Le projet vise à servir de modèle répliquable, pouvant potentiellement répondre à la crise plus large du logement pour les adultes autistes à travers le Québec.

Grâce à une expérience pratique, les personnes autistes peuvent acquérir les compétences et la confiance nécessaires pour vivre de manière plus autonome, gage d'espoir pour un avenir plus prometteur. ■

Pour en savoir plus sur ce projet ou découvrir comment vous pouvez le soutenir, contactez Patrick Millette à patrick@lamaisondelautisme.ca.

par *Patrick Millette et Xavier-Henri Hervé*

Patrick Millette est directeur de la Maison de l'autisme et Xavier-Henri Hervé en est le président.



Le bâtiment actuel au coin de l'avenue Papineau et de la rue Sauriol. Photos courtoisie de la Maison de l'autisme



Un rendu artistique du bâtiment rénové.

Blind Judoka competes at 2024 Paralympics, leads self-defense workshops

by *Randy Pinsky*

Montrealers had one more reason to cheer for Paralympians this past summer, as local athlete and international champion Priscilla Gagné represented Canada in judo at the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games.

This was the third Paralympic Games for Gagné, a trailblazer in para sport, particularly in judo. She competed in the under-57 kg J1 division visually impaired category and placed fifth.

In spite of having no central vision due to retinitis pigmentosa, Gagné has never let being blind stop her ambitions, finding freedom in sport.

Growing up in Sarnia, Ontario, Gagné credits her family for giving her space to experiment as central to becoming the athlete she is.

“My mom was always worried about me getting hurt, and I had to wear knee pads when I biked,” she laughed, “but that never stopped me.”

Her innately competitive personality and self-described “obsessive defiant disorder” has led her to rise to fifth in the world in the women’s 57-kg judo category.

Guided by Olympic and Paralympic coach, Andrzej Sadej, her career quickly accelerated. With her Paralympic debut at the 2016 Rio Games, she became the first Canadian woman to podium at the 2018 Para Judo World Championships. Gagné is a two-time Pan Am Games silver medalist and was Canada’s flag bearer for the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics.

This was the first Paralympic Games in which Canadian medallists would receive financial recognition on par with their Olympic counterparts (see article on p. 40 in our Spring 2024 edition).

In recent years, there has also been a shift in the classification and weight divisions, resulting in Gagné having to go up a category and compete against individuals with some vision. Out of principle against such changes, she opted to not participate in the 2023 Pan Am Games in Chile. “That completely goes backwards and undoes everything we’ve worked so hard to achieve,” she said.

When Gagné is not training, sparring or traveling with her guide dog Zophia, she gives motivational speeches and judo demonstrations. Most recently, she launched a series of self-defense workshops

with CNIB (formerly the Canadian National Institute for the Blind) for Montrealers who are blind or visually impaired.

The workshops are key for working on body posture and assertiveness, as well as how to respond to people who target them as victims or, alternatively, try to impose help.

“In discussing [Priscilla’s] experience in combat sports and interest in helping people with vision loss, I was immediately interested in collaborating with her,” said David Trudel, director of psychosocial programming and community engagement. “[This was especially the case] with her personal and professional experience regarding the challenges encountered by people with visual impairments.”

Accessibility advocate Noah Silletta was one of the participants. Born with hypermobility as well as vision and mobility challenges



Judo Paralympian Priscilla Gagné leads a self-defense workshop for Noah Silletta, right, and other individuals who are blind and partially sighted in fall 2023. Photo courtesy of Radio-Canada

exacerbated by a car accident, the workshops enabled Silletta to feel more confident in their current abilities. “It helps to be with people who understand your situation instead of having to always explain,” said Silletta.

In the 2024 Greatness Moves Us Paralympic video, Gagné advised families with blind children: “Let them get hurt, push them, encourage them – they need to know they are not fragile and figure out how to navigate that. That’s what makes an athlete an athlete, and a child into an adult.” ■

The CNIB is in discussion about a potential series of self-defense courses in January 2025.

Marc-André Fabien excited for what’s to come with the Canadian Paralympic movement

by *Jordan Stoopler*

Montrealer Marc-André Fabien’s involvement with the Paralympic movement dates back over a quarter century. He remembers his first true exposure to para sport in the late 1990s while fundraising for the federal Liberal party.

“The secretary-treasurer of the Liberal party was also involved with the foundation of [a] rehab centre in Montreal,” said Fabien. “There was a Paralympic volleyball tournament at the College Notre-Dame.

They were in need of \$10,000 to finalize the budget. They asked me if I could help, and I said I would try. 24 hours later, I phoned him back and told him ‘I have your \$10,000.’ The rest is history.”

Fabien would go on to serve as a board member of the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC) and, in 2017, was elected President of the CPC, of which he is currently in his second term.

Under his leadership, the CPC has evolved and grown. In January, the new Paralympic Performance Recognition program was announced, offering athletes reaching the

podium financial compensation for their achievements. The initiative, which began at this summer’s Paris 2024 Paralympic Games and will continue in future Games, will see paralympic medallists earning \$20,000 for gold, \$15,000 for silver and \$10,000 for bronze, figures equal to those received by Canadian Olympians.

In a wide-ranging exclusive interview with *Inspirations* last May, Fabien outlined the accomplishments of the CPC, his goals and his then-expectations for the Paralympic Games, held from August 28 to September 8 in Paris, France.

Q: How has the visibility and perception of Canadian Paralympians evolved since you first started your involvement with the CPC in the late 1990s?

A: Clearly, there is a major difference. There is a lot of acknowledgement of what para sport is about. Most Canadians are aware of what the Paralympic movement is. In the late 90s, when I started, nobody knew about it. We owe to our athletes for their determination, their excellence, their sport and human achievements, the awareness that exists now.

► *Continued on p. 46*

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Sasha, le fils d'Emmanuelle Assor, guide ses parents à travers les grottes naturelles de Rio Secreto à Playa del Carmen, au Mexique. Photo courtoisie de E. Assor

Voyager avec un enfant autiste, compliqué mais gratifiant!

par *Emmanuelle Assor*

Vous êtes-vous déjà demandé comment voyager avec un enfant autiste qui n'aime ni le dépaysement, ni le changement et encore moins les imprévus? Comment casser la monotonie du quotidien et ouvrir l'horizon d'enfants qui aiment tant leurs routines? Personnellement, après plusieurs années de renoncement face à ce qui me paraissait un trop grand défi, j'ai décidé que nous allions voyager coûte que coûte. L'envie de revoir ma famille à l'étranger et de retrouver la mer, cette mer qui fait tant de bien à l'âme, était plus forte que toutes mes appréhensions.

Notre premier voyage en avion fut épique. Je pensais avoir préparé mon enfant au fait que nous allions en Floride en lui montrant des photos de l'aéroport, du logement que j'avais choisi et de la plage. J'avais prévu de lui donner des jouets et des collations dans l'avion. J'avais rempli son iPad de jeux adaptés à ses goûts particuliers. J'étais inquiète mais je n'avais aucune idée concrète de ce qui nous attendait! Dès le premier retard dans l'avion, j'ai dû expliquer aux autres passagers que mon fils était autiste et nerveux. À partir de ce moment, la tension est descendue entre nous et les autres passagers.

Je réalise aussi que je n'avais pas considéré toutes les étapes à franchir avant d'arriver à destination. En effet, pour une personne neurotypique, ces étapes se franchissent naturellement même s'il est souvent pénible d'accepter des délais, des douaniers trop zélés, d'être encerclé de gens partout... Mais on se raisonne, on se dit que tout ceci a une fin. Ainsi, j'avais oublié d'expliquer à mon fils que voyager est souvent frustrant et qu'il faut s'armer de patience pour : prendre un taxi vers l'aéroport, s'enregistrer au comptoir de la compagnie aérienne, attendre, passer la sécurité, attendre, monter dans l'avion

sans wifi, attendre que l'avion atterrisse, attendre pour récupérer les bagages, attendre un autre taxi pour aller à l'hôtel... Les sources de stress sont nombreuses et déboussolantes mais comme on dit en anglais : « *Practice makes perfect* ». À force de voyager, mon enfant (maintenant ado) a appris qu'il faut traverser ces étapes, une à la fois, calmement, pour se rendre ailleurs et découvrir le monde.

Pour réussir nos déplacements, je prévois chaque voyage minutieusement : je cherche des vols sans escale avec des horaires raisonnables, des logements avec une cuisine, car il ne mange que certaines choses. Avant de partir, mon mari lui fait des jolis dessins de ce que nous allons faire, je lui montre des photos de l'endroit où nous allons et je prévois des activités qui lui plaisent. En 10 ans, nous avons vu tant d'aquariums et de zoos, que je suis capable de nommer différentes sortes d'animaux et poissons tropicaux! Nous avons visité des musées et des planétariums, des lieux historiques et pris des Big Bus dans plusieurs villes du monde. J'ai découvert que mon fils aime se déplacer d'un endroit à l'autre tant que ça bouge! Il aime les trains, les bateaux, les autobus et les tramways, et il accepte les avions malgré les retards, toujours difficiles à accepter mais inévitables.

En bout de ligne, j'ai dû m'adapter à l'univers de mon enfant et non l'inverse. Avec sa façon unique de voir le monde et de vivre sa vie, il m'a menée dans des sentiers inexplorés où jamais je ne serais allée. L'an dernier, en voyage au Mexique, nous sommes allés visiter une grotte remplie de stalactites. C'était l'idée de mon fils et c'est même lui qui a marché devant mon mari et moi avec sa lampe frontale, nous guidant dans le noir. La leçon à retenir de nos périples? Ne jamais sous-estimer nos enfants, car parfois ce sont eux qui nous montrent le chemin. ■

Report on Parliament ◀ *Cont'd from p. 37*

Canada is committed to helping youth access the mental health care they need, where and when they need it. Last summer, she announced that \$59 million was being provided to the Integrated Youth Services Network. This initiative will link together a web of provincial, territorial and Indigenous networks to create a learning health system, where research evidence, data and youths' lived experiences are used to inform processes, policies and practices to improve services.

Housing

A new monitoring project put forward as a joint effort between the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) and the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate confirmed that people with disabilities are overrepresented in nearly all aspects of inadequate housing and homelessness.

A report from the CHRC entitled "The right to housing for people with disabilities: Monitoring framework" states that the situation is so serious that some people are turning to medical assistance in dying, because they cannot access the basic supports and services they need to live with dignity. Data shows that people with disabilities are: four times more likely to experience homelessness; more likely to become homeless due to violence; more likely to live in unaffordable housing; almost twice as likely to live in core housing need (housing that is unaffordable, in need of repair and with not enough space for the occupants); and often living in homes that do not have the physical aids they need. ■

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

Ottawa Tourism is committed to showcasing accessible travel options

by *Mike Cohen*

Ottawa International Airport (YOW) is RHF Accessibility Certified Gold by the Rick Hansen Foundation. The Ottawa International Airport Authority is committed to providing a safe, dignified and welcoming environment for everyone. Check out ottawatourism.ca and click on “Plan Your Visit – Getting Around” to learn about the different ways of moving around the city to experience and explore all that Ottawa has to offer.

All national museums, as well as the National Arts Centre, are barrier-free, and the Canada Science and Technology Museum is RHF Accessibility Certified Gold. Parliament facilities are accessible to wheelchairs and service animals, and tours with American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ) interpretation can be requested.

Parliament Hill is the most visited Ottawa attraction. Guided tours are free and include the Senate, House of Commons (West Block), East Block and the Parliament building (Centre Block). The “The Immersive Experience,” a self-guided exhibition and media show, is available for the last one. Be sure to reserve your tickets in advance.



| The pool and golf area at the Brookstreet Hotel in Kanata.

As Canada’s capital, Ottawa is the perfect place to experience some of the country’s best attractions, celebrations and flavours in one welcoming city.

Ottawa cultural attractions, museums and galleries invite visitors to experience the best of Canada all in one place. The capital’s premier performing arts venue, the National Arts Centre, presents a full lineup of music, dance and theatre, plus popular touring acts and shows. Just go to their websites to learn more about their accessibility options.

For the second summer in a row, we were fortunate to spend the day at the magnificent Brookstreet Hotel in Kanata. While we stayed with family, we do want to try out the accommodations here on a future visit. We arrived for our day of leisure and checked in at Perspectives Restaurant and a table on the beautiful patio looking out over the full property. Since this was a Sunday, we were fortunate to be able to order from the brunch menu. The heated outdoor saltwater pool and the area surrounding it is truly a slice of paradise. The hotel is now completing a \$11-million renovation project to transform its guestrooms into upscale accommodations.

The entry way to the hotel is fully wheelchair accessible. You can access the outdoor pool via the restaurant and then via a nice pathway. Elevators will take you to the different floors. There is indoor parking and a large lot near the entrance.

There are many wonderful choices for dining out. From my most recent trip, here is my culinary report. The historic York on William (YOW) building, which encompasses Starling Restaurant & Bar and Apothecary Cocktail Lounge, represents a must visit,



An aerial view of Parliament Hill. Photo courtesy of Ottawa Tourism |

and we were thrilled to dine there again. Starling brings you contemporary dishes from timeless classics to personal recipes with a fondness for locality, designed to be loved by one or shared by many. There is patio seating at street level therefore accommodating people in wheelchairs.

The Métropolitain Brasserie in Ottawa, conveniently located next to the Byward Market at 700 Sussex, is just steps away from Parliament Hill. Home to Ottawa’s largest oyster bar, the patio and main entrance are wheelchair accessible. You can also park in the building next door, and an elevator will take you to the dining room. The Metcalfe Hotel in Ottawa marks the Gray Collection’s first hotel property outside Montreal. Located in the heart of downtown Ottawa, just a few blocks from Parliament Hill, the boutique hotel is home to Cocotte, a French-inspired restaurant on the ground level, where we dined. The restaurant is located right off the main lobby in a very pretty ambiance. Both the hotel and restaurant offer accessibility access. ■




The seafood platter at The Métropolitain Brasserie. |



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| The dining room at the new location is fully wheelchair accessible.

The newest Baton Rouge

It has been almost 33 years since the first Baton Rouge Grillhouse & Bar location opened at Carrefour Laval. Fast forward to today and there are now 30 across Quebec, Ontario and the Maritimes. I remain a huge fan of this brand, so it was with great enthusiasm that I got to experience the new Lasalle location at Carrefour Angrignon.

This marks the first Baton Rouge spot in the Sud Ouest. There is plenty of free parking, and the spacious venue seats 120 inside and 30 more on a seasonal terrasse. The entrance is fully wheelchair accessible, and the washrooms are compliant as well. In fact, there are several individual stalls. There is a choice of booths or tables for seating.

Owned by the MTY Group, the Baton Rouge team always seems to be in expansion or full renovation mode. I have written stories over the past two years on the magnificent makeovers at the Decarie and Complexe Desjardins facilities.

The Baton Rouge menu features many tempting choices, such as the trademark BBQ baby back ribs, chicken, the finest AAA and Certified Angus Beef steaks, craveable appetizers, crisp salads, signature burgers and sandwiches, seasonal vegetables, premium seafood, lobster in season and decadent desserts.

I tried the prime rib for the first time (it was excellent), with their delicious fries on the side. A lobster tail as an extra was a nice treat. My friend enjoyed a perfectly grilled rib steak, along with some black tiger shrimps and scallops. We also shared a half rack of their famous ribs. For dessert we opted for the chocolate chip key lime pie and the white chocolate raspberry cheesecake. It was a fabulous meal, enhanced by servers Lena, Flash and Natalie.

They are located at 7077 Newman Blvd.

Info: batonrouge.ca

Enoteca Monza Pizzeria Moderna

It has been six years since Montreal-based restaurant franchisor Foodtastic acquired the Enoteca Monza Pizzeria Moderna chain. There were only four locations at the time. They have since expanded with five more. We recently went for a lovely dinner at the Laval Centropolis location, which underwent extensive renovations through the month of October to mark its 15th anniversary.

There is a large parking lot, with accessible spots and a wheelchair-friendly drop-off zone. Everything is at the same level. Just call in advance to ensure you reserve the proper seating.

We started off with some glasses of wine and shared the focaccia quattro formaggi appetizer and a fabulous burrata. For the main courses, our table went for the margherita pizza, the vitello alla parmigiano and tortellini rosé. After sharing some glasses of limoncello, we ordered some cups of cappuccino and tea and waited for the decadent desserts to arrive: a piece of key lime pie and the dulce chocolate cake.

Info: restaurantmonza.com



| One of Monza's delicious pizzas.



| The Porterhouse Steak.

The return of Moishes

It has been a year and a half now since the iconic Moishes Steakhouse reopened at its new Victoria Square location. Recently, I enjoyed my first meal there, coinciding with the debut of a beautiful terrasse.

The Grandio Group, which also owns Le Cage Brasserie Sportive, Gibbys and a host of other dining establishments, purchased Moishes towards the end of 2018. Less than two years later, the doors to its fabled St. Laurent Blvd. closed in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. On June 14, 2023, it came back to life.

We enjoyed a spectacular seafood tower and shared an equally appetizing 34-ounce porterhouse steak. For dessert we shared a mouth-watering piece of lemon meringue pie.

Valet parking is available for a fee. There is a wide and level entry through the front door, and, unlike the original Moishes on St. Laurent Blvd., the washrooms are accessible.

Info: moishes.ca

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Back in the day, there was almost no television coverage. There was maybe two hours of coverage on CBC on a Saturday to cover the two weeks of the Games. Today, you will have over 100 hours of coverage, some of which is live. On CBC/Radio Canada's website, you will be able to follow any sport you want. We can still do more. They know that. It's the means that are not always there.

Q: What impact will the newly announced Paralympic Performance Recognition program have on Paralympians as they get set for the upcoming Games and beyond?

A: For the athletes, it's additional money that helps for training, competing abroad. Some of the competitions they are attending, be it world championships or World Cups, they have to pay for these trips. If they win medals and have additional money, that will help. More fundamentally, for the athletes, even for those who won't win any medals, it is the symbol; the symbol that Olympians and Paralympians are on an equal footing and that there is no discrepancy between the two. Too often, in the past, the Paralympians were treated like second-class citizens and [perceived] themselves as such. It is extremely important to make sure that there is no distinction between Olympians and Paralympians in how they are treated. It was fundamental to eradicate this symbol of discrepancy.

Q: What has been the reaction and feedback you have received from athletes since this announcement was made in January?

A: It's extremely well-received. They are extremely happy. Even the retired athletes will tell you it is wonderful news. They would have liked that when they were athletes themselves. They are grateful to see that now, this difference of treatment between a Canadian Olympic and Paralympic medalist does not exist anymore.

Q: You also recently unveiled a 10-year strategic plan for the CPC. What are the main takeaways from that report?

A: What was important was to state that we are a two-fold organization. Yes, we are about high-performance and excellence in sport, but we are also an organization that, through sport, wants to change mindsets and make our country more inclusive for

people with disabilities. Our athletes, when they are at the top of the podium, are the greatest athletes in the world, but, as soon as they step down from the podium, they are confronted on a daily basis with their disability. Even though Canada is a leading country for inclusion, equality and diversity, we still have a lot of progress to make. Some of our athletes have very heavy disabilities. Every day is a challenge for them.

Q: When you first took on the presidency of the CPC in 2017, you mentioned one of your goals was to bring and organize international para sport events on Canadian soil. Are you satisfied with what you have achieved thus far in that regard?

A: We still have a lot of work to do. As a country, we can welcome more international events. That is excellent for our athletes because it allows them to compete against the best in the world and be even better on the international scene. At the same time, it gives more visibility for para sport because it creates more interest on the part of the public. We could be able to welcome more international activities, but we don't necessarily have the funds to do it. As soon as we will have more financial flexibility, we will try to support our sport federations in welcoming international events.

Q: You also have talked about the importance of developing para sport at the grassroots level. Why is this component so important to you and what can be done to further promote para sport amongst youngsters in Canada?

A: We are still surprised to see young athletes with disabilities unaware they can participate in sports at a competitive level through the Paralympic movement. We need to reach out to these young boys and girls that have a disability and want to do sports. We will try to increase the awareness among Canadian people. Those television broadcasts are so important because you have young [people] watching who realize they can do that too. You need role models that coincide with who you are when you have a disability. When they see other athletes with disabilities, this is a signal that they can do it. There is no better reinsertion in society and in life for a human being with a disability than through sport. It gives back your self-esteem, and this is fundamental. One of the goals we have to work on is to increase the

awareness of the Paralympic movement within Canadian society and to get more young people involved in sports. It doesn't necessarily mean to reach the Paralympic level, but to at least have access to sport and get involved in sport.

Q: What are you most looking forward to about the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games this summer?

A: We are excited about the fact that we are coming back to normal Games. Tokyo and Beijing were without spectators because of Covid-19. There were no friends, family or fans in the stands. I think the athletes have suffered from that. The Paris Games are going to be a return to these normal Games and be successful in historical venues. The French organizing committee, since the beginning, have treated Olympians and Paralympians on the same footing. The best example is the logo. For the first time, you have the same logo for both the Olympics and Paralympics. They have created that will of making sure that both are treated the same way. ■



Marc-André Fabien of the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC). Photo courtesy of the CPC



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