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Fall 2025 - Winter 2026 / Automne 2025 - Hiver 2026

INSPIRATIONS

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



THE POWER OF
CONNECTION

THE ANTIDOTE TO TOXIC
ACHIEVEMENT:
MATTERING

LUCA 'LAZYLEGZ' PATUELLI
EXPLORES 'DANCING
LIKE YOURSELF'

Meagan Hawes: "Don't be afraid to try something new." (p. 32).
Photo: Thomas Hawes



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Editor's message

The planning for the Fall/Winter edition starts in the summer, and when September arrives, we get swept up in the flurry of fresh starts that mark the beginning of every school year. Among all the good story ideas that come our way, we try and capture the ones that will bring new perspectives and information for our readers.

In this edition, we feature articles relating to the new Social Participation Program being offered in adult education centres. You can learn about it from both the standpoint of educational professionals (p. 36) and from several teachers, who are putting it into practice (p. 29).

We are thrilled to continue our series called “A personal account” – a column dedicated to someone new in each edition, who has been invited to write something about themselves. In this edition, Meagan Hawes shares how writing and song are important to her.

A special section in this edition focuses on connections, and we hope you enjoy reading about two sets of people and their special bonds. Also included is a column on the topic from a new contributor this edition, Jamie Quinn, who is educational consultant, Sexuality Education with the English Montreal School Board.

You will also find articles about the power of dance for special needs children, photography for teens and a piece in the mental health and well-being section written by our regular contributor Janet Silverstone Perlis that focuses on “mattering.”

Please keep your story ideas coming, and we'll see you back in the Spring!

– Kristin McNeill

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



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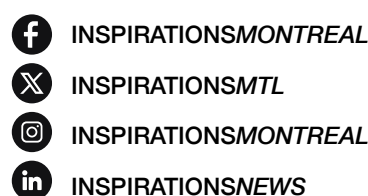
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Inspirations on social media



A son's hidden musical talents

by *Lorri Benedik*

“My son David [Cytryniak] was an easy baby; super smiley and gorgeous,” said Esther Brzezinski. “His sister Sarah, almost three years older, adored her brother and helped care for him.”

Brzezinski did not perceive anything unusual in her son's first year. He had even begun to say a few words. This changed after Cytryniak had a high fever. Brzezinski and her husband Howard were out for dinner when she got a call from her mom who was babysitting. They rushed home to find him feverish and disoriented. A cool bath helped. After that day they noticed a change; Cytryniak was less joyful and stopped speaking. They were referred to the Montreal Children's Hospital's developmental clinic.

“At 18 months they told us he had delays, including language,” said Brzezinski. “We had sessions with a speech therapist who taught me exercises to help get him talking.” He improved slowly. At age 2, the diagnosis was Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). “I didn't know what it meant,” Brzezinski said. “I accepted it, to a degree, but was determined to cure my son.” (PDD-NOS is now categorized as an autism spectrum disorder.)

When Cytryniak was 4, Brzezinski's father clipped an article from the newspaper about a computer program developed at Rutgers University, which could enhance the brain's ability to acquire language. Using this program, Cytryniak's speech improved greatly. By the time he started elementary school, his language skills were age-appropriate. But he could not sit still in class and was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.



Esther Brzezinski listens to her son David Cytryniak play the guitar in their home, September 27.
Photo: Andreas Kurz

Brzezinski moved him to Summit School where she felt they could tackle curriculum at a slower pace. When it was time for high school, they got Cytryniak into Vanguard School, which is primarily for kids with learning disabilities. He attended for a while but it did not work out; he was teased and bullied.

Leaving Vanguard coincided with Brzezinski and her husband separating. “We did not realize at the time that David had become depressed,” said Brzezinski. “He stopped eating and had difficulty sleeping.” Their pediatrician urged them to take him to emergency at The Children's. He was assessed and kept in the psychiatric ward for three days. They sent him home with a diagnosis of depression and anxiety. He was prescribed two medications and was enrolled in a six-week follow-up program.

“I was actually relieved with the diagnosis as it could have been something much harder to treat,” she said. “We are grateful that he responded well to the medications.” Around this time Cytryniak asked for guitar lessons. He spent long hours in his room, practicing.

On September 13, 2006, 18-year-old Sarah was attending Dawson College when a gunman entered the school and began shooting. She was in a classroom close by, heard the shots and hid under a table. She called her mom to tell her what was happening – then the phone went dead. “I was absolutely terrified and did not know what to do,” Brzezinski said. Cytryniak was worried and disappeared into his room. When his sister was safely home, he emerged and performed a song he had written called “Innocence Lost on a Wednesday.” “It was so beautiful,” said Brzezinski. “We had no idea he could write and sing.”

Cytryniak has continued to focus on music. He has four original songs on Spotify and in YouTube videos under the name David Shawn.

Now in her sixties, Brzezinski has found her calling as well, as an actor. She took classes at MSOPA (Montreal School of Performing Arts) and has appeared in commercials and films. During the Covid-19 pandemic shut-down, she created a TikTok video about ageism that went viral. She hosts a podcast and has become a social media influencer with her brand, “Age is not my cage.” ■

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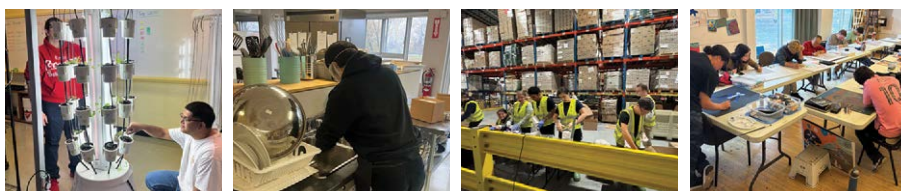
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Renforcer les communautés francophones autistes au Canada

par Michèle L. Hébert

Différentes opinions existent sur la façon de parler de l'autisme. Malgré l'engagement du Canada envers le bilinguisme français-anglais et la Stratégie pour l'autisme au Canada subventionnée par le gouvernement fédéral, les autistes francophones se heurtent souvent à des obstacles à l'emploi et aux services, aggravés par les écarts linguistiques. Les personnes parlant une langue minoritaire subissent plus de préjugés que les personnes parlant la langue majoritaire d'une région. Puis, un langage axé sur l'identité (« personne autiste ») est généralement privilégié, donc la déconnexion s'accroît. Le français, une des deux langues officielles au Canada, reste une part essentielle et culturelle de l'identité des autistes francophones, même en contexte minoritaire.

En 2024, l'Alliance canadienne de l'autisme a reçu une subvention du gouvernement fédéral pour amplifier une action continue à unir les voix francophones de l'autisme par le développement d'un cadre avec et pour le secteur autiste à travers le Canada. La vision ultime comprend l'inclusion et la défense des politiques d'équité inclusives pour toutes communautés au Canada. L'équipe et les membres du Comité de consultation francophone à l'Alliance ont pour double objectif d'unir les voix francophones et de renforcer la capacité des organismes en autisme au Canada. Plutôt que de nous concentrer sur les barrières, nous nous intéressons à ce qui facilite l'inclusion et l'équité, particulièrement en situation de minorité francophone. Cette initiative mise sur la recherche et l'engagement public pour avancer l'atteinte du double objectif.

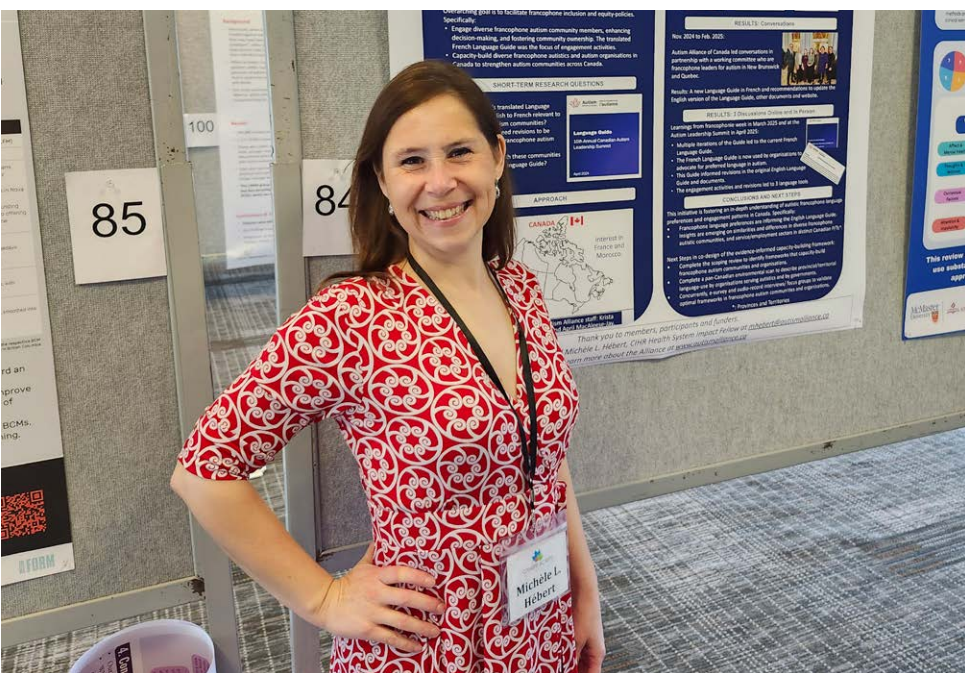
Trois groupes francophones/francophiles (les personnes défenseuses de droits et ayant une expérience vécue, les prestataires de services et les leaders) participent à une étude exploratoire pour identifier les facteurs qui renforcent la capacité des

communautés francophones autistes. Une revue de la littérature révèle une variété de facilitateurs clés, selon la mission ou les programmes de chaque article. Des conversations suivront pour décrire et valider les facilitateurs propres à chaque organisme.

L'Alliance a élaboré trois nouveaux guides bilingues qui soulignent le langage préféré et potentiellement offensant en autisme. Le guide principal a été coconstruit avec 206 personnes participantes. Ces documents sont maintenant largement adoptés à travers le Canada. « Ce type d'inclusion est ce que nous voulons voir davantage, dans les cercles de recherche et de communauté », résume une participante. Une autre personne, qui habite à l'extérieur du Canada, souligne la pertinence internationale de notre initiative : « Le fait que ce sujet intéresse au-delà du Canada – cela démontre à quel point la communauté francophone a besoin de ce travail. »

Plusieurs organismes et leaders adaptent déjà leurs communications en conséquence. Notamment, depuis le lancement de nos activités, des participants nous disent qu'ils emploient un langage préféré par des mises à jour dans des documents-guide diagnostiques en autisme, des sites web, et sur les réseaux sociaux. Une évaluation en cours d'organismes œuvrant auprès des autistes et des gouvernements dotés de stratégies sur l'autisme, montre que l'utilisation du français et d'un langage préféré est plus présente dans les milieux majoritairement francophones, alors qu'elle est encore rare dans les régions anglophones. Ces forces pourraient inspirer le renforcement des capacités dans les communautés majoritairement anglophones au Canada.

Enfin, nous lançons une série d'assemblées francophones, en ligne et en présentiel, dans plusieurs régions au Canada de septembre 2025 à juin 2026. De plus, le 12e



Michèle L. Hébert lors d'une présentation par affiche sur l'initiative francophone en mai.
Photo courtoisie de ML Hébert

Sommet canadien sur l'autisme revient du 13 au 16 avril 2026 à Ottawa.

Les résultats de ces initiatives éclaireront un cadre de renforcement des capacités, tant au niveau organisationnel que politique, pour soutenir une approche proactive qui permettra aux communautés de l'autisme de s'approprier et d'implanter un changement durable. ■

Info: <https://autismalliance.ca/fr>
Michèle L. Hébert, PhD., ergothérapeute et chercheuse postdoctorante en impact sur le système de santé des IRSC à l'Alliance et l'Université de l'Alberta, est la fondatrice et présidente-bénévole de Buds in Bloom/ Bourgeons en Éclat, œuvre de bienfaisance pour les familles d'enfants neurodivers.

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Difference Makers challenge the stigma of learning disabilities

by *Randy Pinsky*

What do actor Keanu Reeves, singer Cher and Olympic gymnast Simone Biles have in common? They all have learning disabilities yet have gone on to extremely successful careers.

The Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities (MCLD) believes that with the proper support, anyone can achieve their goals; a mission which guides their many innovative programs.

In recognition of their more than half-century commitment to supporting those with learning disabilities (LD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the MCLD is this edition's recipient of the Simon Chang Difference Maker Award.

It is this dedication to Montreal families that led Nick Katalifos, director general

of the English Montreal School Board, to nominate the MCLD for this recognition. "I'm very happy that the award is going to an organization that is highly deserving of this honour," he said. "The Centre does wonderful work supporting children with learning difficulties and offers encouragement to our community as whole."

"We are so moved and honored," said Pam Wener, MCLD vice-president.

Originally called the Quebec Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, in the 1960s, the organization developed from a group of committed parents whose children were struggling in school. Learning disabilities were not well understood at the time, but through consistent petitioning, the families were able to get the help they required.

In 2014, the organization came into its own as the Montreal Centre for Learning

Disabilities and is now a registered charity, governed by a board of nine volunteer members. An annual \$30 membership provides individuals and families with access to all of its programs, which are fee-based. The parent/adult ADHD support groups require membership; however, the service is free.

In addition to parent coaching, the MCLD offers the AQUA KIDS Program, the Life Skills Coaching Program and the Monthly Adult LD & ADHD Support Group at their location at the Queen Elizabeth Health Complex in NDG.

According to The Learning Disability Association of Canada (LDAC), LDs impact not just learning but also everyday functioning due to "impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning." In fact, according to LDAC, one in 10 Canadians has a learning disability. This can include dyslexia, visual tracking and executive functioning. LDs can also co-exist with ADHD, exacerbating difficulties with focus and retention.

When asked about her involvement in the organization, Wener related that she went to get support and information about dyslexia because her daughter was being bullied for it, and she wanted "to ensure that she would be successful in life."

Wener also described discovering that she herself had a learning disability as an adult. It was after hearing the speaker's description of what it is like to be married to a person with attention deficit disorder during a presentation that she said "hey, that sounds like me." This epiphany of finally understanding why she did things a certain way or why she was always laboring over particular tasks is one she shares with

other adults who have also had to develop coping strategies to perform academically or professionally.

MCLD funds initiatives at the English Montreal School Board's Before and After School Enrichment program. "Their support is critical," said its program development officer in Environmental Education, Melina Trimarchi.

Having ADHD herself, she connects to the students; "That's just how my brain works: there are many types of intelligence and more than one way to do things."

Another of the MCLD's peer-led initiatives is the Ambassador Program. Children, teens and adults get public speaking training and present their experiences at schools and conferences, working to sensitize the public about learning disabilities. From struggling in school to excelling in post-secondary programs and careers, the ambassadors are testimonies of what can be achieved with the proper accommodations.

Breanna Pallante is one such ambassador. An advocate for speaking out, she said, "Growing up, I realized nothing would change if I was silent, so I have always been open about having an LD."

She is also a passionate promoter of adapted technology, recognizing the impact it has had in facilitating her life. Whereas in the past, programs were out of reach for many people, she observed that adapted technologies are increasingly more mainstream, particularly in Apple devices.

One of Pallante's latest involvements is co-leading the LD+ADHD Social Club pilot project at Dawson College. Though the group just started in September, it has been well-received, she said.



Simon Chang opened up his atelier on Chabanel St. on November 12 to celebrate this edition's Difference Makers: The Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities (MCLD). From left: Sana Nakhleh, Breanna Pallante, Simon Chang, Barb Bobrow, Pam Wener, Christopher Simeone, Amanda Alfaro, Nancy Feddersen and Nick Katalifos. Photo: Wendy Singer

▶ Continued on p. 9

Celebrating five years of inspiration and change with Simon Chang

by Wendy Singer

When Simon Chang's business consultant Faye Swift reached out to Inspirations six years ago, we were curious to know why a renowned Canadian fashion designer would be interested in our work. When we met Chang, we discovered that we shared the same vision, and learned of the impact that his foundation, the Simon Chang Foundation for Change, was making in our community.



From left: Ralph Odone, Liam Boucher, Simon Chang, Zachary Kruse and Josh Cunningham filming Chang's A to Z video at Chang's atelier on January 26, 2023.

Photo: Etienne Béland for Pickle Creative Agency

In the first article that we featured about Chang (Fall 2020/Winter 2021), he said, "I was compelled to help, to do something different, creative; and that's why we started the Simon Chang Foundation for Change. We can make a difference by doing very personal things." That article describes the Foundation's Arc of Life, which supports causes from birth to senior years. Inspirations fits right in the middle.

Five years later, the Simon Chang Foundation for Change remains our most devoted supporter, showing how creativity paired with compassion can brighten entire communities. And our readers agree! Our readership surveys show that stories about Chang are among the most read and anticipated pieces in the publication.

We have enjoyed many collaborations over our five years together, some small, others grand, all impactful. In the spring of 2022, for example, Chang acted as guest fashion advisor for the Mackay Centre School's Fun for All Fashion Show. This initiative was spearheaded by reverse integration student Bella Flanz, whose mission was to make fun fashion accessible to her Cycle 3 classmates. In the months leading up to the show, Chang motivated the models to use fashion as a tool to share their own stories. "I told them to take chances and create something new with their own vision. There is no wrong way to be creative."

On June 9, 2022, Mackay students took to the runway as Chang cheered them on. "In our society today, there is very much a sea of sameness. In this show, each student made their own individual statement," he said.

"Live an authentic life and make everything very special for yourself or those you care for. I don't want to know what you want to be, I want to know what you love to do. Don't get pigeonholed by titles and labels. Show others how capable you are in what you like to do."
- Simon Chang

Chang's message, inspired by his own life experiences, carries through with every interaction, whether it is leading a painting on jeans workshop at L.I.N.K.S. High School or filming his motivational video A to Z. (The video was filmed by students in Summit School's TECC Video Model Productions program in January 2023).

Early on in our partnership, inspired by Chang's outlook and perseverance in life, we created the Simon Chang Difference Maker award, recognizing individuals who demonstrate exceptional commitment within the special needs community. Recipients of the award often have a synergy in drive and creativity akin to that of Chang.

The Simon Chang Foundation for Change has done far more than provide financial support to Inspirations. They've helped us create experiences that celebrate individuality, community and ability. Chang and Swift's example continues to inspire our team, our readers and the broader commu-



Simon Chang showing one of his sketches to students at L.I.N.K.S. on June 9, 2023.

nity, to dream bigger and to act with heart. Their early belief in *Inspirations* set the stage for everything that followed, and for that, we will always be grateful.

Simon Chang continues to create. Stay tuned to read about exciting developments in our Spring edition!

Info: A to Z with Simon Chang is available for viewing on YouTube.

Wendy Singer is the managing editor of Inspirations.



Cynthia Yee, left, and Natalina Melillo, right, were recognized as the Simon Chang Difference Makers at Parkdale Elementary School on November 2, 2022. This duo created a sensory bin project that benefited their students and the whole school.

◀ Cont'd from p. 8

Simon Chang was delighted to meet the people that so passionately contribute their time to make the MCLD what it is today, including president, Sana Nakhleh and the volunteer board members. "I congratulate the MCLD on all of the programming they do for their members, and all the families that they help. I am impressed by the amazing group of volunteers who, in such caring and innovative ways, are committed to helping those with LDs."

Info: ldmontreal.ca.

Nominate your Difference Maker at info@inspirationsnews.com.



The power of connection

Erin and Gift: A love for each other and community

by **Sue Montgomery**

Not only are Erin and Gift Tshuma an inter-racial couple, they are also inter-abled.

On their first date, Gift, who was born in Zimbabwe with a muscular disorder, thought it would be funny to take his wife-to-be to a vegan sushi restaurant to see if she could feed him with chopsticks.

Gift, who has limited use of his arms, said he'd normally never go out to eat on a first date.

But Erin, who he had met online, was different, and within six months, the two were married in a civil ceremony in a February snowstorm in Ottawa.

Gift, 35, moved from Montreal to Toronto, where they both work remotely. "I was nervous," said Erin, 38, of that first date. "Sometimes I can barely feed myself with chopsticks, how am I going to feed someone else?"

The two did couples' therapy before they got married to discuss interpersonal relations. Gift, who moves with a motorized wheelchair, needs caregiving for day-to-day routines like showering, getting dressed and eating.

He has a limited number of hours of caregiving provided by the Ontario government, but it doesn't necessarily address all their needs. So, a lot falls on Erin's shoulders, something Gift fears could lead to burnout.

"When caregivers don't show up and Erin has plans already, that interrupts her social life or her work," he said. "I rely on physical care, and everything has to be planned out by the hour."

While Erin said it's challenging for her to maintain a home for two people, she's always been a caregiver in one form or another, whether it be volunteering at a

therapeutic pool in a hospital or working as a personal support worker.

"It was always kind of part of me, so none of my friends were surprised," she said of their marriage.

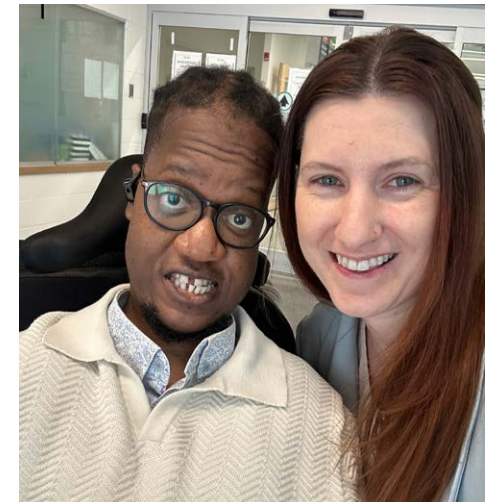
"Gift is just a super compassionate, caring person who's very respectful and cares about other people, so all my friends thought he was a wonderful person."

But like every couple, they get angry or frustrated and end up hashing it out.

"I think people don't understand that and will say 'you can't be mad at him, he has a disability.'"

"And I say, 'he's my husband and if he does something annoying, I'm going to tell him,'" Erin said.

They have wildly different interests - Erin loves the outdoors and camping, while Gift



Gift, left, and Erin Tshuma at a speaking engagement at Mackay Centre School in the spring of 2025. Photo courtesy of G. Tshuma

is terrified of insects. He is a car fanatic, even though he doesn't drive; Erin hates anything to do with vehicles.

"But we agree on the fact [that] we love people and love engaging in our community," Erin said. ■

Brad and Dan: In business, in friendship

by **Randy Pinsky**



This 'self-eye' photo was taken using Heaven's eye-tracking technology using his new PCEye 5 tracker from Tobii Dynavox. Photo courtesy of All Access Life

It's not everyone who can say they are in a business partnership with their best friend.

Yet that is the case for Brad Heaven and Dan O'Connor from All Access Life. From winning awards like the 2018 OSEntrepreneur regional business competition, and most recently, being chosen to be on the first ever *Forbes* Accessibility 100 and then invited to speak at Cannes Lions Festival in France on a *Forbes* panel discussion on accessibility, Heaven and O'Connor are an unstoppable team.

The pair first met in 2010 when O'Connor applied to be an aide at John Rennie High School (Lester B. Pearson School Board). Though Heaven is non-verbal and has dyskinetic cerebral palsy, "I never let it hold me back," he shared in the All Access Life promo video, communicating through an eye-tracking and speech-generating device.

O'Connor said, "I'm always on the hunt for assistive technology options to help Brad live life to the fullest." In realizing there was no one centralizing site, they decided to fill that niche - enter All Access Life. The non-profit "one-stop shop," as described by Heaven, was launched in 2019, featuring reviews of items ranging from adapted utensils to weighted vests for various forms of disability.

They rigged up a system so that every time they got a new subscriber, a light would go off. At first, there was only the occasional flicker - until the day they reviewed the Xbox Adaptive Controller for gamers with limited mobility. "It was suddenly like a disco!" said O'Connor.

When they are not strutting their stuff on the award red carpet (they also won Inspirations' inaugural Simon Chang Difference Maker Award in 2020), Heaven and O'Connor promote their work through

speaking engagements and running marathons, including one on World Cerebral Palsy Day. Sporting their "No Limits" merchandise, Heaven walks the final two kilometers in a gait trainer.

"We bring out the best in each other," reflected O'Connor. "Most people assume I'm helping Brad, but he helps me just as much, if not more."

They share the frustration of individuals only talking to O'Connor or speaking louder and slower to Heaven. "People think just because I'm not verbal that I can't understand," said Heaven. "I hate being treated like a child." If someone asks O'Connor what Heaven would like to order, he requests that they ask him directly.

Together, the All Access Life team is empowering others and shattering assumptions about abilities. "It's us against the world!" said Heaven. ■

Guest speaker shares relationship advice for neurodiverse adults at Chabad talk

by *Randy Pinsky*

“There’s a certain magic to human connection,” shared Rabbi Yisroel Bernath at an online fireside chat entitled “Secrets to Love and Friendship for Neurodiverse Singles.” It was hosted by Chabad NDG in February 2025. “It gives meaning and hope to our lives, but navigating relationships can be complicated – especially if you don’t understand the rules.”

Bernath was joined by California-based friendship and dating coach Jeremy Hamburg, founder of My Best Social Life, and his wife Ilana Hamburg, its educational director. The organization guides members of the neurodiverse community in building meaningful connections.

When asked what brought them to the event, one participant wrote, “I have Aspergers. People pick up on it and are turned off by that. They don’t want to take the chance to understand me.” This sentiment was echoed by others who added they struggle with small talk and social anxiety.

Jeremy reflected that many of their clients have difficulty meeting others. Social conventions can be bewildering; individuals stray from the expected script, and nuances can be missed or misinterpreted. Bernath, locally known as Montreal’s Love

Rabbi, shared a story of a dating mishap: A neurodiverse individual emailed a woman his calendar to “book” a date. “It was very logical and timesaving on his end,” he observed, “but ran afoul of a social norm he was probably unaware of.”

While not neurodiverse themselves, on their website, Jeremy and Ilana say they have developed a finesse in “decoding social situations.”

One trick they endorse for meeting others and keeping a conversation going is building up a “mental library” of interesting anecdotes as opposed to factual responses. “Answering literally shuts down the dialogue, and it becomes more of an uncomfortable interview,” explained Jeremy. A well-stocked mental library can ease the stress of spontaneity.

In spite of the myriad of dating apps available, Jeremy observed how loneliness is at an all-time high. “Everyone thought online dating was going to be the answer for neurodiverse people. ‘I don’t have to make eye contact! I get to write the questions and answers!’” However, he personally does not advocate using them due to the endless hidden social rules. Instead, he advises, “Go out in the real world and be the best version of yourself.”

My Best Social Life does not try to conform neurodiverse individuals into mainstream societal expectations. Instead, it seeks to share “secrets that transform autism and neurodivergence into an advantage so you can quickly make friends, land dates and... live the social life you deserve.” ■

Info: <https://mybestsociallife.com>.

Cultivating meaningful connections starts with yourself

by *Jamie Quinn*

In today’s fast-paced society, it can be easy to overlook the importance of being truly comfortable with our own selves. Although, when we do accept who we are – physically, emotionally and mentally – we unlock a powerful sense of well-being that influences every aspect of our lives. This self-acceptance is also the secret to making meaningful connections with others.

When we show up authentically, we create space for others to do the same. In learning to embrace ourselves, we naturally begin to attract others into relationships that are rooted in mutual respect, understanding and genuine care.

As American author, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou said, “You alone are enough. You have nothing to prove to anyone.” Self-acceptance begins with acknowledging our unique qualities, strengths and even our challenges. For some, this may mean accepting a body that doesn’t fit society’s beauty standards or

learning to navigate life with a physical or mental challenge. Whatever the situation, feeling at ease in our own skin allows us to live fully and confidently. When we let go of comparisons to others and begin to truly value who we are, confidence begins to grow from within.

Practicing self-care doesn’t just stay within us; it radiates outward. People who feel good about themselves are often better equipped to build healthy relationships. Friendships can grow when individuals are secure enough to celebrate each other’s successes rather than view them as threats. Romantic relationships can flourish when partners bring certainty rather than look for validation from one another. Ultimately, by prioritizing ourselves, we create a strong foundation for deeper, more meaningful connections with others, and relationships rooted in trust.

For individuals with diverse physical or mental abilities, the path to self-acceptance can be especially powerful and transforma-

tive. As society becomes more welcoming and inclusive, it begins to truly celebrate all forms of diversity, and real change can happen. By focusing on strengths and embracing individuality rather than fixing perceived limitations, people build resilience, self-love and lasting confidence. As model, speaker, and Crohn’s and ostomy advocate Sara Levitt puts it, “My biggest fear became my greatest blessing.” This sense of empowerment not only deepens relationships but also challenges outdated stereotypes, reminding the world that a full, vibrant life looks different for everyone, and that diversity is something to be celebrated! ■

Jamie Quinn is a Sexuality Education educational consultant with the English Montreal School Board.



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Walking the catwalk toward better mental health

by *Stuart Chappell*

Our self-esteem is deeply connected to our state of mind and well-being. When we feel confident, we face the world with optimism and courage; when self-doubt creeps in, anxiety and fear can hold us back. On September 26, Wagar Adult Education's Socio-Vocational Integration (SVI) program invited neurodivergent learners to take part in "The Job-Interview Catwalk." Held in the school auditorium, the activity offered a lighthearted yet powerful opportunity for students to build confidence.

As part of the SVI program, participants walked a "runway," greeted a teacher with a handshake and introduced themselves. These were simple actions that demanded immense bravery for many. Some students expressed acute anxiety and fear at the thought of standing before their peers. Yet,

one by one, they pushed past uncertainty and chose courage. Nervous smiles soon became those of genuine pride as students took ownership of their moment. The applause that filled the room wasn't just for poise or presentation – it was to celebrate perseverance, growth and self-belief.

The event blended fun with purpose, offering a supportive space to practice interview skills while fostering resilience and self-worth. By confronting fear and challenging self-doubt, students learned that confidence doesn't come from perfection – it grows from small, supported moments where courage meets compassion. ■

Stuart Chappell is a Socio-Vocational Integration teacher at Wagar Adult Education Centre.



The winners of Wagar's Job Interview Catwalk, were from left: Fiaz Khalid, Wasim Ramadan, teacher Stuart Chappell, Domenic Morency and Arif Islam in the Wagar Adult Education Centre auditorium on September 26. Photo: Manjot Bains

Daily yoga prepares Peter Hall students for the day

by *Corine Tran*

As a physiotherapist, I'm often asked by teachers how to bring adapted yoga into their classrooms. I've seen firsthand how intentional movement helps children, but I wanted a program that was evidence-based and truly adaptable to our students' needs. That's when I came across the Get Ready Project (formerly Get Ready to Learn), a school-based yoga program designed for exactly this purpose.

The Get Ready Project is a school-based yoga program that is practiced daily in the classroom during the morning routine in order to prepare students and staff for the day. It uses guided videos, with classroom staff demonstrating the movements and following specific guidelines to keep the routine consistent. The guided videos are selected following the level of the students in the classroom, and the program is easy to integrate into the routine.

Together with my occupational therapist colleague, we completed the training to become program facilitators. We launched our pilot project at the elementary campus with three teachers from classrooms with students of varying levels of understanding, physical abilities and participation. The teachers received the one-day training to be able to lead the Get Ready Project within their class under our support. Challenges came up, of course, but soon, the students were requesting their daily sessions. Staff also began to look forward to this quiet, calming way to start the day.

Just four months after the first implementation of the program in a classroom, the results were striking. Students followed routines more smoothly and knew what was expected. They stayed quiet and calm on their mats or chairs, imitated the movements to the best of their abilities but without pressure, sang back during the "Circle of Song," and even helped set up and clean up.

The teachers and program facilitators, along with other adults implicated with these classrooms, noted multiple positive changes in the students. As a physiotherapist, I was hoping for improvements in the students' motor imitation, body awareness, motor planning and postural control. However, I was amazed by how what I thought was a simple movement activity ended up having benefits far beyond physical skills. Teachers reported better regulation, attention, ability to stay in one place, engagement and even communication.

My hope is that the Get Ready Project can be implemented in additional classrooms of all types of clientele throughout Peter Hall School. I feel that this program has the potential to create lasting, positive change. ■

Info: thegetreadyproject.com.

Corine Tran is a physiotherapist at Peter Hall School.

Karaoke a hit at Peter Hall



In September, Peter Hall School student Kailee-Laura, left, shone on stage during one of the school's several karaoke sessions organized by music therapist, Kathryn Komorek, right. The school describes it as an activity that builds the confidence of their students, develops their communication skills and nurtures their creativity.

Photo courtesy of Peter Hall School

The antidote to ‘toxic achievement:’ Mattering

by Janet Silverstone Perlis

Mattering is defined as feeling valued and visible without conditions. Research shows that resilience – the ability to bounce back from adversity – and the development of confidence are strengthened when children feel they matter, rather than being valued only for what they achieve.

Psychologist Gordon Flett in his book *The Psychology of Mattering* highlights mattering as a powerful protective factor for emotional well-being. “Children who feel they matter are more resilient, better able to cope with stress, and less vulnerable to the pressures of perfectionism or performance-based self-worth.” Conversely, when children feel their worth is tied strictly to achievement, they may come to believe they count only when they win or get good grades. They may come to experience even minor setbacks as catastrophic. Every time they try something, they feel their self-worth is on the line. Each attempt becomes a watershed moment to judge their value. They believe they only matter or are good enough when they succeed.

By contrast, when children feel they have a crystalized sense of self (they feel accepted and good enough regardless of the outcome), they tend to recover more quickly from failures. They aren’t afraid to try new things, knowing that mistakes won’t diminish their inner sense of value.

This concept was similarly described in *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic ...And What We Can Do About It* by Jennifer Breheny Wallace. She discusses the negative effects children experience when they are raised to believe their worth is tied only to their achievement outcomes. She states that “toxic achievement culture fosters anxiety, burnout, and a loss of intrinsic self-worth in children,” turning them into “human doings” rather than “human beings.”

“Human doings” is the term Wallace uses to describe children who feel they only matter when they succeed. This underscores the negative consequences, such as the loss of identity and self-worth from being accomplishment-centric. She expressed that when children believe their value is only achievement-based, their well-being becomes vulnerable. They are more prone to stress, fear of failure and doggedly pursuing the next success. Their sense of self becomes rooted in their latest achievement. Once the task has been completed, they may tend to dismiss their success only to move on to the next goal. Thus begins the never-ending cycle of jumping from one achievement to the next in the hope of creating an enduring sense of self.

To be sure, we want to encourage motivation, effort and doing one’s best. But we want to do it in a way that doesn’t diminish pride in oneself but rather promotes healthy self-worth. Both Flett and Wallace state that promoting achievement in a non-toxic way is achieved through encouraging a sense of mattering. This is accomplished by having children acknowledge their efforts rather than only judge their successes. This means ensuring children feel valued for who they are, not just what they do.

The antidote for parents and teachers

1. Separate “doing” from “being.”

Focus on efforts rather than the outcome.

Instead of “I’m proud of you for getting an A,” try, “I’m proud of how hard you worked and how kind you were to your classmate.” This teaches that their worth isn’t tied to the grade outcome.

2. Notice.

Help children feel seen and valued by noticing and rewarding their efforts particularly if it is something important to them.



3. Foster contribution.

Allowing children to take on a role (including doing chores) can help them develop confidence, feel needed and trusted.

4. Listen without fixing.

Curb the tendency to solve their problems or provide advice by allowing them the space to explain how they feel and come up with their own solutions.

5. Play and rest.

Children need downtime to thrive. Overscheduling can limit their opportunities to connect with their significant adults as well as impact opportunities to relax, have freedom to be creative and use their imagination. Unstructured playtime can mitigate against stress while promoting relationship-building.

6. Model balance and authenticity.

Children learn by example. When adults in their lives make mistakes, and laugh at themselves, they learn that life isn’t about perfection.

Children who grow up feeling they matter are less vulnerable to stress. They can develop the inner confidence to take healthy

risks, recover from mistakes and pursue goals that reflect their true interests – not just what they think will make others proud.

As Wallace writes, “Children who know they matter develop a deep, stable sense of self-worth that no grade, award, or acceptance letter can replace.”

Being motivated and working hard are undeniably two very desired and important traits we want to instill in our children. However, when we focus exclusively on rewarding only success, we may instill a fear of making a mistake and eroding a child’s belief in their abilities. Rather than place value on who they are, their worth becomes based on what they do. Celebrating effort as opposed to outcome reinforces in our children that who they are is far more important than what they do. ■

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

Nonviolent Communication training supports educators, students

by *Olivia Integlia*

A few years ago, Danika Swanson, Personal Development and Community Involvement consultant at the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), received a special request from Venture and Options outreach high schools: could she provide training in Nonviolent Communication (NVC)?

Swanson, who has a background in conflict resolution, turned to the communication process framework developed by psychologist Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. Non-violent communication, she explains, is “an approach to relationships that centres connection, empathy and collaboration.”

For her, the best way of integrating such an approach within a school was to create a space in which staff could learn from Rosenberg’s book *Nonviolent Communications: A Language of Life*.

Swanson launched an eight-week book club with educators from Venture and Options. Participants each had copies of Rosenberg’s book and met weekly to discuss it.

Caitlin O’Brien, a counsellor in re-education at the EMSB, was among them. She had previously heard about NVC and helped gather childcare workers, counsellors, and educators interested in learning together.

Once a group had been assembled, they began discussing Rosenberg’s book, O’Brien explained.

“Danika just did a beautiful job of taking us through the book, chapter by chapter, with exercises and homework to do,” O’Brien said. “The approach [...] helped us practice it in real time.”

Between sessions, participants tested new strategies in the classroom and at home, then returned to share their experiences. O’Brien recalls “tangible change” among the group and praised Swanson for creating



Guillaume Lanctôt-Bédard trains the first cohort of Nonviolent Communication leaders at the English Montreal School Board in February 2025.
Photo courtesy of Danika Swanson



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“a learning environment where it was okay to learn and make mistakes.”

Encouraged by the response from participants, Swanson began to think about how to introduce and share NVC with more EMSB staff. She continued with the book club model, expanding the initiative to Perspectives High School, and sought grant funding to support the training for others in the EMSB. This funding allowed her to partner with Guillaume Lanctôt-Bédard, a certified NVC trainer from Spiralis, to offer in-depth workshops for two cohorts of EMSB professionals, teachers, staff and administrators to deepen their knowledge and capacity to share NVC.

Lanctôt-Bédard said he was met “with immense openness” and emphasized that willingness to learn is central to success with NVC. He also believes its value in schools is especially profound.

“I’m particularly moved when I get a chance to share [NVC] with people who have an impact on youth, whether they’re teachers or principals or educators, because I think that can really support creating an emotionally safe environment, where human beings can thrive and can have access to the best of themselves,” said Lanctôt-Bédard. ■



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Helping students learn how to create positive connections

by *Rekeem Sutton and Louis Kolovos*

This fall, the English Montreal School Board’s School Climate and Violence Prevention team is putting an increased emphasis on student well-being, positive school climate, the prevention of bullying and establishing healthy peer connections.

Visits to both elementary and secondary schools were arranged with the goal of engaging students and staff in meaningful conversations about anti-bullying practices and the importance of fostering a safe and respectful school environment. At each level, sessions focus on helping students develop an understanding of what healthy friendships and positive peer interactions look like, while also teaching how to recognize and appropriately report bullying behaviour. These preventative workshops align directly with the mandate of the ministry of Education’s “Act to prevent and stop bullying and violence in schools.”

Work in the digital sphere has been extended, addressing the growing concerns of cyberbullying, online interactions and mental health. Students are given presentations encouraging them to reflect on how they engage with one another on social media and other online platforms, highlighting both risks and opportunities for positive connection. The goal is not only to prevent cyberbullying and reduce harm but also to equip students with practical strategies for fostering supportive, safe and respectful online interactions. Mental health awareness is woven into these conversations, underscoring the link between emotional well-being and digital activity.

Mental health art resource

L’atelier - La créativité au cœur du mieux-être, an organization located in downtown Montreal, is an alternative mental health resource with a mission to promote social integration through teaching craft and art skills. It is designed for people living with mental health challenges seeking socialization and self-fulfillment. Info: www.atelierobnl.com.

– Kristin McNeill

Students have also been engaged through music and community partnerships. Music initiatives, in collaboration with the School of Music Canada, offer students positive, creative activities where they can express themselves and build supportive peer connections. These programs foster social-emotional growth while offering meaningful, positive alternatives to strengthen school engagement and connection.

In addition, another initiative has been launched to invite community organizations to share their services and supports related to mental health and well-being during a school’s parent-teacher curriculum night. The goal here is to increase parents’ awareness of the wide range of resources available to them and their families. Key partners in this initiative include Aire Ouverte, Centre Jeunesse Emploi, Strengthening Families, and la Direction régionale de la santé publique de Montréal. By bringing these groups into the school setting, families and students gain direct access to valuable services that might otherwise feel distant or difficult to reach. This collaboration not only connects parents with vital supports but also strengthens the bridge between school and community, creating a more holistic and supportive environment for students’ growth and well-being. ■

Rekeem Sutton and Louis Kolovos are project development officers with the School Climate and Violence Prevention department at the English Montreal School Board.

Introducing *The Jackie Fisher Empathy Tour!*

Thanks to a generous grant from *The Jaclyn Fisher Foundation*, Inspirations News is bringing real stories of resilience, kindness, and empowerment to classrooms across the Greater Montreal area! This fall, we kicked off an exciting school tour led by three remarkable young women—Samara O’Gorman, Maryam Ganni, and Sara Levitt—who are on a mission to inspire the next generation.

Samara O’Gorman

Through heartfelt stories and original poetry, Samara explores self-love, the importance of empathy, and healthy friendships. She inspires students to find their voice, embrace their passions, and step confidently into leadership in their own unique way.



Sara Levitt

Living with an ostomy after Crohn’s disease, Sara uses honesty and humour to tackle chronic illness and body image stigmas. She reminds students that what makes us different can also be our greatest strength.



Maryam Ganni

Legally blind, Maryam turns “impossible” into “unstoppable.” Sharing her journey, her professional makeup career, and entrepreneurial spirit, she empowers students to see beyond limits and embrace who they truly are.



Honouring *Jackie*
Despite being diagnosed with Crohn’s disease as a child and later with cancer, *Jackie* remained resilient, forged meaningful connections with a heart full of love, pursued the good in all, and inspired others with her generosity and commitment to the global community. Inspirations News is honoured to carry *Jackie*’s legacy forward by sharing her message of kindness, empathy, and inclusion with students.



To learn more or schedule a presentation, please contact us at info@inspirationsnews.com.



by
Steven Atme

An awakening for legislative change

This 20th year of my devotion to the arts and 13 years of the *Special People Have Dreams* mission have brought so many major significant milestones in both my personal life and career.

In April, I performed at Rideau Hall in Ottawa after the Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers Ceremony, where I met Governor General Mary Simon. This spring, I was involved with the music in the documentary *Ben's Animals*, and in October, I was appointed a Knight of Columbus. I'm deeply proud of the hard work serving Canada with my music through love and charity.

This summer, I had the idea of reconnecting with a friend of mine who is a federal MP in Ottawa. We met at his office on Parliament Hill on June 20 to discuss various cases both past and present plus my recent encounters. He was emotional and suggested I write a document called "Legislative Article Proposal for Special Needs & Mental Health" and send it to members of government. So, I did. My proposal was divided into five points:

- › Inclusive Education Must Embrace Individual Learning Styles
- › Respect Special Needs' Dreams and Ambitions
- › Anti-Bullying and Emotional Support
- › Family Support Services
- › Increase Housing and Financial Support for Independent Living.

A month later, I received a response stating, "While the federal government provides funding for health care, delivery of services falls to the provinces and territories. Parliament does not have the authority to implement your proposals, no matter how worthy."

Though I appreciated they took the time to read it, it's not enough, and we shouldn't tolerate less action. I sent my letter to all provincial/territorial ministers for health, education/higher education, families and social services! I posted my letter on Facebook on August 9, and that was when the national movement began. It caught a lot of attention with over 16,000 views in two months. I received respons-

es from Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador ministers. They were enlightened.

I even received messages from people across Canada thanking me for advocating for them and inspiring them to share their stories and write testimonies to send to their provincial/territorial representatives.

What lifted my heart and brought tears was this statement, "Canada has an advocate for autism." I've said before that it's not just about talking, it's about making it happen. I believe anybody can make a change. During a recent TV interview, I looked into the camera and said, "Families, do not give up." I want people to live healthy and prosperous lives. If anyone would like to read my letter, go on my Facebook page, write your testimonies and share. ■

Steven Atme is a pianist and composer, gives creative arts lessons and is a public speaker, sharing his experience growing up and living with autism.



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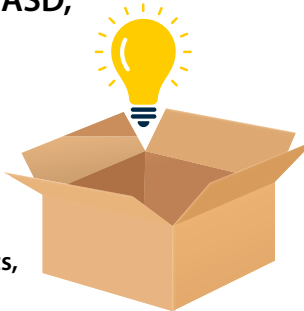
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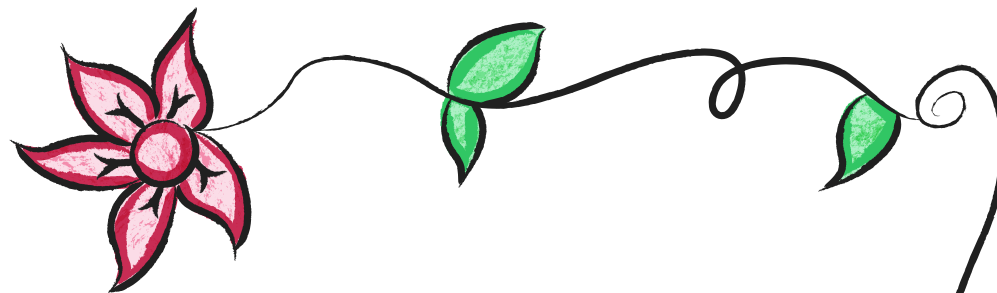
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Art by Zach Reisman
Page layout by Michelle Perron-Elgee

Spreading the love of dance

by *Olivia Integlia*

Susan Brotherwood wears many hats. She's a mother, wife, teacher, trained occupational therapist – but before all that, she was a dancer.

Brotherwood pursued a degree in physical education, specializing in dance and remedial education, in England. She later studied at The Place, a London-based dance centre that houses the London Contemporary Dance School and offers university-level courses in contemporary dance.

Teaching dance has long been part of her life, she explained. "I've been teaching dancing ever since before the kids came along." When her husband got a job in Canada, prompting her family to relocate, Brotherwood saw an opportunity to pursue a long-held dream.

"I've always wanted to form a dance group with [individuals] with Down syndrome," she said.

As the mother of a son with Down syndrome, the idea had always been close to her heart. "My son, he's a beautiful dancer," she said, reflecting on what inspired her to push for an inclusive dance community.

Together with a friend, Brotherwood proposed creating a dance group for individuals with Down syndrome to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, shortly after the company introduced dance therapy courses. In 2017, Dance 21 was born.

The group's name refers to Trisomy 21 – the most common type of Down syndrome, according to the Canadian Down Syndrome Society.

Before long, Dance 21 – now called Dance 21 Plus – began to grow. After moving to a larger locale in Place des Arts, Brotherwood now offers two classes, welcoming children and teens with various disabilities.

But she did not stop there.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Brotherwood began working as a childcare worker in a Working on Individual Needs to Grow and Succeed (WINGS) classroom at Roslyn Elementary School (English Montreal School Board) in Westmount. WINGS is a self-contained classroom for students with autism. "Why don't I teach dance with them?" she thought to herself at the time.

She brought the idea to Les Grands Ballets, which had just received a grant from the city of Montreal to support dance programs for neurodiverse students. The project was approved, and, before she knew it, she was teaching dance to the WINGS students.

This fall, she returns to Roslyn twice a week, while continuing her work with Dance 21 Plus.

"Definitely, I'm going to carry on," Brotherwood said enthusiastically, noting that her program is always evolving to become more inclusive and accessible.

This summer, the group performed two dances at the Festival des Arts de Saint-Sauveur. "That was awesome," she said. But for Brotherwood, this is just the beginning.

"I really would like to take this group – because they're such a great group – to different venues where they can show that they're just as good at dance as anyone else." ■



Susan Brotherwood, right, dances with Grade 4 WINGS student Sacha Wehbi at Roslyn Elementary School in September. Photo: Olivia Integlia



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Early detection

Quebec's department of Family and Support for Individuals offers an early detection program for developmental difficulties in children under the age of 5. The Agir tôt program is free and aims to provide families with information and resources related to services to help prepare a child starting kindergarten. Agir tôt is accessible via all integrated health and social services centres (CISSS) and integrated university health and social services centres (CIUSSS) in Quebec.

– Kristin McNeill

by *Sue Montgomery*

Dedicated special needs teacher Leslie Levinson retires after 36 years



Leslie Levinson and her students, from left: Aiden Hartwell, Bennett Ross, Maurice Abdelahad and River Fraser, on a three-day get-away at Camp Massawippi in Ayers Cliff in June 2025. Levinson was named the "Teacher of Inspiration" in the Fall 2014/Winter 2015 edition of *Inspirations*.
Photo courtesy of L. Levinson

Leslie Levinson began working at Mackay Centre School in 1989 and, this June, walked out of the only place she ever taught with myriad memories of students who have been given a voice thanks to her.

Levinson is credited with starting, in 1998, the first Augmentative and Alternative Communication class at Mackay to help children with complex communication needs. She explained she wanted to re-start the program that had been previously phased out. Today there are four such classes, with six students in each at the English Montreal School Board school in NDG.

"The nicest memories are when you see you've had an impact, that you've given a voice and words to kids that had lots of stuff in them but no way to get it out," she said. "It's nice when they can say 'I love you' to their mom."

Levinson was working as an aide at Mackay when a teaching spot opened in 1990. She tried her hand at physical education, pre-kindergarten and as a resource for Grades 2 and 3. She then convinced her principal to let her attend a workshop in New York about students with complex

communications needs. It was there that Levinson found her passion.

"[Until then,] the school would pull the kids out of class for an hour a week with a speech therapist, and I said, 'it's not enough. You're teaching them a language – they have to be immersed in that.'"

Almost all of Levinson's former students have cerebral palsy.

One of those students, River Fraser, first joined Levinson's "Alternative and Augmentative Communication" class when he was 4. Now 15, his last class with Levinson was in June, her last month teaching at Mackay. Because he has little control over his hands, he uses a computer device that is controlled by his eyes to communicate. He selects images, words, letters and numbers on a screen by fixing his gaze on them, which are then dictated by a computer-generated voice.

River's mother, Anna Calvert, referred to Levinson as a second mom to all her students, while being the biological mom to her own four kids.

"Most of all, you have helped each one of these kids to find their own voice, and you have shown them that they deserve to be

listened to," Calvert wrote in a thank-you note for Levinson's retirement.

"There is no bigger gift you could give to them and to all of us."

Levinson used rudimentary pictures and drawings as tools until technology came on the scene and rapidly made communication easier. Still, she maintains learning to spell is the foundation for all her students.

"With spelling, you can do anything," she said. "You can surf the net, write emails, anything."

"You don't get the results right away but it's the same with learning any language," she said.

Richard Côté, whose daughter, Ava, was taught by Levinson, wrote in an email to her that the family will always be grateful for the role she played in their daughter's journey.

"You have been so much more than a teacher to her. You've been a mentor, an advocate and a guiding light," who helped shaped the "confident, joyful person she is today."

Levinson said she'll still go back to the school to supply teach, in between playing tennis, volunteering for NDG hockey, visiting her grandchild in Kingston and helping her aging mother and mother-in-law.

"To do something that you love is a privilege," she said.

"You're very appreciative of the parents because they put so much trust in you; they open up to you; they share things with you."

"I've been with parents at their best times, and I've been with them at their worst times."

Colleague Anne-Marie Yaworski said the path to communication for their students is filled with obstacles: complex bodies, malfunctioning equipment and ever-changing needs of the children. It takes courage, hope and patience to do the job.

"We should measure her success on how many 'I love you's,' how many 'thank you's,' how many jokes and the millions of words that have been spoken because she gave the quietest people a voice," she said in a speech for Levinson's retirement. ■



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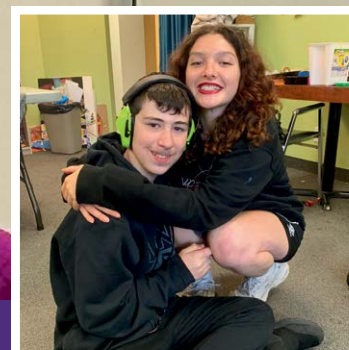
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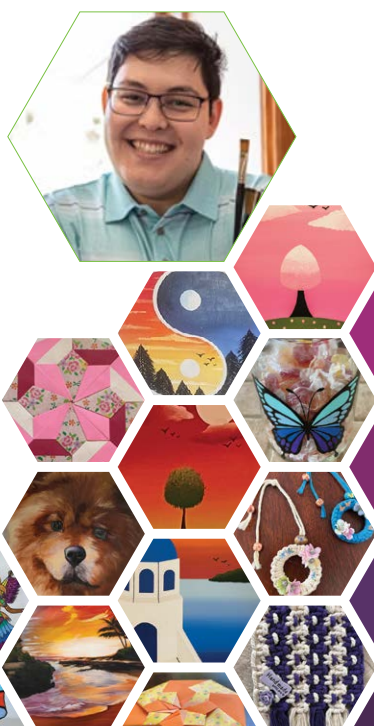
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Espace pour la vie, Giant Steps join forces

by *Andre Pereira*



An example of a Sensory-friendly Moment, when theatre lights and sounds are lowered for a calmer experience.
Photo courtesy of Giant Steps / Espace pour la vie

Giant Steps and Espace pour la vie have deepened their collaboration to make the five Espace pour la vie museums more welcoming for autistic individuals and their families. Together, they are transforming the museum experience through inclusive design, sensory-friendly practices, and a culture of empathy and understanding.

With the support of Giant Steps, Espace pour la vie embarked on a comprehensive inclusion process that encompassed audits of each of its museums, staff training, the development of visitor support tools and the testing of a pilot project that led to

the creation of Sensory-friendly Moments at the Planétarium. These special sessions, held the last Tuesday and the last Sunday morning of each month, feature reduced lighting and sound, smaller audiences and the freedom for visitors to move in and out of the theatre as needed. Across all five museums – the Biodôme, Biosphère, Jardin botanique, Insectarium and Planétarium – free sensory bags co-created with Giant Steps are available, along with a quiet sensory room at the Planétarium for visitors seeking a calm space.

Reflecting Giant Steps' 360-degree approach to inclusion, the partnership extends beyond the visitor experience to also promote neuroinclusion in the workplace. Through the Giant Steps Adult Education Program, offered in partnership with the English Montreal School Board, autistic young adults are now gaining on-the-job experience through internships at Espace

pour la vie, beginning with the Biosphère. These opportunities not only build skills and confidence but also model what an inclusive workforce can look like in practice.

Giant Steps and Espace pour la vie are launching a joint research project to co-develop and validate a practical assessment tool that will help organizations measure and improve neuroinclusion across different sectors.

“Our partnership with Giant Steps goes beyond accessibility – it’s about belonging,” said Albane Le Nay, director of Operations and Visitor Experience at Espace pour la vie. “Together, we’re learning, adapting and growing so that every visitor feels seen, expected and welcome. The strategy of small steps has truly allowed us to take a giant step forward.” ■

Andre Pereira is the director of Marketing and Communications at Giant Steps.



by *Nick Katalifos*

Welcoming the new board of advisors at Inspirations

As an avid supporter of Inspirations since its inception 17 years ago, I am pleased to report that it is increasingly becoming a known and trusted resource and source of information for the special needs community. It is thanks to the financial support of people and organizations who believe in its value that it can continue on this path.

Over the past three years, Inspirations has welcomed funding from various foundations, which has fueled our growth. We thank the Simon Chang Foundation for Change with whom we are celebrating five years of partnership this year!

And now, we welcome new funders: the Canada Post Community Foundation, the Canada Periodical Fund (Canadian Heritage), the Hylcan Foundation and the Jaclyn Fisher Foundation.

This growth has led us to create our first board of advisors, whose mandate is to provide strategic advice and guide Inspirations in achieving its long-term vision and

ensure its sustainability. Acting as the chief external advisory group to the leadership of Inspirations, these board members are Inspirations' ambassadors in the community, helping us promote our mission and assist in our fundraising initiatives.

We welcome the following individuals to our board of advisors:

Leslie Butt recently retired after 40 years of service in public education. He was an integral part of the English Montreal School Board's (EMSB) Financial Services team, where he offered tremendous support to *Inspirations*. He is currently the interim executive director of the Generations Foundation. We are grateful to have Leslie sit at our table.

Ambassador of Bell Let's Talk, Audley Coley is a mental health advocate and subject of the book *Audley Enough: A Portrait of Triumph and Recovery in the Face of Mania and Depression*, which tells his story of resilience over discrimination, setbacks and fighting the stigma of mental

illness. Audley is a public speaker, fitness and dance instructor, community organizer and philanthropist. His lived experience will certainly support our foray into mental wellness.

David Garfinkle became quadriplegic after a surfing accident over 10 years ago and decided to embrace his future with determination and hope. He is the essence of what Inspirations is all about. The David Garfinkle Sensitivity Tour brings him to EMSB schools, where he shares his insights with students, breaking down barriers to inclusion one question at a time. His experience in life and business will act as an excellent guide for our team.

Author and communications specialist Susan Grundy's lived caring experience puts her in an excellent position to steer us as we grow our positive mental health and well-being initiative. She shares her journey of caregiving and sisterhood through the lens of mental illness in a compelling way in her book *Mad Sisters*. Susan

has just released *Black Creek*, a healing journey from ancestral pain that follows her writing theme of mental health and well-being.

Francine Levi brings a wealth of experience in the philanthropic field, having enjoyed a successful career in the roles of director, donor relations and development at the Jewish General Hospital Foundation, and principal director of development with the Faculty of Arts & Science at Concordia University.

I am honoured to have a seat on this Board of Advisors as the member representing the EMSB, as well as the neurodiverse community. I look forward to working with this group and Inspirations' leadership of Michael Cohen, publisher; Wendy Singer, managing editor; and Mark Bergman, manager, communications and outreach. ■

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



by *Elisabeth Prass*

Budget changes disrupt school life for special needs children

Although you are reading this a couple of months into the new school year, I want to extend my warmest wishes to all students, parents and educators across Quebec.

My child's autism means that education is not simply about textbooks and classrooms – it is about creating an environment that nurtures their unique strengths, addresses their challenges and allows them to thrive. I know this not only as an elected official but as a mom. Every parent of a child with special needs knows that progress doesn't happen overnight. It requires patience, collaboration, and, above all, resources.

Unfortunately, this is where the Legault government continues to fail Quebec families. The CAQ's contradictory decisions on

education funding have created instability for schools and uncertainty for parents. Specialized services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and individualized support, are not luxuries. They are essential tools that allow children to learn, communicate and grow with dignity.

After first announcing \$570 million in cuts to public education in June, the CAQ minister of Education partially backtracked in the face of public backlash, announcing a reinvestment of \$540 million a month later. But this was not the full picture: strict conditions made access to the funds difficult, leaving many school boards unable to deliver on their plans. At the English Montreal School Board, for example, they had planned to hire 40 new support staff members to work with special needs students. Instead, they were forced to cut an additional 24 positions.

Now, the CAQ government has once again shifted its stance to remove limits on new hirings. But this decision comes too late. The school year is already underway, and the opportunity to bring in additional staff before classes began has been lost. Children who needed support on Day 1 are still waiting. Families and teachers are left to pick up the pieces. Does this seem responsible to you or to your children? Certainly not.

When budgets are tightened or when political decisions are delayed, it is these very services that are too often reduced or deferred. Teachers and support staff, already stretched to the breaking point, are expected to “do more with less.” This is not only unfair to them but profoundly unjust to our children.

This is why I will continue to speak out against the government's inconsistent decisions and push for stronger, more stable

support in our schools. Parents should not have to wage battles at every step of their child's educational journey. Schools should not be forced to make impossible choices because of political indecision. Most importantly, our children should not be treated as afterthoughts.

I want to send strength and solidarity to every family navigating the challenges of raising a child with special needs. You are not alone. Your children's futures matter – and together, we must ensure they receive the education and respect they deserve. ■

Elisabeth Prass is member of the National Assembly of Quebec for D'Arcy-McGee and is Official Opposition Critic for Relations with English-Speaking Quebecers, as well as for Social Services, Mental Health, Persons Living with a Disability or with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and for the Fight Against Homelessness. She is mom to a wonderful boy living with ASD.

Maison des jeunes de Bordeaux-Cartierville : une douce transition vers l'inclusion

par *Emmanuelle Assor*



En mai, les étudiants préparaient l'exposition de photos en juin.
Photo courtoisie de Michaël Huot

Depuis le mois de novembre 2024, la Maison des jeunes de Bordeaux-Cartierville (MDJ-BC) a organisé des rencontres de concertation avec des parents et des écoles du quartier, dans le but de créer le projet « Transition vers l'inclusion ». L'objectif de cette initiative est simple : inclure doucement des jeunes autistes avec ou sans déficience intellectuelle (DI-TSA), âgés de 12 à 17 ans, selon leur rythme et leurs goûts, dans les activités régulières de la MDJ-BC.

Dès janvier 2025, la première activité a eu lieu avec 6 jeunes référés par l'École secondaire La Dauversière-Évangéline (Centre de services scolaire de Montréal) pour se joindre progressivement aux activités de la Maison des jeunes : billard, discussions, jeux vidéo ont été ouverts à tous. « On a tous été ravis de voir que les jeunes choisis pour ce projet se sont

facilement intégrés. Cela s'est très bien passé » a affirmé Michaël Huot, directeur général de l'organisme.

Au fil de l'année scolaire, d'autres activités inclusives et artistiques ont été développées, comme l'accès à un atelier de percussions et la participation à la création d'une jolie murale. Une adolescente autiste a aussi participé (sans être filmée) à l'enregistrement audio d'un podcast. Elle y a parlé de neurodiversité et de sa vie de tous les jours, le tout avec beaucoup d'introspection.

De mai à juin, un photographe professionnel, Youssef Shoufan, a aidé les jeunes à manipuler un appareil photo et à prendre des photos. Sur le thème de « On ne nous voit pas », un thème qui résonne auprès de ces jeunes souvent laissés pour compte, les participants ont pris des photos avec les yeux fermés, se laissant

guider par leur inspiration. Un vernissage très joyeux et festif a suivi, a raconté M. Huot. Les participants étaient fiers de ce qu'ils avaient accompli.

« Au début du projet, quelques difficultés de communication ont émané mais se sont vite estompées avec le temps. Le bilan que nous faisons du projet est très positif » a conclu M. Huot qui travaille déjà sur le choix de la deuxième cohorte de participants. Cette fois-ci, la MDJ-BC compte recevoir entre 8 et 10 jeunes DI-TSA. ■

Pour plus d'informations : mdjbc.org
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IS MEALTIME A BATTLE? THERE'S HELP.

By Clinic Little Bright Lights



Did you know that feeding disorders in children on the spectrum are extremely common? Although some types of feeding problems, such as food refusal, are also frequent in the general pediatric population, up to 9 in every 10 kids with autism has an issue related to eating.

Feeding disorders include a limited appetite, food selectivity based on color, texture or taste, gagging, having difficulty swallowing or refusing to sit at the table. These issues can be more impactful than other physical issues because they can affect a child's nutrition, growth, health, weight, development and overall well-being. They also cause severe worry, stress and limitations for the caregivers and families. Families always have to predict where the child will be for their next snack or meal and what foods will be available at that time.

The mental toll that takes can be immense. In many cases, the presentation of food also leads to challenging and even aggressive behaviors from the child. As too many of our families know, children with food refusal can spit out the food that is presented to them, swipe it onto the floor, hit their caregiver, scream, cry, and run away from the meal. School, play dates, birthday parties, restaurant outings and family functions can all be affected. The primary caregiver is also often left making multiple meals every mealtime for the different family members in the home. Many parents feel guilt, asking themselves if they somehow caused the problem or if they're failing as a parent. Perhaps most importantly, they don't know how to get help.

At Clinic Little Bright Lights, we

understand the complexities of childhood feeding issues. Expanding the list of foods our pediatric clients accept to eat and teaching them to eat without any challenging behaviors are goals we've very proudly integrated into our ABA therapy services.

For feeding, we take the same approach to teaching as we do for teaching language, play skills, autonomy and school readiness; We identify what the child can and cannot do today, and we plan a goal that is big enough to have meaning but that is small enough for the child to achieve almost immediately and without tears. Then, we make it happen.

We are proud of the positive impact we have had on the lives of many families in our community. Parents often tell us that their children, after working with our team, have started

eating new foods without difficulties and are even trying new things on their own.

"The food refusal therapy my son received greatly impacted his ability to eat a varied diet. It has allowed him to consume a healthy well-balanced diet versus a limited and restricted one. He no longer refuses or avoids new foods or certain textures. This has alleviated meal time stress at home, has sped up feeding time, and has even given us the freedom to leave the house without packing a specific, limited snack in the event hunger hits for him. He can now eat almost anything from anywhere."



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by *Samara O’Gorman*

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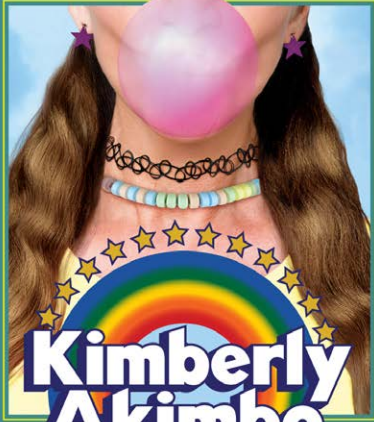
WINNER OF 5 TONY AWARDS®

2023 TONY AWARDS BEST MUSICAL

BOOK AND LYRICS BY DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE
MUSIC BY JEANINE TESORI

BASED ON THE PLAY BY DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE
DIRECTED BY ROBERT MCQUEEN
CHOREOGRAPHY BY ALLISON PLAMONDON
MUSIC DIRECTION BY CHRIS BARILLARO

STARRING LOUISE PITRE



Kimberly Akimbo
a musical

Nov 23
– Dec 21
2025

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Get ready for *Kimberly Akimbo*, a musical that critics are calling “THE BEST NEW MUSICAL OF THE YEAR, BY FAR” (*The Wall Street Journal*). After winning the 2023 Tony Award for Best Musical, the show is finally coming to Montreal in a major co-production between the Segal Centre and David and Hannah Mirvish.

“If her name is new to you, it won’t be for long...,” says Segal Centre Artistic & Executive director Lisa Rubin. “...*Kimberly Akimbo* is a story that lingers in the heart, and there’s no better place to bring it to life than the Segal. After the magic of *Titanique*, we’re overjoyed to reunite with Mirvish for a musical that will leave you laughing, crying, and thinking long after the final bow.”

The show is built on a Tony-winning book by Pulitzer Prize winner David Lindsay-Abaire and a Tony-winning score by Jeanine Tesori. Starring a Canadian theatre legend, Louise Pitre, known for her iconic roles as Donna in *Mamma Mia!* and Fantine in *Les Misérables*, this production is an absolute must-see. It centers on Kimberly, a witty teenager navigating a fictional genetic disorder similar to progeria, which causes her to age more than four times faster than normal. As she balances family dysfunction, a first crush, and potential felony charges, Kim must find the

courage to seize the moment and enjoy the ride, proving the famous proverb that “life is short.”

Why not ring in the holidays on a good note? *Kimberly Akimbo* is running from November 23 to December 21, 2025. The Segal Centre is committed to accessibility and is offering patrons with vision loss two audio-described performances on December 7 at 2:00 pm and 7:30 pm.

Audio described performances will include a Touch Tour before the show, which are scheduled at 12 pm and 5:30 pm respectively.

The Segal Centre’s knowledgeable guides will be on hand to assist you, providing descriptive information about the elements you encounter. This is an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the production’s artistic vision as you interact with the various components that bring the show to life on stage.

For more information about Touch Tours and to reserve your spot, please contact our box office: 514-739-7944.

For a full list of offerings, please visit segalcentre.org



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Learning life skills, one load at a time

by *Romina Mancini*



Mouhamad Haidar, left, and Gérald Nardone work on the Wash and Learn Laundry service.
Photo courtesy of R. Mancini

Students at Galileo Adult Education Centre have been gaining hands-on experience in a unique way through the Wash and Learn Laundry Service. The program, modeled after a real laundromat, allows teachers and students to bring in laundry created from other classroom programs such as aprons, tablecloths and cushions during designated times.

Upon drop-off, students working at the laundry service provide a slip indicating when the items will be ready for pickup or delivery, simulating the customer service experience of an actual business. This interaction not only teaches responsibility but also builds confidence in communication and organizational skills.

Beyond the service element, the program is designed to help students acquire practical life skills they can use at home. From sorting colours and loading the machines to determining which items should be hung to dry rather than placed in the dryer, students are learning the step-by-step process of doing laundry correctly and independently.

The Wash and Learn program gives students the chance to take on real responsibilities in a safe environment. They feel proud when they see the finished product, and the experience builds confidence in what they can achieve. It also fosters problem-solving, teamwork and decision-making – skills that will serve them well both inside and outside the classroom.

This innovative initiative highlights the school's commitment to preparing students not just academically but also for everyday life. By turning an ordinary task into a learning opportunity, the program ensures that students walk away with lessons they can carry far beyond their school years. ■

Romina Mancini is a Social Participation teacher at Galileo Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board. She runs the Wash and Learn program in her class.

For an article about the Social Participation program, see p. 36.

Smoothie Mondays: A student-led Social Participation project at Galileo

by *Lisa Trotto and Vera Tronca*

At Galileo Adult Education Centre (English Montreal School Board), social participation is more than just a concept; it's an everyday practice that empowers students to take the lead in meaningful, real-world initiatives. On September 29, students from two Social Participation classes launched Smoothie Mondays, a student-led project where they prepare and sell nutritious smoothies and protein bites to staff and fellow students.

This initiative was born directly from the students' own interests, motivation and voice. By giving them the opportunity to transform their ideas into action, Smoothie Mondays allows participants to build important life and job-readiness skills. They take charge of every step of the process, from planning, organization, food preparation and customer service to managing the cash register, while also practicing choice-making and collaboration.

By leading this project, students are not only building confidence but also preparing themselves for future work placement opportunities.

Each week, students take on different roles, such as planning recipes, shopping for ingredients, handling money and promoting their products. What looks like a simple snack initiative is, in reality, a powerful hands-on learning experience.

Academic and practical skills include math and financial literacy through budgeting, adding totals, giving change and tracking

sales. Students practice language development by reading recipes, writing shopping lists and communicating with customers. They also build health and science awareness by learning about nutrition, food safety and hygiene practices.

Students strengthen their life skills as they gain independence by making decisions, taking initiative and following through on responsibilities. They develop time management while preparing ingredients, serving customers efficiently and meeting deadlines. Problem-solving is encouraged when adapting to missing ingredients or unexpected challenges.

A focus on customer service, teamwork, leadership and entrepreneurial thinking leads to sharpening workplace and career skills. Students learn to greet customers, handle money politely, collaborate with peers, divide tasks and understand cost versus profit. Leadership opportunities allow them to take charge, guide classmates and gain confidence in decision-making.

Social and personal growth emerges as students build confidence, express creativity, engage with the Galileo community and demonstrate resilience by learning from mistakes and improving week by week.

Every smoothie made, every smile shared and every responsibility taken is a step toward independence and growth. ■

Lisa Trotto and Vera Tronca are Social Participation teachers at Galileo Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board. They run Smoothie Mondays in their classes.



Galileo students make mixed berry smoothies on September 29 in the school kitchen. From back to front, left: Bruno Straccialano, Tanya Montano, Ali Mahmood, Paule Ania Chanson and Stanley Tam; right: teacher Vera Tronca, Peter Dimirdjian, teacher Lisa Trotto and Adamo Testoni. Photo courtesy of Galileo Adult Education Centre

Luca ‘Lazylegz’ explores ‘dancing like yourself’ in new book

by *Roanne Weisman*

If you never thought a duck could be an inspiration, think again. This particular duck, named Funky, is the creation of Luca “Lazylegz” Patuelli, also known as B-boy Lazylegz. Both Patuelli and Funky were born different. Funky’s legs are of different lengths and “kind of crooked,” explains Patuelli in his new children’s book, *Funky, the duck with dancing dreams*, and one of his wings “didn’t quite grow like the other.”

Patuelli was born with a condition called arthrogryposis, which affects his legs and shoulders. Both Funky and Luca had dreams of becoming dancers. Funky wanted to enter a dance competition called DuckFest. Patuelli dreamed of becoming a breaker (a breakdancer). Funky watched the other dancers, but when he tried to copy them, his body couldn’t do the moves. But then he remembered what his parents taught him: “The only mistake would be to

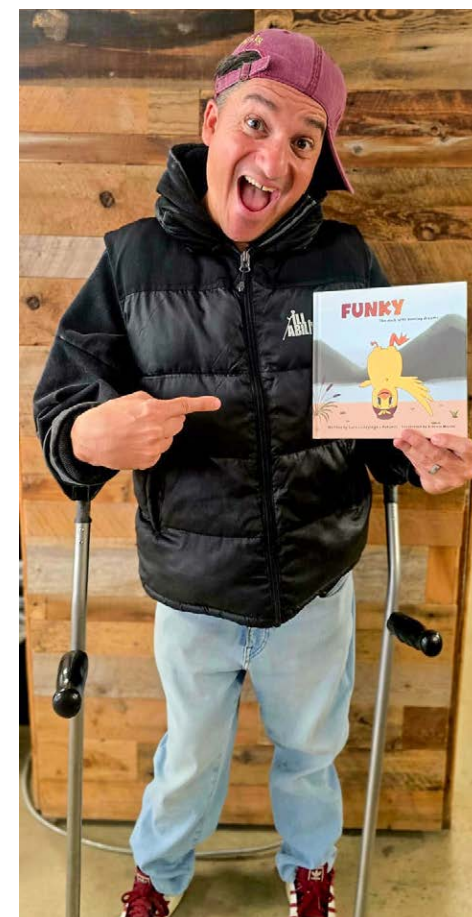
give up. These words created a spark in me. If I couldn’t dance like the others, maybe I could dance like myself.” And this inspirational duck went on to become a DuckFest star, creating original moves cheered on by the other ducks.

When Patuelli realized that his legs could not perform the dance moves of other breakers, he, too, decided to find his own moves. “The beauty about breaking, is that you have to create your own unique style. Because of my difference, I had to learn to create movement on my own,” he explained in a CBC Arts interview on YouTube in 2017. Using two crutches, which he calls his dancing shoes, he created his own signature moves, such as the elbow spin, using his powerful arms.

Patuelli has now been breakdancing for more than 20 years and has become a world-renowned dancer, choreographer

and motivational speaker. He has even created a new word, “ILL-Abilities” to replace the word “disability.” He explains in the interview that in breaking, the words “ill” and “sick” mean the opposite – they mean “amazing” or “incredible.” So, he created a team called ILL-Abilities, which is an international breakdancing crew, as well as a non-profit organization called The No Excuses No Limits movement, both of which foster inclusion and mentorship through the power of dance and the arts.

Patuelli hopes that the story of Funky will help all children know that they are unique and special, just as they are. “We each have something special to give to this world,” he said during the YouTube video. “When I hear my music, I forget my differences, I only think about my dance. Dancing allows you to be free.” ■



Luca “Lazylegz” Patuelli shows off his new book, *Funky*. Photo courtesy of L. Patuelli

Inside Out 2 – Fun to watch and helpful teaching tool

by *Ishini Fernando*

Released in 2024, *Inside Out 2*, is a coming-of-age sequel to its original 2015 hit *Inside Out*. The Pixar film, directed by Kelsey Mann, focuses on Riley Andersen and her emotions (who were also main characters in the first movie), as she enters adolescence. In the *Inside Out* universe, the emotions are their own characters who live at Headquarters, the mind’s control centre.

In the first movie, viewers were introduced to five core emotions in Riley’s life: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust. In this current movie, Riley is newly 13 and experiencing a lot of new developments in her life: she is going through puberty, navigating changing relationships, facing the pressure of trying out for the Firehawks hockey team, making sense of new social

dynamics and trying to make new friends. In the beginning of the movie, a demolition occurs at Headquarters to make room for new emotions. Much to the dismay of Riley’s five core emotions from childhood, four new ones arrive! Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment and Ennui are introduced as important new permanent residents in Riley’s mind to help the newly minted teenager. Anxiety (voiced by Maya Hawke) quickly proves to be a dominant emotion, taking over Riley’s decision-making and taking up more place than the others.

Inside Out 2 does a stellar job at depicting the more complex emotions teenagers experience during this life stage. It explores themes of self-worth and identity through personified emotions, which can help both adults and children alike understand that

all emotions are valid and necessary for growth, and that none need to be labelled as good or bad.

For children on the autism spectrum, the movie can be a particularly helpful tool for teaching the complexities of emotions. In a 2024 *Psychology Today* article, Dr. Patricia Wright, who is a practitioner and researcher interested in well-being and autism, writes about how the movie garnered attention in autism communities on social media. She also praised the film for presenting an opportunity to provide instruction for developing well-being skills. Parents who watch *Inside Out 2* with their children can therefore expect both an entertaining and educational experience for the entire family. ■

Lachapelle stars in documentary

Montreal filmmaker Evan Beloff’s film, *Ben’s Animals: A Documentary About Autism, Art, and Advocacy*, premiered at the Canadian Museum of Nature in June in Ottawa, followed shortly after by its first television broadcast on CBC. This 45-minute-long documentary is a visual portrait of Ben Lachapelle, a 23-year-old autistic artist, who is passionate about animals and nature. Through a mix of animation, storytelling and interviews, it offers “a poetic, moving, and joyful portrait of a remarkable young man,” according to Moosefuel Media. Mark Bergman, in an Inspirations podcast, spoke with Lachapelle, his mother Julie, as well as Beloff and composer Steven Atme. The documentary is available to stream on CBC Gem.

– Kristin McNeill

Film review: *Bleu Tango* directed by Marion Chuniaud

by *Samara O’Gorman*

Bleu Tango, directed by Marion Chuniaud, is a 12-minute documentary that centres on the life of Azalia Kaviani, a multidisciplinary artist and entrepreneur from Montreal. The film, supported by the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, The Canada Council for the Arts and in post-production by PRIM Centre d’artistes creation support program, follows Kaviani on her powerful and determined journey to break free from the social, physical and psychological constraints associated with cerebral palsy. By using art as a form of self-expression, the

young woman transforms her body into a language that transcends her limitations.

Each scene was accompanied by delightful animations by Vivien Forsans that mirrored Kaviani’s playful nature as an artist, and Chuniaud masterfully captured Kaviani’s journey through an intimate and poetic approach. “I am fascinated by her courage and determination, and I decided to expand the project into a short film. People with disabilities, rarely heard from, are seldom given space to share their stories. I felt it was my duty to tell her story, with her,” said Chuniaud. In the film’s closing scene, Kaviani’s dance partner gently guides her through a sequence of movements, providing the audience an uplifting reminder that trust and guidance can always be found no matter the circumstance.

The documentary defies fields known for their strict physical demands like dance, drawing and yoga, and challenges viewers to redefine their perception

of individuals with physical limitations, promoting their active role in society and the arts alike. Chuniaud made it a goal to create the film alongside Kaviani, adding, “By inviting her to be an active participant in the project, I aim to create a film that goes beyond the topic of disability and explores the place we give to difference in our society. I truly believe that this is a deeply personal yet universally relevant journey.”

Kaviani’s work has been exhibited at the Mekic Gallery (duo show *Les Visages*), at the Montréal, arts interculturels (MAI) in the group exhibition *SalonEsque*, and at the Festival Accès Asie (solo show *Les Nocturnes*), resonating with diverse audiences over the course of many years. With the support of her mother, Fanny Esfahani, Kaviani has embraced her roles as a painter, a dancer and even a restaurateur. Together, in the summer of 2022, the family opened Azalea, an Iranian restaurant located on St. Denis St. It serves as a symbol of her determination to create a space where she can thrive and inspire others to overcome their own obstacles.

In a conversation with Chuniaud, Kaviani shared that “When I’m hurt or feel judged by others, I release my ideas and emotions

through my art. As a disabled artist, I’ve learned to deal with my condition and my limits, as well as my potential. I AM MY ART.” ■

Note de la directrice

Bleu Tango est né de ma rencontre avec Azalia, une femme qui a fait de son corps un langage. Ce film est un hommage à sa détermination, à sa manière unique de communiquer avec le monde malgré la paralysie cérébrale. À travers son regard, j’ai voulu montrer qu’il existe mille façons d’exister, de créer, de se relier aux autres. *Bleu Tango* invite à repenser nos représentations du handicap, en donnant la parole – autrement – à celles et ceux qu’on entend trop peu. Azalia nous inspire à croire en notre propre force, au-delà des limites.

– Marion Chuniaud, cinéaste, réalisatrice, photographe.



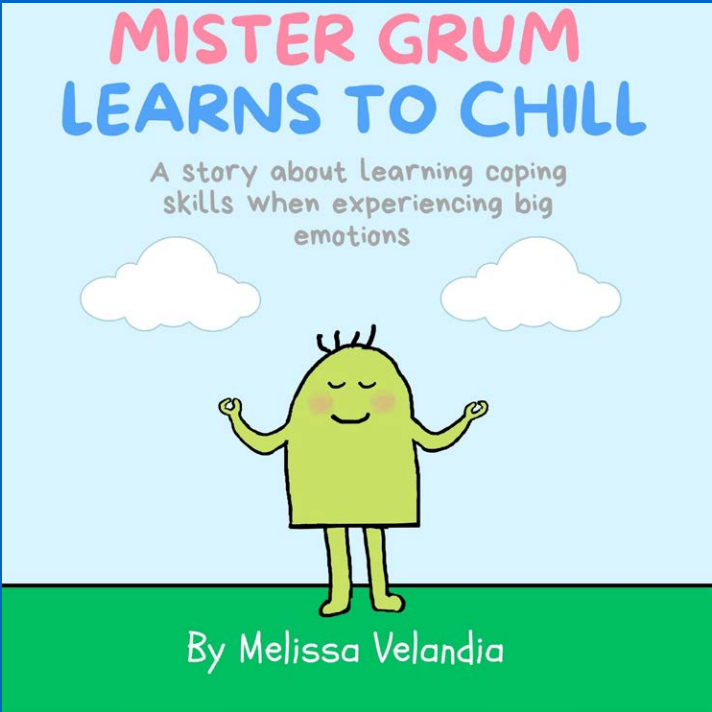
Azalia Kaviani as a baby, with her mother, from *Bleu Tango*. Animation by Vivien Forsans. Image courtesy of Marion Chuniaud

A picture book exploring how to feel better

Mr. Grum is grumpy all the time. Young children first meet him with his angry face: downturned eyebrows, frowning eyes and mouth in the book *Mister Grum learns to chill: A story about learning coping skills when experiencing big emotions* by Melissa Velandia, a psychologist with the English Montreal School Board. At first, readers do not know why Mr. Grum is so upset, so the narrator invites children to try to make him feel better – to chill! But he doesn’t want to smell the flowers, swim, bake cookies or draw. The friendly narrator does not give up on Mr. Grum. Finally, readers discover things he would like to do: Read a story, take a hike with his family. He now has a happy face. Children read that even

if they are having a bad day, like Mr. Grum, they can learn to do a fun or relaxing activity, and, like Mr. Grum, they will feel better. The end of the book has blank pages inviting young readers along with an adult to explore and visually express different activities that help them calm down and chill. Examples are to play with a friend, talk to an adult they trust, bake, write about their feelings, read or listen to a story or play in the park. At the end of the book, Mr. Grum thanks readers for not giving up on him, and that is the final lesson in this charming book. Do not give up on yourself, even if you are very unhappy. Ask a trusted adult to help you find ways to feel better and take control of strong emotions. ■

– Roanne Weisman



A personal account

My advice: Don't be afraid to try something new

by *Meagan Hawes*

Hi, my name is Meagan. I graduated from Saint Lambert Elementary School and Centennial Regional High School. After that, I attended Champlain College in the three-year Adam's P.A.C.E (Post-secondary Alternative Community-based Education) program.

Adam Taylor, born with Down syndrome, had a dream to attend college. His parents, Ann and Graham Taylor, were inspired to follow Adam's dream, and so the Adam's P.A.C.E. program was created and named after him. It's a college-level inclusive education program, where I audited classes, participated in work study (internships) and completed the Prework Training program. Adam was an inspiration to me because his great desire was to go to Champlain College with his friends, and that was a dream that came true for him.

For the next five years, I worked at Tim Hortons as a kitchen helper. I really enjoyed working but sadly due to Covid-19 I was

out of a job. While being at home, I started writing and playing my guitar.

This past August, I went back to school, ACCESS, a Social Participation program for adults with special needs. My two goals are "independent living" and "learning French."

Growing up, I always liked writing and putting my thoughts down on paper. A few Christmases ago, I received a gift – a 300 Writing Prompts book. Each page offered a new idea, a new challenge or a new question that made me think more deeply about my life and emotions. The prompts encouraged me to reflect on things I hadn't considered before, and writing became more than just "something to do" – it became a way to process my thoughts and understand my feelings. That book reminds me that everyone has something meaningful to say, including me.

Since then and over the past couple of years my brother, Tommy, who is a photographer by profession, started writing songs. His love for songwriting inspired me so much I decided this was something that I also wanted to pursue as an interest.

Like my writing prompts, I now write to express how I feel through songs and lyrics. Writing about positive things such as happiness, love and family connections lifts my spirits, especially when I've had an off day.

My dream is to one day sell my songs to artists who inspire me. Jelly Roll, for example, writes openly about inspiration, hope, love and his faith in God; I want my lyrics to touch people's hearts, just like what Reba McEntire looks for in songs – real emotional meaning. I'm also inspired by artists like Dan + Shay and Michael Bublé, who often write about love, family and meaningful connections. I hope my songs can reflect those same values and bring comfort, joy and inspiration to others.

Here are some lyrics from one of my songs "Holding Hands:"

"We started out as friends, now we're holding hands,

We go out on dates and talk about lots of things.

Happy he's in my life and that I get to call him my sweetheart."

Writing songs has given me a purpose, and it doesn't matter what age I am – I always want to follow my dreams no matter what, just like Adam did. I've even decided to take guitar lessons. I really want to encourage other people to find their dream no matter what it is. It's never too late to do something different – there is always space for something new.

If I could give one piece of advice to someone searching for their passion, it would be this: don't be afraid to try something new – you never know what the future might be for you. Life is full of surprises and uncertainties, and that's ok. You never know until you try. Who knows – maybe one day you'll write an article for the *Inspirations* newspaper, too.

Oh, by the way, I have Down syndrome. ■

See cover for photo.

Meagan Hawes is a student at ACCESS, an Adult Education Centre of the Riverside School Board. She was formerly in the Adam's P.A.C.E. program.



par
Emmanuelle Assor

Aspergirl saison 2, une série pas comme les autres sur l'autisme

Pour ceux qui n'ont jamais entendu parler de *Aspergirl* (sorti en 2023), dont la deuxième saison vient de sortir deux ans après la première, il est temps de découvrir cette sympathique série franco-belge tournée à Lille. En 10 épisodes de 22 minutes, on apprend à connaître le délicieux personnage de Louison, une femme récemment séparée, dont le fils Guilhem est expulsé de l'école après une altercation avec un camarade de classe. Lorsque les services sociaux s'en mêlent, Louison fait tout son possible pour avoir l'air de mener « une vie normale » pour ne pas perdre la garde de son fils.

Mais en quoi consiste « une vie normale »? En cherchant la réponse à cette question impossible, Louison chemine vers le diagnostic d'autisme de Guilhem. Mais là n'est pas le clou de l'histoire : c'est plutôt le fait qu'elle découvre qu'elle aussi est autiste, quand elle fait diagnostiquer son fils.

A partir du diagnostic de la mère et du fils, on comprend mieux les tribulations de chacun, les malentendus mignons, tristes ou cocasses avec leur entourage, dans un monde « neurotypique » qui n'est pas fait pour eux. Carel Brown, l'acteur qui joue Guilhem, est aussi bien choisi. Il porte sur ses épaules toute la difficulté d'être différent, de vivre sa vérité et de vouloir quand même être un jeune comme les autres... Nicole Ferroni qui joue Louison a un pétillant bien à elle, des étoiles dans les yeux. Elle n'est pas un « super héros » et c'est ce qui la rend si attachante.

À cet effet, *Aspergirl* surprend en nous montrant un personnage de femme autiste, qui vit sa vie, librement, en dehors des normes sociales, sans se douter de sa « différence ». Un peu comme l'a fait *Atypical*, cette merveilleuse série américaine, *Aspergirl* – pour une fois une série en français, une rareté! – présente un

univers nouveau, loin des clichés sur les génies Asperger (une terminologie que l'on n'utilise même plus).

S'adressant à tous, *Aspergirl* est plus qu'une fable sur la différence et l'acceptation. Sans chercher à nous instruire ou à nous consterner, la série donne une place de choix à l'humour. Car c'est sur un ton léger que l'on peut parfois dire des choses difficiles. On les montre sans les juger et ainsi on ouvre des portes.

Aspergirl : saison 1 et saison 2 (dès le 6 septembre) sur Tou.TV, Prime Video, Apple TV et sur l'appli gratuite de TV5. ■

Emmanuelle Assor est journaliste de formation, elle a beaucoup écrit d'articles sur des sujets de société. Dans ses temps libres, elle voyage avec son fils autiste. Elle aime écrire sur ce sujet, sensibiliser les gens sur l'autisme et raconter sa vie de mère particulière.



by *Julie Kristof*

Advocacy, gratitude and growth in our schools

My daughter was born in August of 2007 with complex medical issues and diagnosed at 18-months-old with a rare, chronic and fatal disease called Familial Dysautonomia. The diagnosis was a kicker, a reality that her symptoms were not going to resolve or get better. It was also a significant realization for her older brother, my husband and I that we were on a path that was fundamentally different than the one we had expected and dreamed of. We were now on a path that was filled with the unknown. We grieved.

At this point you might be thinking: “Julie, isn’t this piece about gratitude?” Yes, it is. Stay with me!

After the diagnosis, I was very worried about my son and how the trauma might impact his world. My very wise husband pointed out that every person goes through some kind of trauma – it’s how we choose to deal with that trauma that is important. From that moment on, with the exception

of the times that I roll up into a ball and cry (that’s okay too!), the mantra in our home was to not waste energy on what we can’t control, but to focus on what we can.

I am grateful for so many people and so many things.

In the context of the advocacy I do, I am grateful for my voice.

I get to use my voice to ask questions, identify gaps and to contribute to great initiatives. I am trying to forge partnerships and build bridges between different groups and communities. I am trying to be vulnerable and speak up when I don’t understand something or am confused. I am grateful for my voice.

I first got involved by joining the Governing Board of my daughter’s school. Then, I sat on the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) Parents Committee, then the Advisory Committee on Special Education Services (ACSES), and last year I was elected to sit on the EMSB Council of

Commissioners as the parent commissioner for ACSES.

I am super excited to be working on a program planned for next spring and hosted by John Grant High School called Spring into Support Night. This event is a heartfelt celebration of neurodiversity that brings together students, families, educators and community organizations in a welcoming and inclusive environment.

I believe that every person has a voice and is an advocate for something they care about. Your voice makes a difference, maybe you can’t tell immediately, but as the Dalai Lama said, “Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects.” ■

Julie Kristof is a mother and sits as parent commissioner – ACSES on the English Montreal School Board’s elected Council of Commissioners, as a member of the EMSB Parents Committee and proudly chairs the Governing Board at John Grant High School.

L’Abri en Ville provides more than housing

by *Olivia Integlia*

The systems put in place for adults experiencing fragility in their mental health are in crisis according to Star Gale, executive director of L’Abri en Ville, a non-profit organization providing stable housing for adults living with severe mental health diagnoses.

Applicants must first be ready to ask for help.

“Anybody that comes to L’Abri[...] could live independently, but they think that they would have a better success rate having a little bit of support to achieve that goal,” Gale said.

Once accepted, residents live in one of 10 three-bedroom apartments, which are rented by the organization. Residency “is not permanent, but it can be indefinite,” Gale adds, noting that some residents have lived

in the same apartment for over a decade. She describes it as “supportive independent living.”

Many of the organization’s leases were first signed over 30 years ago, allowing L’Abri to benefit from long-standing rental agreements. While not formally rent-controlled, these agreements offer stability. “We put in a lot of work every year to negotiate with the proprietors to do what we can to keep the rents low,” said Gale.

The organization’s support extends far beyond housing.

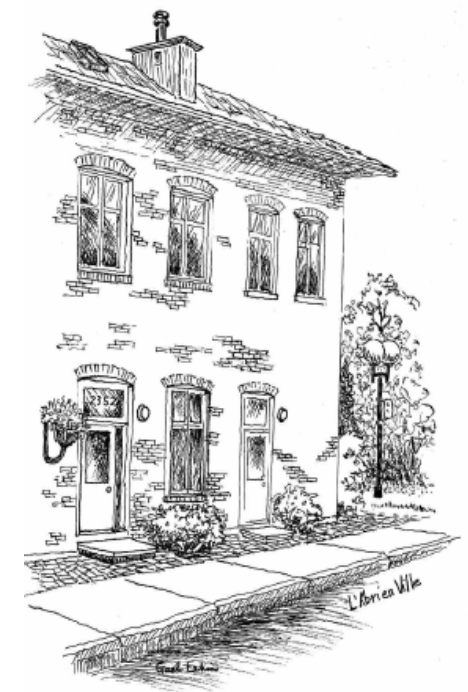
A coordinator with a background in social work or social services oversees each apartment. Coordinators hold weekly house meetings to ensure everything runs smoothly – an important step, Gale explained, because “it can be hard to live with other people.” They also help maintain relationships among roommates and intervene when residents are hospitalized to ensure continuity of care.

Coordinators also act as liaisons between residents and their support networks, including family, friends and clinicians. They also assist residents in achieving personal goals, such as returning to work and meeting physical needs.

Volunteers are another cornerstone of the program. Each apartment is supported by a team of three to five volunteers who help foster “rehabilitation and meaningful connection,” Gale explained.

While L’Abri’s housing is not a permanent solution, Gale emphasized that it “concretely interrupts the cycle of the revolving door of people coming in and out of being unhoused because they’re in psychiatric distress.”

The success of this approach has inspired similar initiatives. Today, L’Abri en Ville has three organizations in Châteauguay, Saint-Lambert and Ottawa. ■



An illustration of the front of L’Abri en Ville’s offices on Duvernay St. by Gael Eakin. Image courtesy of L’Abri en Ville

Spectrum Productions recognized for championing neurodiverse creators

by **Randy Pinsky**

There are many ways to express thoughts and feelings; some use the medium of art, while others, video animation and film. For the past 15 years, Spectrum Productions has offered professional skill-building and film-making workshops to autistic and neurodiverse artists of all ages.

In recognition of their work in promoting client self-expression and career advancement, Spectrum Productions is this edition's Inspirations Entrepreneurial Award recipient.

From its humble origins in 2009 as a summer camp to an independent film production studio in Montreal's Mile End, Spectrum Productions demonstrates what happens when people are given a chance, said Michelle Bennett, director's assistant. "Through nurturing the creative capabilities of autistic youth and young adults in film and media, we are trying to increase

the public presence of neurodiverse creators in Quebec."

In offering programs such as Creative Media Labs and Career Exploration, clients have access to top-of-the-line equipment and professional assistance for projects, from initial sketches to final execution.

While the company offers several introductory workshops, it also supports those looking to pursue a career in animation and film. Bennett said that having the Creative Media Lab open daily provides a reassuring structure to their neurodiverse clients and reinforces employability skills such as responsibility, teamwork and punctuality.

Clients have showcased their works at numerous festivals and venues, including Montreal's Nuit Blanche and Fantasia, as well as the Festival International de Cinéma Adapté de Montréal (FICAM). One of Spectrum's aspiring animators, filmmakers and voice actors, Adrien Nicholas, recently took part in an online panel promoting his short animated film *BackJump*, which screened at the 2025 Toronto International

Film Festival. "It's an experience I will never forget," he related, "Being autistic gives me a superpower for my work."

In response to hesitation by film companies or art schools to hire their clients or accept them in their programs, Bennett said, "Any adjustment is minimal compared to the gains."

Due to the increasing use of AI and fierce competition in the film industry, the non-profit has pivoted to offering more career support. In addition to their "Pitch It To Me!" program for developing professional level film pitches and a portfolio, their new Spectrum Public Access learning platform offers free online workshops to widen their reach beyond Montreal.

The studio will be hosting their annual gala on November 19 at the Rialto Theatre and will showcase over 60 short films created over the summer, including Nicholas' comedy, *How to Be a Villainnaire*.

As a launching pad for neurodiverse artists, Spectrum Productions states on its website that it is seeking to "play a vital role in



The Spectrum Productions CML production stream team celebrates receiving the Inspirations Entrepreneurial Award on November 5, from left: Anthony Campoli, James Watts, Philip Bignell-Harris, Robert Girolami, David Gromak, Alex Kowalczyk, Adrien Nicholas, Leeza Girolami, Felipe Arasanz, Dan Ten Veen and Austin Roach. Photo: Mark Bergman

changing the conversation around autism to one of talent, creativity - and potential."

Spectrum Productions also offers weekend activities, a Friday Night Social Club and summer camps. ■

Info: www.productionsspectrum.com.

Organizations collaborate to promote inclusive hiring

by **Lori Leonard**

When it comes to finding meaningful jobs for neurodivergent youth over the age of 21, Ashley Budd, director of Adult Education and Employment Services at Giant Steps, and Hugues-Olivier Champagne, provincial coordinator of Ready, Willing and Able (RWA) combine the efforts, experience and expertise of their organizations to ensure employment opportunities are provided.

Giant Steps is a school and resource centre focused exclusively on autism, with an adult education and employment services pillar working to advance education and employment opportunities for young autistic adults. For the last six years, it has housed the Quebec chapter of RWA, a federally funded organization that seeks

to connect employers and autistic individuals or individuals with an intellectual disability looking for employment. The program provides training to employers and supports for employees, for example in the form of job coaching.

In partnership with the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and Giant Steps' adult education program, autistic adults can learn skills to help them gain greater independence, community inclusion and meaningful employment. Students are provided with training, visual job aids and coaching.

"Sometimes companies are reticent and have misconceptions about hiring a neurodivergent adult," said Champagne. "Employers and employees must be edu-

cated to understand that productivity can actually increase by hiring a neurodivergent individual and that the end result is often very positive. One of the key ingredients is to ensure the job is a good match between the employee and the employer."

Budd works in tandem with the EMSB and advises them to contact RWA for employment openings. She said that "Summer employment is available to Giant Steps students. For example, this summer, some of the students were employed to complete janitorial services at the EMSB." Other partnerships take place with companies such as Provigo, St-Hubert, Fairmont and Costco, which are open to hiring neurodivergent youth and have been pleased with positive results, according to Champagne.

Champagne claims that over 5,000 employment opportunities have been filled through RWA since 2014 in Canada; with around 1,000 individuals hired in Quebec by 500 employers.

According to Giant Steps, over 75 percent of employers in Canada rate autistic workers or those with intellectual disabilities as well as or better than average on productivity. The organization has also found that individuals who comprise this talent pool are loyal, stable, dependable and competent employees. ■

Lori Leonard is a freelance writer also for Main Street newspaper, is owner of Lori's Links and a community resource person who resides in Ste. Anne des Lacs in the Laurentians.

P.A.C.E. grad lands job in CEGEP gym

by *Sue Montgomery*



Donnick Patrice, left, is seen here with his co-worker Baptiste Audouin, at his job at the Champlain Student Association (CSA) Fitness Centre at Champlain College. Photo courtesy of Sarah Madi

Donnick Patrice went from being a student at Adam’s P.A.C.E. program at Champlain College in St. Lambert to working – and being a shining light – in the college’s athletic department. Teamwork between the administration and unions at Champlain, and fueled by his teacher’s encouragement, were the keys to Patrice’s unprecedented employment at the college.

“I’ve known him since he was 9,” said retired teacher Natalie Henri about Patrice, who is now 23. “He’s a gentle soul – a nice, polite, empathetic young man.”

When Patrice left REACH, a school for students aged 4 to 21 with developmental challenges, Henri pushed hard to get him into the P.A.C.E. (Post-secondary Alternative Community-based Education) program. Located in Champlain College, it gives people from the neurodiverse community a chance to experience CEGEP life.

“He thrived in that program and became independent,” said Henri. “He did so great

that I was able to convince Champlain College to give him a chance at a job there.”

For the past year, Patrice has worked from 3 to 6 p.m. every weekday in the fitness centre, keeping the equipment clean and orderly and greeting participants.

“I love it,” said Patrice, adding that he takes a bus to work by himself and often arrives at noon.

That gives him some time to see his friends and to drop in to some classes at P.A.C.E. He likes to spend the money he earns on video games and Lego.

About his job, Henri said, “Nobody thought he could ever, ever do that. I always believed in him and thought he could do more.”

Sarah Madi, who works at the college’s Student Services department, said that at the beginning, she helped Patrice with time sheets but now he manages on his own.

She said Patrice also helps with the college’s food pantry as well as the lost and found.

Dean Howie, the college’s former director of Student Services, said it took a little time and some discussion with different bodies at the college and required them waiving certain qualifications such as secondary five and French to get Patrice hired. “In the end,” he said, “everyone collaborated to make this work, and this is a testament to the college community and the impact the Adam’s P.A.C.E. program has had at Champlain.”

“It created a precedent,” Henri said. “Donnick is exactly what the [P.A.C.E.] program was designed for.”

Adam’s P.A.C.E. was created 20 years ago and is named after a young man whose dream it was to attend CEGEP with individualized support. The students are aged 18 to 23. ■

Coffee served with confidence at Centre of Dreams and Hopes

by *Randy Pinsky*

‘Grilled cheese with a side of hash browns? Coming right up!’

Every morning, students and staff at the Centre of Dreams and Hopes (CDH) in Ahuntsic-Cartierville line up to get something fresh and hot at its newly opened and completely student-run Café on Wheels. Launched in April 2025, specialized educator and Café co-founder Melissa Moses is thrilled how it has truly taken off.

Since volunteering with neurodiverse clients at the West Island Association for the Intellectually Handicapped (WIAIH), Moses has been passionate about inclusive educational opportunities. Currently completing a master’s in education and counseling psychology at McGill University, she and educator Anthony Picarazzi brainstormed how to help their students in the Needs Exploration classroom develop tangible skills and teamwork.

After mulling over several ideas, a lunch program, then scaled down to a café, emerged as the winning ticket. Beyond cooking, the class also focuses on food safety and hygiene, and financial literacy.

“It’s been a powerful way to build life skills, foster independence and create a sense of community,” said Moses. “Café on Wheels is more than just a café – it’s a tool for empowerment and inclusion.”

Cracking eggs, flipping pancakes and prepping the coffee drink of the month, the students alternate roles of cook, server and cashier to develop their versatility.

“Café on Wheels has become a morning tradition at CDH,” observed Moses. “It sets the tone for the day.”

The Centre of Dreams and Hopes started 20 years ago as a summer camp, responding to the lack of specialized programs for anglophone families in Montreal’s east end.

It has now expanded to a bustling day centre. “They have an amazing team,” said Patricia Petrecca, mom to 23-year-old Sabrina. “It’s like a second home.”

The centre is funded by government sources and private sponsors, along with a \$50 fee paid by members.

CDH is unique as it ascribes to a neurodiversity-affirming perspective, “empowering clients to thrive as they are,” as stated on their site. Through a comprehensive set of educational, therapeutic and recreational resources, families can get support in one location.

“At CDH, students are challenged – and thriving,” said Petrecca.

As for Sabrina, she reflected, “[working at Café on Wheels] makes me feel happy” – the best reward Moses and her team could ask for. ■



From left, Sabrina Mencaroni, Dania Marino and Sebastian Cortina prepare beverages to serve to customers at the Centre of Dreams and Hopes’ Café on Wheels in September. Photo courtesy of Melissa Moses

Blind psychologist ‘sees’ the solutions to client problems

by *Randy Pinsky*

“It sounds clichéd, but there’s some truth in the adage, ‘the wise blind sage,’” said psychologist Josh Simmonds. “I see what my clients don’t. I pick up on cues, changes in tone - and what they aren’t saying.”



Josh Simmonds in his office on August 30.
Photo: Andreas Kurz

Born with retinitis pigmentosa, Simmonds became legally blind in his 40s. He feels his clients connect with his easygoing nature, and are less inhibited, particularly those with body image insecurities.

“People feel more listened to when they feel they are not being seen versus having a visual bias,” he observed.

While studying psychology at Concordia and McGill University, Simmonds had difficulty seeing the board but was reluctant to share his condition with his professors. In his second year, he finally sought the support of the Office for Students with Disabilities and experienced the difference it made. Self-advocacy has since been a life-long endeavour. “Asking for accommodations does not give you an unfair

advantage,” he explained. “Rather, it helps put you on an even playing field with others.”

Since 2003, Simmonds has run his own psychotherapy practice. On his LinkedIn page, he prides himself on offering a “person-centered style [that] emphasizes a collaborative dialogue that is mindful of individual differences and cultural influences.”

Clients may be surprised at their first meeting when Simmonds greets them with tinted glasses and a white cane. However, he said, they soon realize it does not impact his clinical skill. If anything, it enhances his intuitive nature. “Recommendations and thoughts are taken with a bit more gravitas because I walk the walk and talk the talk,” said Simmonds.

The only time it becomes relevant, he laughed, is when it looks like he is not paying attention or misses a handshake.

Outside of the office, Simmonds is a competitive dragon boater who has represented Canada with the 22Dragons senior men’s

division. With the support of the Montreal Association for the Blind and Habilitas Foundation, he co-founded the Caravela dragon boat team for individuals with vision impairment and other challenges in 2016.

This has been a particularly poignant year for Simmonds, having suffered an aortic tear in the fall of 2024. He is back on the water thanks to the support of his dragon boat family.

His next project is writing an autobiography tentatively titled *Feeling Seen: Memoirs of a Blind Psychologist*. Other ideas include hosting a podcast showcasing practitioners with disabilities, discussing their experiences and contesting assumptions.

“Everyone has challenges they need to work through, be they visual or something more discrete,” said Simmonds. “Don’t look at them as barriers, but rather as part of the journey.” ■

From Social Integration to Social Participation: A new curriculum for adult education

by *Jennifer Campbell, Matthew Kennedy and Julie Robitaille*

You may have heard of the Social Integration Programs at Endeavour, Galileo, Ventures and Wagar. After many years, all these centres have implemented a new Ministry of Education curriculum called Social Participation (SP). This new curriculum represents a forward-thinking approach to fostering inclusion, autonomy and active citizenship among adult learners. Designed to support individuals with diverse needs and abilities, this curriculum emphasizes real-life skills, community engagement and self-advocacy – all through the creation of a learning plan.

By focusing on practical learning experiences and authentic social interactions, each learning plan will empower adults to build confidence, strengthen interpersonal relationships and enhance their independence. This renewed framework reflects Quebec’s commitment to lifelong learning and the active inclusion of all citizens

into the social and civic fabric of their communities.

The SP curriculum includes 30 brand new courses drawn from four themes: Living conditions, social relationships, living environment and community.

As consultants, we jumped right into what we knew would be a jam-packed preparatory year. We unpacked the curriculum with our teams, established a working group of teachers from six school boards to create unit plans, delivered four after-school provincial workshops, prepared a full-day training session and launched a new teacher-built website. This was all made possible thanks to a generous budget from the Provincial Organization of Continuing Education Directors, English (PROCEDE).

This school year, our plan is to collaboratively guide our teaching staff in the implementation of SP, with particular attention to the formative and summative assessment

of learning, as the new curriculum requires the completion of authentic exam-based evaluation situations. As students move through the program, they’ll be able to update their learning plan along the way, which will help them to refine their goals based on what they’ve learned, while also allowing teachers to track students’ learning and continuously adapt their teaching.

Regardless of which adult education centre they attend, the province’s neurodivergent adult learners will benefit from a brand-new curriculum that represents an important shift from social integration to social participation. ■

Jennifer Campbell is an educational consultant for special education with the English Montreal School Board. Matthew Kennedy is consultant for Social Participation and Sociovocational Integration with the Lester B. Pearson School Board and Julie Robitaille is a pedagogical consultant with l'Équipe-choc pédagogique.

Well Nest supports carers

AMI-Québec Allies in Mental Health helps families manage the effects of a loved one living with mental health challenges through support, education, guidance and advocacy. On October 9, AMI-Québec hosted a Well Nest communal painting event where carers and friends of the organization were welcomed to enjoy a fun evening of respite, food and drink, and create on a big canvas with friends old and new.

Known for their support groups, workshops and counselling offerings, AMI-Québec's Executive Director **Ella Amir** shared that the organization continues to add more activities to support carers of all ages, such as writing, meditation and group walks. Events like the Well Nest aim to give people options on how to heal, receive respite and build community.



AMI-Québec board and team members enjoy the Well Nest event at their office in Montreal on October 9. From left: Sharlene Young, Oliver Fitzpatrick, Connie DiNaro, Natalie Boileau, Ella Amir and Besta Avci. Photo: W. Singer

'Barrier busting' on The Lepodcast

David Lepofsky is one of Canada's leading disability rights advocates, known over the past 40 years as a driving force for accessibility and inclusion. A retired lawyer who is blind, he is the chair of Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance as well as Toronto District School Board's special education advisory committee, and a visiting professor of disability rights at three Ontario university law schools.

Now, Lepofsky has teamed up with Accessible Media Inc. (AMI) and **Jacob Shymanski**, host of Audiobook Café, co-host and producer of The Lepodcast and also blind, to launch a new podcast: Disability Rights, and Wrongs: The Lepodcast.



Jacob Shymanski. Photo courtesy of J. Shymanski

The Lepodcast aims to take you into the front lines of advocacy to tear down barriers faced by over 2.9 million Ontarians, over 8 million Canadians and upwards of a billion people worldwide who have disabilities.

The debut episode revisits Lepofsky's landmark legal battle to force the Toronto Transit Commission to audibly announce all subway, bus and streetcar stops.

Episodes drop approximately every three weeks.



David Lepofsky. Photo courtesy of D. Lepofsky

Strengthening pediatric research

On October 18, over 700 people of all ages and fitness levels came out in Montreal and Quebec City simultaneously to test their limits at the 8th annual Tough Mountie Challenge. Participants began with a trail run on Mount Royal before tackling 18 obstacles on McGill University's Forbes Field, each designed to test physical and mental strength and provide a glimpse into police training.

The Montreal event was co-hosted by **Kevin Raphael**, star host of TVA Sports, and **Samuel Hébert**, kinesiologist and obstacle course athlete. It was organized by the Pediatric Research Foundation in collaboration with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Quebec regional police departments.

Together, they raised \$220,000 for the Pediatric Research Foundation in support of mental health and neurodevelopmental research programs. Funds will support three innovative projects: Neuro-inclusive secondary schools: taking action to reduce barriers to the well-being of neurodivergent youth; Mitigating polarization and reducing youth distress and violence: a pilot project to rethink preventive approaches in schools; and the Future for Inuit youth: reconnecting with life through individual and community development.



Tough Mountie Challenge raised funds for child mental health prevention research on October 18 in Montreal and Quebec City. From left: Patrick Côté, ambassador; Julie Poulin, Pediatric Research Foundation; Sébastien Chartier, SPVM; Josée Saint-Pierre, Pediatric Research Foundation; Martin Roach, RCMP; Samuel Hébert, ambassador; and Sam Younes, honorary president. Photo: Jaysson Gallant

Zera Café spreads the love on the court

The inaugural Zera Café charity tennis tournament took place on September 11 in Hampstead Park. The community rallied on the courts to raise over \$40,000 to support Zera Café's mission of providing meaningful, supported employment to neurodivergent adults. Nearly 70 players came out to play and enjoy dinner together along with 50 spectators who cheered them on.

Zera Café founder **Eve Rochman** describes the event as an overwhelming success. "We are so grateful to our amazing committee and to the vibrant tennis community, whose enthusiasm and encouragement continue to strengthen our mission of inclusion and made this new initiative a success."



Participants serving up smiles at Zera Café's tennis tournament in Hampstead Park on September 11. Photo: Alissa Anzarut

Right to Play McGill, Nesbitt work to make phys. ed. more inclusive

by *Olivia Integlia*



Volunteers from McGill's Right to Play club build a tower of blocks for the students of Nesbitt Elementary School. Photo courtesy of Dabin Lee

For the past three years, Nesbitt Elementary School (English Montreal School Board) in Rosemont-La-Petite-Patrie has partnered with McGill University's student club Right to Play, an affiliate of the international non-profit whose goal is to support children through play.

"Right to Play McGill focuses on encouraging inclusive, impactful play within local schools," said Dabin Lee, the club's vice president of outreach. In addition to visiting schools, it raises funds to support its mission and provides equipment for physical education programs.

Nesbitt has been among the beneficiaries. Physical education teacher Alex Rio explained the club first held a two-day session when they started at the school in 2023. All students participated in team-building games. The club also raised \$1,000 to purchase much-needed equipment, he said.

Last year, however, the focus shifted. Instead of a short-term program, Right to Play McGill began working weekly with students in WINGS (Working on Individual Needs to Grow and Succeed), a classroom for autistic children. Volunteers spent 30 to 60 minutes each week leading activities. "They were able to interact with, get to know and earn the trust of the students," said Rio. It was here that he says he saw the true benefit of the program.

Lee agrees, noting the emphasis on social-emotional learning. There was "less of a focus on going through planned games," she said, and more on teaching skills like "teamwork, patience, learning how to ask for help, sharing [and] supporting each other."

Right to Play McGill will be returning to Nesbitt this year, further continuing their mission. ■

Info: <https://righttoplay.ca>.

Meet Jack Gill

by *Olivia Integlia*

Jagdev (Jack) Gill, a fourth-year biology and math student at McGill, joined the university's Right to Play group last winter and soon became one of the volunteers for Nesbitt Elementary School's weekly program.

Gill says his interest in neuropsychological disabilities made the experience particularly meaningful.

"We were able to slowly bring [these students] out of their comfort zone and just laugh with them, and play with them," he recalls. Activities included sledding, jumping on trampolines and completing obstacle courses.

Living with cerebral palsy, Gill knows firsthand the challenges of physical education.

Yet, since 2022, Gill has been a para-athlete on the McGill men's swim team. "I'm super happy McGill's been open and allowed me not only to swim with them but to really be part of the team," he said, "They've definitely helped me get a lot faster."

Gill's athletic journey has taken him far. In September, he competed at the Para World



Jack Gill after having completed the 200m freestyle race at the 2025 World Para Swimming Championships in Singapore this September. Photo courtesy of J. Gill

Swimming Championships in Singapore, placing sixth in the 100-meter freestyle. In 2023, he earned a bronze medal in the same category at the Pan American Games in Chile. "It was just an amazing experience," he said.

Looking forward, Gill hopes to represent Canada's swim team in the 2028 Paralympic Games. ■

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Travel tip for Rome: Buy a ticket for the Big Bus Tour

While in Rome, Italy, the Big Bus Tours represented our first activity. Seated on the top deck, it was the perfect way to be introduced to the city and have the best opportunities to photograph iconic landmarks. This daytime sightseeing tour showcased the Eternal City in all its glory: the Colosseum, Circus Maximus, Piazza Venezia, Piazza Navona Fountain, Vatican City and more, with stops located nearby so we could hop off the bus to explore them at our own pace. During the tour, we were able to tune in to pre-recorded commentary, which is available in a variety of languages.

All buses are equipped with wheelchair ramps; however, the only way to reach the upper deck is by going up the steps.

According to the Big Bus website, you must first select the date you want to board the

bus, and the date you select at the time of booking should be the first day of your tour. They state that “if you’re touring with them for more than one day, your ticket must be used across consecutive days,” and that “some tours also require you to select a time of travel, to secure your seat.” There are other things you can arrange, such as extras, which can be done using their booking portal.

Services operate daily from 9 am to 6 pm, with tour schedule information and notices available on their website. Buses pull up at each stop every 20 minutes.

On board the buses are headphones for pre-recorded educational commentary available in many languages, which allows passengers to learn about Rome, its inhabitants, architecture and culture. ■



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Ben & Florentine Ruby Foo's

A new Ben & Florentine Restaurant has opened at Ruby Foo's Hotel on Decarie Blvd. The tables are all situated at the same level, and the washrooms are located in the hotel area. There is a ramp for wheelchairs at the back exit of the restaurant.

Renowned for its must-try potatoes, old-fashioned stir-fries, and sweet and



Server Jennifer presents the orders at Ben & Florentine.

savory combos, Ben & Florentine offers a diverse and surprising menu that meets the highest quality standards. This marks the 67th restaurant for Ben & Florentine, which has locations in Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba and the Maritimes.

I was intrigued by the selection of old-fashioned skillet items, opting for the maple syrup version, featuring one egg over easy with bacon, mixed peppers, red onions and a mix of Monterey Jack and cheddar cheeses. I was also eager to try their gourmandise: a half-waffle with almonds, chocolate chips and hazelnut and white chocolate. It was every bit as delicious as I was told, in fact, better. My dining partner ordered the healthy delight; two poached eggs, fresh fruits, rye bread and a choice of cottage cheese, Swiss cheese, brie and vanilla yogurt.

Info: benetflorentine.com.

Chez Delmo

It has been 15 years now since Benoît Dessureault and Adam Bornell bid adieu to their careers in the print-media advertising business and purchased Chez Delmo, a French restaurant specializing in delicious fish and seafood. Located at 275 Notre Dame Ouest, near the heart of Old Montreal, Chez Delmo has gone through several incarnations since first opening in 1907 as a bar, gaming room and yes, a brothel.

It is hard to believe that we had not been there since 2016. I assure you it won't be nearly that long a wait the next time. There is valet parking and easy access to the dining room, which is all at one level.

We shared 12 large and delicious oysters, a perfectly prepared fresh Angus rib-eye steak à tartare, lobster and



Chez Delmo owner Benoît Dessureault and his son William.

grilled scallops. For dessert we shared a decadent portion of chocolate mousse.

Info: www.chezdelmo.com.

The beloved Montreal restaurant Renoir at the Sofitel

Renoir, the signature French restaurant of the renowned Sofitel Montreal Golden Mile in downtown Montreal, recently underwent an extensive upgrade. The restaurant welcomes guests for breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week, inviting them to rediscover the art of exquisite French cuisine. It can now seat 80 people inside. The dining room and bar area are now separated, and there are also 80 more seats on the beautiful and seasonal outdoor terrasse. There is valet parking for a fee.

The entryway is accessible, as are the washrooms.

An institution of the Montreal epicurean scene for the last 23 years, Renoir has long been revered for its fine French cuisine that infuses local Quebec ingredients with international flavours. Under Chef Olivier Perret, a Maître Cuisinier de France, Ambassadeur de l'Érable and Air France's Canadian Signature Chef, Renoir continues to offer the refined French cuisine it has long been celebrated for.

We started off our dinner with some cocktails before turning to the appetizers. And at Renoir you can always count on something different. That was definitely the case with the Canadian lobster and

sturgeon caviar, with sea water jelly, cucumbers and tangy cream for me and the Canadian pike quenelle and lobster bisque for my dining partner, who enjoyed the Quebec rack of lamb for the main course. I opted for the roasted duck breast, confied leg and seared foie gras from Ferme Goulu. It came with carrots, pistachios, spiced jus and raspberry.

Our server, Amy, concluded the service by bringing out the three dessert pastries of the evening. We went for the Frasier, a traditional French cake consisting of a sponge cake soaked in kirsch, filled with mousseline cream and strawberries (hence its name) as well as a decadent pistachio and cream.

Info: restaurant-renoir.com.



The refurbished dining room at Renoir.



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