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SIMON CHANG

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INSPIRATIONS

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



Students from Peter Hall School pose for a photo in front of the National Assembly of Quebec in June. See p. 19.
Photo courtesy of Peter Hall School

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Editor's message

This edition brings you some deeply personal accounts of different types of grief. Sarah Crotty graciously shares her story about losing her brother when they were both teenagers. David Garfinkle reveals how he moves forward after a life-altering change. "Loving Stephanie" is a beautiful portrait of a mother and daughter, accompanied by a moving photograph by Andreas Kurz. These pieces are heavy but uplifting, with messages of both suffering and hope.

We also hear from two professionals. Grief counsellor Corrie Sirota writes about what can lead people to grieve and ways that we can look at grief in a wholesome and helpful way. Stephanie Paquette, social worker with the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and a regular contributor, writes about being present through grief.

In news form, our reporters write about two housing initiatives that open up independent and adapted living options for adults with special needs. Two articles reveal elements of city and borough action plans around accessibility.

The employment and entrepreneurship section is also packed with stories. For example, read about a specialized product and its inventor (this edition's award winner) and about how adult students in the Social Participation and Sociovocational Integration programs at EMSB adult education centres are taking part in meaningful working and learning opportunities.

Our regular columnist and psychologist with the EMSB Janet Silverstone Perlis writes about the Highly Sensitive Child as she explores the topic through the well-known book by Elaine N. Aron. It shines a light on children whose sensitivity to the world around them is really a gift to us all.

We hope you will settle in and enjoy this edition.

– Kristin McNeill

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We are grateful to everyone who took the time to share their thoughts in our 2026 readership survey. We have taken your feedback and comments to heart and hope you see your input reflected in this edition and those to come. Your voices help shape the content and the resources we share.

We're also continuing to find new ways to welcome your support. Our new CanadaHelps page makes it easy to give online, and we're excited to introduce Adopt-a-Story, an initiative that invites readers to support a story, topic or section that matters to them. Every gift helps bring meaningful stories and valuable information to our readers –to inform, inspire and connect our community.

Thanks to our readers, partners and advertisers, together we continue to support, inspire and champion inclusion and positive mental well-being. – Wendy Singer, managing editor

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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 170 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 school boards.

INSPIRATIONS

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CDN-NDG borough rolls out citizen consultation on accessibility

by *Randy Pinsky*

Twist your ankle and you will suddenly become more aware of accessibility challenges that those with mobility difficulties face on a daily basis in the city.

While Montreal as a city adopted the Municipal Plan for Universal Accessibility 2024-2030, the borough of Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (CDN-NDG) went a step further to become the third in Montreal to propose a borough-specific plan.

The formal process began in the fall of 2025, when the borough of CDN-NDG offered public consultations (in addition to a survey), one in person and one online, seeking feedback on barriers to universal accessibility in its facilities, streets, parks, services and programs, explained Christine Bouchard, strategic planning advisor for CDN-NDG's department of culture, sports, recreation and social development. She said they used citizen observations to serve as a base for developing their action plan. "We have set ourselves objectives and identified actions to remove the barriers to participation for people with functional limitations."

The first draft of the Universal Accessibility Action Plan was produced in the winter of 2026, which was presented to the public in the spring for a second consultation to confirm its contents and clarify certain elements.

More than 130 citizens contributed feedback in person or online during the consultation sessions and via a distributed survey.

Contrary to popular belief, universal accessibility does not only refer to elevators in metro stations and ramps in front of stores. The city of Montreal's website defines it as a situation in which "all people can exercise their rights and carry out their daily activities independently and without barriers, regardless of their abilities."

Nor does it only affect a minority of individuals. According to CDN-NDG's 2021 "Portrait des personnes ayant déclaré une limitation d'activités," around 31 percent of citizens are impacted by mobility difficulties, which can also include aspects of sight, hearing, learning or mental health conditions.

Bouchard was joined in the June 9 online consultation by Jonathan Vermette, who acted as moderator. Vermette is from AlterGo Expertise, an organization whose mission is to advance universal accessibility. "We want to see accessibility taken into account at the outset as opposed to a secondary afterthought," he said.

The June meeting identified four axes of action: architectural and urban planning; communications; training and awareness; and programs, services and employment.

The dilemma Montreal must continuously contend with is how to balance historical legacy with modern needs, noted Bouchard. For instance, it is more complex to accessibly retrofit existing and often heritage buildings as opposed to new ones when accessibility is considered at the design phase.

Martin Lalonde of Montreal-based Ex aequo disability advocacy organization spoke about "microaggressions" that stem from a lack of sensitization. For Lalonde, who has an invisible disability of chronic back pain, storefronts that lack ramps is an example. "Owners may claim 'there aren't many customers in wheelchairs who frequent here,' however, perhaps if there were a ramp, there would be more," he said.

The accessibility team will incorporate feedback from the consultations and present its findings in the fall by adopting the CDN-NDG universal accessibility plan at the borough council. ■

Services multidisciplinaires et des programmes pour la déficience intellectuelle, trouble du spectre de l'autisme et déficience physique. (DI-TSA-DP)

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From left, Isabel Savard, Jean-Rémi Mayrand, Kathy Haltrich, Lucas Mayrand, Elise Favis, Devadas (Dave) Barrigar, Ainslie Macdonald (front), Christopher Favis, Pascale Armstrong, Nicole Charat-Macdonald (front), Jeremy Rambas-Mitchell, Basil Favis, JJ Armstrong, Ricky Narvaez-Bryant, Marco Grotto and Graham Macdonald during an outing at Quinn Farm on Notre Damede-l'Île-Perrot in September. Photo courtesy of J.R. Mayrand

Apartment complex opens in West Island for neurodiverse adults

by *Randy Pinsky*

For parents of young adults on the autism spectrum or with intellectual challenges, questions about their child are constantly preoccupying their minds, such as: "Will they make friends?" or "Will they get a job?" But a particularly complex concern is "Who will take care of my child when/if I am not able to?" and "Where will they ultimately live?"

Jean-Rémi Mayrand and Isabel Savard shared this uncertainty concerning their son Lucas. In April 2022, the couple launched the foundation Autisme et Toit, whose play-on-words alludes to its mission of inclusiveness and housing.

Their most tangible project is Les Colocs de l'Ouest, which welcomed new tenants in March 2026. It is a replicable model of adapted housing, explained Mayrand. The three-storey, newly built apartment complex in Pierrefonds features 11 adapted units.

Some of the special features include soundproofing the common rooms and installing safety precautions throughout the building.

With funding from the city of Montreal, the Societé d'habitations du Québec and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Les Colocs is the first of its kind in the West Island.

Mayrand shared his concern that most adults with autism eventually get placed at senior living facilities or intermediary residences that may not be adapted to their needs and interests. Although the project was started during the pandemic, "the outcome has been beyond our expectations," he said. "Everything came together at the right time."

While the residents, aged 25 to 37, all have a certain level of autonomy, they require assistance for their daily needs. Experienced house managers come from Ideal Care.

Residents have movie nights, weekly cooking sessions and a common room for relaxing.

They shared their impressions. "I like the fact that I have my own place to call home now," said Ainslie Macdonald. According to Lucas Mayrand, "there is so much space, and I have a nice view."

"We want to thank Jean-Rémi and Isabel for their visionary leadership and tireless advocacy," said Graham Macdonald, Ainslie's father. "[They] have turned empathy into action, and action into lasting change. Their work through Autisme et Toit is not only transforming lives today but laying the foundation for a more inclusive tomorrow."

Autisme et Toit, a registered charity, gives advice and coaches other families who would like to do a project similar to Colocs de l'Ouest. ■

Info: autismeettoit.com

***Inspirations podcast* featured Autisme et Toit in "Opening Doors to Independence" in January 2026.**

Celebrating Awesome, thanks to Tidan!



Inspirations extends its heartfelt gratitude to Tidan Inc. for its generous $25,000 donation in support of our Adopt-a-Story initiative. Co-founders and co-CEOs Jack Sofer and Mike Yuval have built successful careers in the hospitality industry and are recognized philanthropists. Pictured at Tidan's downtown office on September 30 are, from left: Jack Sofer, Mike Yuval, and *Inspirations'* publisher Mike Cohen. This generous gift will help Inspirations continue publishing our Awesome page, celebrating the remarkable achievements of individuals who inspire others.

The Simon Chang difference



by *Wendy Singer*

Over the past six years, Inspirations has had the privilege of welcoming Simon Chang into our community, onto our pages and into the hearts of countless students, educators and readers across Greater Montreal and the surrounding areas. On October 7, Inspirations celebrated Chang, the legacy we have built together and the difference he has made.

Chang is internationally renowned for his contribution to women's fashion. Less widely known is his longstanding commitment to philanthropy, from providing scholarships to design students at universities across Canada to raising funds for breast cancer research alongside Céline Dion. He also focuses on smaller, more personal gestures such as offering Tim Hortons gift cards to people he meets.

In 2018, Chang and his business partner, Faye Swift, established the Simon Chang Foundation for Change to expand his hands-on, collaborative approach. Their Arc of Life philosophy was created to support people at every stage of life. Among their initiatives are a Wall of Hope at the neonatal intensive care unit at the Jewish General Hospital University Health Centre and the Moment in Time program, which grants wishes to seniors at two Donald Berman eldercare centres.



Samara O'Gorman, middle, holds Simon Chang's new book while chatting with Chang, left, and Steven Atme.

The Inspirations community falls within the middle of this arc. Since 2019, our team has worked hand-in-hand with Chang to positively impact students with different abilities. As *Inspirations* newspaper's title sponsor, he has shared his expertise through school visits and collaborative projects, inspiring students to follow their dreams. Inspired by the designer, we created the Simon Chang Difference Maker Award and have since recognized 13 educators and community members for their commitment to promoting inclusion and making a difference.

Celebrating a shared legacy

The impact of this collaboration came into focus on October 7 at the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) head office, where community members and Simon Chang Difference Makers from the Galileo Adult Education Centre, Mackay Centre School, Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities, L.I.N.K.S. High School and Summit School gathered to celebrate Chang's legacy.

Also present were EMSB Commissioners Maria Corsi, Paula Killian and James Kromida; Director General Nick Katalifos; Assistant Director General Pela Nickoletopoulos; and Regional Director Jimmy Giannacopoulos.

Standing at the podium and looking out at a room filled with Chang's Difference Makers was profoundly moving. It was also a unique opportunity to reflect on the immense body of work created over the past six years.



A celebration of Simon Chang's Difference Makers and the launch of his new book took place at the English Montreal School Board on October 7. Simon Chang, left, shares a conversation with Martina Schiavone, principal of Galileo Adult Education Centre. Photos: Emine Arslan Avci and Alena Hamlett

Josh Cunningham, vice-principal of Satellite Programs at Summit School, was named a Difference Maker in Fall 2023 after collaborating with Chang on several projects, including the school's leather and sewing programs and its student-led media project which produced Chang's *A to Z* video. "Simon's enthusiasm and creative spirit are contagious, facilitating a learning environment that was always welcoming and confidence-building for our students," he shared. "Simon's generosity with both his time and resources helped further develop our programs and created opportunities for our students that they would not have had the chance to experience. The Difference Maker award acknowledged and reinforced the work we are doing at Summit School."

Lisa Trotto, Vera Tronca and Alain Tourigny were named Difference Makers in Spring 2022 for their work on Galileo's puppet-making educational art project, which was conceived of by Tourigny and written by Marie-Claude Lauzon. "Being named a Difference Maker was incredibly meaningful and strengthened my confidence in finding creative ways to make learning more accessible and inclusive," Trotto said. "Simon Chang's generosity and support helped bring our puppet project to life, giving students new ways to express themselves and build relationships. Seeing a student who typically struggled with social interaction spontaneously initiate a conversation through their puppet was a powerful reminder of how the right opportunities can make a lasting difference."

Creativity in action

Chang has contributed fabrics, paints and his expertise to school projects including apron-making at John Grant High School, painted jeans at L.I.N.K.S. High School and bags sewn through Summit School's Sew

▶ *Continued on p. 9*



Audley Coley, left, a member of Inspirations' Board of Advisors, shares a moment with Simon Chang while holding a copy of his newly released book, *Simon Chang*.



Simon Chang, middle, stands with Alana Cymerman, left, and her daughter Bella Flanz, who led the Mackay Centre School's Fun for All Fashion Show in spring 2022.



From left, Lisa Trotto, Simon Chang and Tanya Marie De Sousa, posing with a portrait created by Galileo students and staff.



Joining together to celebrate inclusion and community engagement were, from left: EMSB commissioner James Kromida, Director General Nick Katalifos, Commissioners Maria Corsi and Paula Kilian, Managing Editor of Inspirations Wendy Singer and Simon Chang.



Leaders on Wheels student Alexis Zhang with Rea Limperopoulos, vice principal of the Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools.



Laughter and applause fill the room as members of the Leaders on Wheels, alongside students, educators and community members, enjoy the celebration.



Audley Coley, left, stands with Pam Wener, Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities (MCLD), Wendy Singer, Sana Nakleh, MCLD, and Alla'a Ali, MCLD.

◀ *Cont'd from p. 8*

Good program. At John Caboto Academy of the EMSB, students were captivated by his sketchbooks following a lively bilingual question-and-answer session.

Chang also served as fashion consultant for the Mackay Centre School's 2022 Fun for All Fashion Show. Led by Bella Flanz, then a student in Mackay's reverse integration program, the project aimed to show classmates, many of whom used wheelchairs, that everyone could enjoy fashion without barriers. Over several months, Chang brought clothing, led workshops and encouraged students to unleash their creativity.

For Swift, these collaborations deepened her understanding of the community Inspirations serves. "Having been a special education teacher myself many years ago, I hadn't fully realized how much the field had changed or how many students with special needs were now being integrated into regular classrooms. I was surprised by the scope of the needs and the number of educators supporting these students every day. Inspirations helped us recognize where support was needed most and how we could make a difference," she said.

The butterfly effect

Chang chose a butterfly as the Foundation's logo, inspired by the idea that small actions can have a far-reaching impact.

"Working with Inspirations has been an eye-opening experience," he said. "It introduced me to a remarkable community of students and educators and gave me the opportunity to work directly with them. Seeing their creativity and potential firsthand inspired me to find new ways to contribute. This partnership has shown me how much more I can do."

The gathering was a powerful reminder of the butterfly effect in action. Chang's generosity, creativity and positive spirit have created ripples that reach far beyond what we might ever imagine. His commitment to inclusion, respect and celebrating individuality has become part of our fabric, and we will continue to carry these values forward in everything we do. ■



Simon Chang, the book

Chang's new book, *Simon Chang,* was presented to event attendees on October 7. The 320-page coffee table book, featuring over 500 photographs, illustrations and designs, offers fans the opportunity to delve deeper into Chang's story and legacy.

Designed as a visual feast for the eyes, the book reflects the unique individual who inspired it, capturing Chang's many interests – from fashion to graphic design, photography, food and travel – and his daily routines.

Simon Chang is seen here with Faye Swift, cutting a cake that replicates his book. The book is available for purchase through the Simon Chang Foundation for Change (email: admin@simonchanggroup.com). The cost is $105 (GST included) and all proceeds go directly to the Foundation.

We are grateful to the Simon Chang Foundation for Change for their invaluable support and partnership over the past six years, helping us share stories that celebrate difference makers and promote inclusion for people of all abilities across Greater Montreal.

When diversity and divorce intersect: A new initiative to support families

by *Tania Piperni*

Parenting is a rewarding journey, but it can also be challenging, particularly when raising a child with diverse developmental, cognitive, emotional or physical needs. Navigating educational and social support systems can be complex under the best of circumstances. When family conflict or divorce is added to the mix, those challenges often become more complex.

Families facing the dual realities of diversity and divorce frequently encounter unclear legal frameworks, inconsistent professional guidance and considerable emotional and financial strain. In these situations, a child's needs can sometimes be overshadowed by competing demands and conflict. Ideally, both parents remain actively engaged, share responsibilities equally, and the child's well-being remains the central focus. However, this is not always the case.

Traditional custody arrangements based on typical developmental expectations of the children involved may not adequately meet the needs of children with diverse profiles. As a result, the parent who assumes most of the caregiving responsibilities may feel isolated, overwhelmed and unsupported. Professionals involved in these cases may also lack specialized knowledge of the legal and practical realities facing such families. Ensuring that children's voices are heard and that their needs remain a priority is essential.

Recognizing these challenges, a group of Montreal-based professionals recently established MAPSSdd, an acronym for Multiple Adversities, Problems, Support and Solutions; divorce and diversity. The organization was created to advocate for and support families of children with diverse needs, including adult children, who are affected by separation or divorce. Its mission is to ensure that these families' voices, experiences and rights are recognized within legal, emotional and social systems.

The MAPSSdd team, which currently operates on a volunteer basis, embraces a broad understanding of diversity, ranging from cognitive, physical, emotional and developmental to varied ways of learning, processing information and engaging with the world.

The initiative was spearheaded by Dr. Harriett Greenstone, a well-known Montreal psychologist, who brought together a group of like-minded professionals with different backgrounds and personal motivations for becoming involved.

Reflecting on the inspiration behind the project, Dr. Greenstone explains: "In many aspects of my life, I have seen one parent left fighting a battle with no one to help. Rather than being recognized for advocating tirelessly for their child and their child's rights, they may instead face criticism or blame. I felt something needed to be done. Parents often find themselves fighting the disorder and then fighting the system. When feelings of defeat set in, they may turn on one another, and in that new conflict, the child can be forgotten as time, energy and resources are consumed by the divorce process and its aftermath. This sad reality captured my attention, and the need to make things different became very clear."

Another founding member, Erica Onofrio, is deeply committed to supporting neurodiverse individuals and their families through her work as an art therapist, birth and grief doula: "I am always looking for meaningful ways to support their journeys, amplify their voices and create spaces where they can be seen, valued and heard. I believe being part of MAPSSdd is one small step toward honouring and celebrating their voices."

As conversations evolved, more professionals joined the initiative, personal family stories were collected, and MAPSSdd began to take shape. Although the organization is still in its early stages, it has already held a soft launch and is preparing for the official launch of its website and upcoming programming.

The team's vision is to empower families through clarity, compassion and community, while ensuring that the child's voice remains at the centre of every discussion. MAPSSdd plans to offer guidance, professional training sessions and workshops led by experts from a variety of disciplines. It also aims to create a supportive community where families can connect, share experiences and learn from one another. ■

Info: mapssdd.weebly.com

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



Children with the gift of sensitivity

by *Janet Silverstone Perlis*

Have you ever wondered why some children seem to feel everything so deeply? They may cry easily, notice the tiniest change in a room or refuse to wear a shirt because the tag feels "too scratchy." These same children are often especially attuned to the feelings of others. They may quickly notice when someone is left out, be deeply moved by a kind gesture or offer comfort when a friend is hurting. This depth of feeling was first highlighted by the groundbreaking research of psychologist Dr. Elaine Aron. She identified that an estimated 15 to 20 percent of children are born as Highly Sensitive Children (HSC). Beneath the tears, worries and big reactions often lies a remarkable gift.

Dr. Aron stresses that it is essential for parents and educators to understand that these children aren't acting out, looking for attention or being intentionally difficult. Most importantly, her work firmly establishes that high sensitivity is absolutely not a disorder, a medical diagnosis, a deficit or a mental health condition. She differentiates how this trait differs from other types of diagnoses.

Dubbed "Sensory Processing Sensitivity" (SPS), it is a neutral, deeply ingrained temperament trait, not a weakness. It is simply a different, highly attuned way of processing the nervous system and experiencing the world. Highly sensitive children often process experiences deeply and notice details others may miss. Their sensitivity can help them develop empathy, creativity, compassion and a strong appreciation for the world around them. They may be the children who ask thoughtful questions, notice beauty in everyday moments or show remarkable kindness and understanding toward others beyond their years.

Therefore, the goal is not to change a child's sensitive nature, but to help children understand and manage their emotions while recognizing and embracing the qualities that make their sensitivity a gift.

Differentiating Highly Sensitive Children
High sensitivity manifests across a predictable cluster of traits. Dr. Aron used the acronym D.O.E.S. to group these foundational characteristics:

- **Depth of Processing:** These children think about things deeply, ask profound or philosophical questions at a young age and need more time to make decisions because they are weighing all possible outcomes.
- **Overstimulation:** Because their brains absorb every sound, sight, smell and emotional undercurrent, their nervous systems can easily short-circuit. What looks like a behavioural meltdown is often just neurological exhaustion.
- **Emotional Responsiveness and Empathy:** They feel joy, sadness and fear with incredible intensity. They are deeply empathetic, absorbing the moods of the people around them and showing immense compassion for animals and others.
- **Sensing the Subtle:** They are the first to notice small changes that others miss entirely, such as a clock ticking in a quiet room, a minor shift in a person's tone of voice or a slight rearrangement of furniture.

Moving from vulnerability to strength
Because an HSC's nervous system operates at a high volume, traditional "toughening them up" disciplinary tactics usually backfire. Instead, the goal is gentle guidance. By validating their emotions ("I see you're feeling overwhelmed, and that's okay"), we give them the security they need to navigate a loud world.

When highly sensitive children are misunderstood, they can easily internalize the message that something is "wrong" with them. But when we accept high sensitivity as a natural human variation rather than a disorder, we unlock its true potential. With the right support, these deeply observant, big-hearted children blossom into exceptionally creative, conscientious and empathetic leaders.

Every child experiences emotions differently. Sensitivity is not, in itself, a disorder, and intense emotions can have many causes. If emotional difficulties persist, interfere with daily life or cause significant distress, consider consulting a qualified mental health professional for guidance.

Sensitivity is not something to be fixed or overcome. With understanding, patience and the right tools, children can learn to manage their big feelings while embracing the qualities that make them unique. What may sometimes feel like a challenge can also be a gift.

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

Recommended reading

For parents:

- *The Highly Sensitive Child* by Elaine N. Aron
- *Brain-Body Parenting* by Mona Delahooke
- *The Whole-Brain Child* by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
- *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

For children:

- *A Rocky Start for Jack: A Journey Towards Self-Acceptance for Highly Sensitive Children* by Jennifer Lewy and Dina Lewy
- *The Color Monster* by Anna Llenas
- *Listening to My Body* by Gabi Garcia
- *The Rabbit Listened* by Cori Doerrfeld

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School 'NEST' offers children a chance to reset

by *Sue Montgomery*



Syd Apel, school psychologist with the New Frontiers School Board, sits with a student in a NEST classroom in October. Photo courtesy of S. Apel

The New Frontiers School Board (NFSB) has received positive feedback about a program that provides social, emotional and academic support to students in need.

The Nurturing Each Student Today (NEST) program, in its fourth year, provides specialized, trauma-informed support in all 10 of the board's elementary schools. In a special room outside of the classroom, a child is able to co-regulate with a caring adult (an assigned special education technician) and discuss challenges and practice skills through play and a variety of activities.

Students can access the room during a scheduled time or upon request. "It's something we try to implement as a prevention for them," said Syd Apel, a school board psychologist, who coordinates the NEST with Sheryl Ross, a behaviour consultant.

NEST is modelled on the Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management's Nurturing Support Centre based at Riverside School Board. Its goal is to provide trauma-informed, attachment-based interventions that can help a child develop the skills to cope with daily expectations at school. Instead of being disciplined because they are unable to live up to expectations, students are getting the support they need to develop their skills. "There's an understanding that to have children's cooperation we're moving away from this idea of reward and punishment ... [and instead] developing a capacity to listen to your own self and voice, so motivation is intrinsic instead of extrinsic," he explained.

Ross pointed out that societal changes may be contributing to a shift in the way children respond to traditional teaching methods. "We have to get that nervous system calm enough to be open to learning, and it's something that teachers are struggling with," she said. "It's not part of their curriculum."

The school team gathers to refer possible candidates for NEST and to figure out what skills are needed to succeed. Are they struggling with peers? A subject at school? Challenges in life? NEST will support them and attempt to remove that pressure. ■

Colouring as a way to lift spirits

by *Roanne Weisman*

One way for you and your family to unleash your creativity, invite joy into your lives, deal with stress or get through difficult times is by delving into *Fear is Better Dressed in Polka Dots - Words to Color in a Crisis and Other Times Too* by Aimée Brender and Susan Brender.

All you need is this small colouring book, a set of coloured pencils or markers, imagination and your own personal style!

The Mayo Clinic describes the benefits of colouring to be stress relief, calming the brain, encouraging mindfulness and shifting the focus away from negative thoughts.

And besides, it's fun!

Fear is Better Dressed in Polka Dots was written and illustrated by sisters Aimée Brender and Susan Brender, when they were dealing with cancer diagnoses in their family during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. "This book was a way to channel what we were feeling and to feel better through this crisis," said Aimée, a pattern designer and textile artist who did all the illustrations. "We see the book as being about catharsis and inspiration," explained Susan, a yoga instructor and small business owner. "Catharsis when one colours the pages that express difficult feelings and inspiration from the ones that express positive emotions." Both women are mothers and part of a supportive, close-knit family.

The book consists of 36 unique and fun images designed to transport you into a happier mindset. The images are beautifully designed and irresistibly tempting to colour in, with affirming messages on each page, such as "find balance," "rise to the challenge," "face your fear," "ask for help," "move forward," "self-care," and "rest and reflect." The book was published privately and is available on Amazon. ■

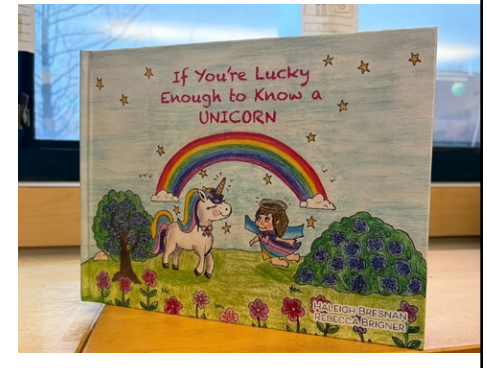




From left, sisters Aimée Brender and Susan Brender. Photo courtesy of A. Brender

Unicorns as comfort

A new children's book *If You're Lucky Enough to Know a Unicorn* was written to "help children navigate complex feelings," according to its author Haleigh Bresnan and her cousin Rebecca Brigner, who illustrated the book. They created the book together, driven by personal experiences. While the story addresses grief in a gentle way, its focus is on the mysterious and loving presence of a unicorn and "finding beauty in incredibly difficult moments." Published in February 2026 by Palmetto Publishing, the 22-page book is available in soft and hard cover. - KM



Being there through grief

by *Stephanie Paquette*

I have been supporting people who are grieving since the beginning of my career. As a social work student, I worked with injured and dying patients and their families as they navigated the shock and pain of loss. One experience has always stayed with me. A patient had sustained devastating injuries that resulted in the permanent loss of the use of her legs. I remember feeling overwhelmed by the many layers of grief she was carrying and wondering what I could possibly do to help.

In the end, what they needed most was not advice or answers, but someone willing to sit beside them, hold their hand and stay present with their grief.

Although grief is often associated with death, it is much broader than that. It can accompany separation, illness, the loss of a relationship or any significant life transition. Whatever its source, grief can touch every part of our lives.

After a significant loss, there is often an outpouring of support. People reach out, send messages, drop off meals and surround the grieving person with care. But as time passes, that support often fades, while the person who is grieving is still trying to make sense of what has happened and find a way forward. Grief does not follow a timeline, and our need for connection often continues long after the initial calls and visits have stopped.

Many people who are grieving want to talk about their loss, yet those around them can feel unsure about bringing it up. We worry that mentioning the person who died or talking about what happened will make things worse, when often the opposite is true. One simple approach is to ask permission: "Would you feel comfortable talking about what happened?" or "I've been thinking about you. Would you like to tell me about them?"

Giving someone that choice offers a sense of autonomy at a time when grief can make them feel as though they have very little control. It also lets them know that their loss has not been forgotten. Sometimes, simply listening and being willing to remember alongside someone is one of the most helpful things we can offer.

Rituals can also help us find connection and meaning within the grief experience. They can be as simple as eating a favourite meal, lighting a candle, visiting a meaningful place or creating a small space in our home to remember someone who has died. There is no right way to grieve, just as there is no single right way to support someone who is grieving. What matters is finding ways to stay connected to what has been lost while allowing space for the grief that comes with it.

For those looking for additional support and information, www.grief.com offers resources on grief and loss. David Kessler's book *Finding Meaning*, along with its accompanying workbook, may also provide guidance for those trying to find a way forward while continuing to honour what has been lost. ■

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

Advertorial

When letting go means stepping in

by Kylie Goldman, MSW, social worker

For many families, the hardest part isn't the paperwork. It's the moment you realize your role is changing, whether your child with a disability is turning 18 or your parent now needs more help. Both families are letting go of the way things used to be. And both end up facing the same question: what do we do when someone we love can no longer decide alone?

Start before anything is official

Most families begin long before a court is involved, and a few practical tools make that stage easier:

The words to use when you first notice a change in your parent.

How to share your concerns with their doctor, and what to ask at the appointment.

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My free guide, "Before You Say It Out Loud," is the place to start: beyondcareco.com/before-you-say-it.

When formal protection is needed

At 18, your child is an adult in the eyes of the law, even if their needs haven't changed overnight. And a power of attorney does not cover a parent's incapacity. In Quebec, there are three main paths:

The assistance measure, for an adult who can still decide but benefits from recognized help. You help. They still decide.

Homologating a protection mandate: if your parent signed one while still capable, the court puts it into effect.

Tutorship to a person of full age: when there is no mandate, the court can appoint a tutor, always with the least protection necessary. It is protection, not control.

Both court paths require a medical evaluation and a psychosocial evaluation by a social worker who is a member of the OTSTCFQ. That second report is the part I do. A notary or lawyer handles the legal side.

Letting go doesn't mean stepping away. It means stepping in at the right time, with the right support.

How to reach me

Free guide: beyondcareco.com/before-you-say-it.

Free consultation about formal protection: kyliegoldman.com or 514-378-8800.



Kylie Goldman, MSW, is a social worker (OTSTCFQ) in Montreal and the founder of Beyond Care.



Loss is an unwelcome change. How do we respond to it?

by Corrie Sirota

After nearly three decades as a grief counsellor, I have learned a great deal about loss. One of the biggest lessons is this: grief is our natural response to loss, and loss happens whenever life changes. While we often associate grief with death, we also grieve the end of relationships, friendships that quietly fade, children growing up, retirement, moving homes or dreams that no longer fit the lives we're living. Sometimes, we grieve what was. Other times, we grieve what we hoped would be.

Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of walking alongside people during some of the hardest moments of their lives. I've sat with parents whose children have died, spouses facing life without their partners, individuals grieving identities, futures, relationships they never imagined losing. Again and again, I am reminded that grief isn't simply about losing someone we love, it's about losing something that mattered deeply to us.

Some losses are obvious. Someone dies, and the world changes overnight. Other losses are much harder to define. A relationship ends without closure. A loved one develops dementia and is physically present but emotionally absent. A diagnosis changes the future you imagined. A long-held dream quietly slips away.

These experiences are often described as "ambiguous grief" or "ambiguous loss," a term developed by American family therapist Dr. Pauline Boss. It refers to losses that don't have a clear ending or aren't fully recognized by others. This type of loss can also include a parent receiving a diagnosis for their child after they were assessed or being advised that their child has been born with a medical condition at birth. Unlike a death, this type of loss doesn't have a funeral, ritual or even a clear moment of goodbye, and people often wonder if they're "allowed" to grieve. The answer is yes. Any meaningful loss deserves to be acknowledged.

One of the hardest parts of grief is learning to create what I call a new normal. Many people worry that healing means letting go of the person they loved or the life they once had. I gently remind them that there is a difference between moving on and moving forward.

Moving on can feel like leaving someone behind. Moving forward means carrying your love, memories and experiences with you while learning to live differently. Letting go is not about letting go of love.

You can let go of the life you expected while holding tightly to the memories that shaped you.

You can let go of the role someone once played while keeping the lessons they taught you.

You can let go of needing all the answers while making peace with unanswered questions.

And you can begin building a new life without abandoning the old one.

Grief often feels most intense the first time a normally celebratory event or moment occurs without that person beside you – the first birthday, holiday, anniversary, graduation or family celebration. Even everyday moments – a favourite song, a familiar scent, a photograph – can suddenly stop you in your tracks.

I often compare grief to a roller coaster. There are peaks and valleys, unexpected twists and moments when you feel like you're moving backward instead of forward. One minute you may be laughing, and the next you are in tears. This isn't a sign that something is wrong. It's a sign that you are grieving.

Alongside those painful moments, I hope you also begin to notice the "glimmers" – small moments that bring warmth. A memory that makes you smile. A story that brings laughter. A feeling of closeness when you least expect it. These moments don't mean your grief has disappeared. They simply remind you that love continues to exist alongside loss.

People often ask what my job is as a grief counsellor. I explain that my role isn't to help someone "get over" their grief. It's to walk beside them as they learn how to carry it. There is no timeline, no checklist and no right way to grieve. Sometimes, the greatest gift we can offer another person is simply to sit with them and say, "I see you, and I see how hard this is."

Over time, grief does change. The pain often becomes less overwhelming. Memories begin to bring more comfort than heartache. You may even find yourself imagining a future that holds both your loss and the possibility of joy. When people can't believe that is possible, I simply hold onto the hope until they are ready to take it for themselves.

Perhaps that is what creating a new normal really means. It isn't forgetting. It isn't replacing. And it certainly isn't leaving someone behind. It is allowing yourself to grow around your grief while continuing to carry the love that will always be part of you.

Life is filled with changes we never asked for. Some are welcome, and others arrive without invitation. But even in the midst of unwelcome change, healing is possible. Sometimes, it begins with something as simple, and as courageous, as giving yourself permission to grieve what was, honour what remains and gently make room for what comes next. ■

Corrie Sirota is the clinical director at Myra's Kids Foundation, a clinical social worker and psychotherapist and author of Someone Died… Now What? A Personal and Professional Perspective on Coping With Grief & Loss.

Learning to grieve as a young person

by *Sarah Crotty*

Grief is complicated, messy and confusing. It is by no means linear, and almost impossible to summarize in an article.

My brother, Eric, died by suicide in April 2018, at 17. At the time, I was 15 years old and not expecting my life to be forever changed that rainy Sunday afternoon. Eric was my best friend. He was goofy and smart; he loved Formula 1 and learning how to play national anthems on the piano.

But like many young people today, Eric struggled with crippling social anxiety for many years. Eric did everything that was asked of him in an effort to get better. He got out of bed every morning and went to school, even if he knew his anxiety would force him to flee the classroom because his brain told him the other students did not want him there. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Eric took part in an outpatient program at the Douglas Hospital during the summer, where he faced his anxiety with other young people in similar situations and an incredible team of professionals by his side. I was, and will always be, so incredibly proud of the bravery and strength my big brother showed battling his social anxiety and the depression that followed.

Losing somebody you love is hard, but losing somebody at such a young age is especially painful and confusing. Not only was I grieving the loss of my sibling, but I was watching my parents grieve their child. I was lucky to be surrounded by such an amazing family, friends and community. Despite this, there is something so lonely and isolating about being young and grieving. I spent a lot of time feeling guilty about not being a better sister or regretting all the fights we had over stupid, insignificant things.

I was lucky enough to find a community where I truly felt understood and where I had people who were in the same boat as me. I joined the Myra's Kids Foundation's annual weekend grief camp in August 2018, and my life truly changed.

For the first time, it didn't feel like my world revolved around these deep and heavy emotions I was carrying with me. I was able to laugh and smile and then light a candle in honour of my brother. Grief was normal, accepted and even welcomed. I had finally found an environment where people didn't bat an eye if I started crying, or people didn't get uncomfortable when I mentioned death, or where I was encouraged to feel and to say whatever I wanted about my brother's death.

I spent three years with the foundation as a camper and then transitioned into a volunteer. After nine years, I am still a proud member of this community. I get to honour my brother every day, and I help younger children who are struggling with grief after losing their special person.

As the years go on, my grief remains as I grow with it. I still think about my brother every day, but I am privileged to be able to honour his memory by being there for others the way the Myra's Kids Foundation was there for me.

Although Eric may not be here with me physically, I know he would be so proud of the person I am becoming and the work I do in his memory. ■



Sarah Crotty, right, with her brother Eric. Photo courtesy of S. Crotty

Sarah Crotty is a student studying medical genetics and hopes to pursue a career in public health.

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Loving Stephanie

by *Lorri Benedik*

Aliza Boghen had seven-year-old twin sons, Alexander and Daniel, when Stephanie was born. The doctor told her immediately that her daughter had Down syndrome. "This was not the child I expected," said Boghen. "There was the initial shock and then fear for a future full of unknowns."

Boghen recalls returning home with the baby and feeling overwhelmed by concern. She had been crying when she answered a call from her mother. "We are delighted to have a little girl in the family," said her mom. And Boghen smiled, shared in the joy and then went back to crying.

But her sadness was short-lived.

"Our Stephie was so sweet and adorable," she said, "I remember washing dishes and feeling blue when she crawled over and sat by my legs. I looked down, and she was looking up at me with the biggest smile; it was like she knew I needed something."

They all fell deeply in love with her.

"Even before she could talk, Stephie's good nature and sweet personality brought us such joy," said Boghen. "I would often say, 'Everyone should have a Stephie at home.'"

The family grew to welcome another child into the family, Jennifer, and soon after Stephanie began going to school. A few days after she started pre-kindergarten at age four, Boghen received a call from the school saying that her daughter could not continue with them: she required extra attention they were not able to provide.

"I wasn't sure what to do until I read about the Miriam Home School and thought it could be something for Stephie," she said. "I registered her there when she was five." One of the aides in the classroom took a special interest in Stephanie and would take her out of class for an hour or two each day. Within two weeks, she was reading and showed an exceptional aptitude for learning. The school put on a play about Goldilocks, and Stephanie landed the title role.

"The first time I saw her on stage I knew she was a natural actress," Boghen said. As a young adult, Stephanie joined I Can Dream Theatre.

Her love for the arts continued into her adulthood. When Stephanie was 33, she entered the three-year Centre for the Arts in Human Development program at Concordia, where she learned about behaviour through acting and music. She was also working at Maimonides Geriatric Centre doing office tasks.

Four years ago, 45-year-old Stephanie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.



Aliza Boghen and her daughter Stephanie Boghen at home on September 27. Photo: Andreas Kurz

Although Boghen had worked as an animator for seniors with Alzheimer's, she did not know about its connection to Down syndrome. "I am well aware of the prognosis," Boghen said. "I have always accepted Stephie as she is and will continue with this latest hurdle.

"I have wonderful children, and we are all very close," she said. "My kids, their spouses and children are my support network."

Boghen has noticed the rapid progression of her daughter's Alzheimer's, most recently, her loss of mobility.

"I accept that this is my Stephie now; I am realistic and know that things will continue to change," said Boghen. "We will go with the flow; when she needs more care than I can provide, we will find the right placement for her."

Just before the diagnosis, Stephanie had been cast in Infinithéâtre's production of *Extra/Beautiful/U*, which played at Centaur Theatre. She was to play the main character's younger sister, who had Down syndrome.

"It was incredible," Boghen said. "They put the script in front of her, and she embodied the role." However, with the symptoms of Alzheimer's, she could not continue. The playwright, Michaela Di Cesare, dedicated her play to Stephanie. ■

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David Garfinkle focuses on what good he can make happen today

by *Olivia Integlia*

When David Garfinkle travelled to Hawaii on a corporate retreat in 2014, he was given a choice: a massage or a surfing class. Being adventurous and athletic, he chose the latter.

It was a decision that would change his life.

Garfinkle had never surfed before. As he stood on the board in shallow water, he fell. His last memory was of being lifted back onto the board by his colleagues. Ten days later, he woke up in a hospital bed at Hôpital du Sacré-Cœur-de-Montréal, with his brother standing beside him.



David Garfinkle, centre, with his daughter Emily, left, and Carol Lesser in downtown Montreal in October. Photo courtesy of D. Garfinkle

"You've really done it now," his brother told him.

Garfinkle had sustained a C4 spinal cord injury, leaving him quadriplegic.

The news came with a bittersweet reality: he would live, but he would not be able to return to the life he had known before.

"Why me?" he thought to himself.

At 54, Garfinkle had been highly active. He played tennis and hockey, rode bicycles and went to the gym every morning before waking his children for school. Suddenly, even the most basic functions – eating, coughing and breathing – had to be relearned. He spent 11 months in hospital and rehabilitation.

There were moments when the physical and emotional weight of his new reality felt overwhelming. He recalls craving a medication used to treat nerve pain, because it allowed him to sleep and escape what he was experiencing. At times, he wondered, "This is not worth it. Why am I going through all this?"

What helped shift his perspective was meeting Dan Thompson, who later became his mentor. Thompson had also sustained a life-changing injury while playing football in Ontario. Thompson encouraged him to gradually wean himself off the medications that were keeping him heavily sedated and focus on building a life again.

"I don't want to be a hero, but I also don't want to be a zero," Garfinkle remembers thinking. "I want to live. I want a good quality of life."

Twelve years later, Garfinkle has built a life that looks different from the one he imagined.

He is renovating a home in Vermont that he hopes will become a multigenerational space for his family. He stays connected with his three children, spends time with friends, travels when he can and remains involved in charity work. In 2025, he and his children helped raise more than $400,000 for the Neuro-Efficiency Foundation.

But moving forward has not meant leaving grief behind.

Garfinkle still misses the spontaneity of his old life: playing sports, travelling easily, going to the gym and maintaining the kind of romantic relationship he once had. Even getting ready in the morning can be a reminder of how much his pace has changed. What once took minutes can now take more than an hour.

He is learning to give himself grace.

"I'd rather be on the offence than on the defence, starting early in the morning," he said. When frustration sets in, he reminds himself that he has a whole day to get things done.

For Garfinkle, healing has not meant forgetting what he lost. It has meant figuring out what deserves his energy.

"I don't want to think every day I wake up, 'what bad is going to happen today?'" he said. "I'm the opposite. What good can I make happen today?"

For now, that can mean something as simple as talking to his children, reaching out to a friend or going for a walk.

"Life is good. It could be better, but it's good." ■

If you would like to bring David Garfinkle to your school, email us at info@inspirationsnews.com.

This story has been adopted by Robert Beck, a friend of David Garfinkle. We are grateful to Robert for his generous support and for helping bring stories like this to our readers.

Our Adopt-a-Story initiative offers donors the opportunity to support the stories, topics and voices that matter to them.

À Peter Hall : un voyage vers l'autonomie

par *Marie-Claude Martz*

En juin dernier, après une année de travail acharné, les élèves de Zohra Boutarène, enseignante en éducation spécialisée au secteur francophone, ont vécu un moment inoubliable : un voyage d'une nuit à la ville de Québec. Conçu pour favoriser l'engagement communautaire, ce projet était bien plus qu'une simple sortie ; c'était un véritable tremplin vers l'autonomie pour les élèves.

Tout au long de l'année, Mme Boutarène, son équipe classe et les élèves ont préparé ce voyage. La classe a fait des recherches sur la ville et planifié la visite de plusieurs endroits, comme l'Assemblée nationale, l'Aquarium du Québec et le Musée de la civilisation.

De plus, pour financer leur projet, les élèves ont préparé des repas et des gâteries chaque semaine, avec l'aide de l'équipe, pour les vendre au personnel de l'école. En plus d'amasser des fonds, ces ateliers de cuisine faisaient partie intégrante du programme : ils permettaient de regarder les circulaires, de dresser les listes d'épicerie, de mesurer les ingrédients et d'utiliser les ustensiles. La vente des repas a aussi permis aux élèves de pratiquer leur communication, d'apprendre des règles de vie en société et de développer plusieurs compétences du programme éducatif de l'école – toujours dans le but de gagner en indépendance.

Ce voyage s'inscrit parfaitement dans la mission de l'école Peter Hall, qui est d'aider les élèves à préparer leur transition lorsqu'ils auront 21 ans et quitteront l'école. Passer du temps loin de la maison et de leur famille, dans un cadre sécurisant, les aide à devenir plus indépendants et à avoir plus confiance en eux.

Les élèves et le personnel sont revenus la tête pleine de beaux souvenirs et très motivés à répéter l'expérience cette année vers une destination différente ! ■

Marie-Claude Martz est directrice, services pédagogiques à l'école Peter Hall.

Some simple techniques to teaching basic money management

by *Suzy Knafo*

Last spring, I met with students of John Grant High School of the English Montreal School Board to see how I could approach designing a financial literacy class. Although we spoke only briefly, I sensed that teaching traditional financial literacy in an "out-in-the-real-world exercise format" would be ideal for these students who have unique learning needs. They would immediately be able to connect the dots between what we are learning and why.

I favour this approach as someone who, throughout my academic journey, found that too heavy a theoretical approach was used for teaching some financial concepts. My hope is that when these students are doing their groceries, reviewing receipts, making credit decisions or creating a budget, they can apply these teachings. I also hope that they develop an awareness of their financial situations so they can protect themselves against scammers.

One example of how the program could be adapted to the students, and their families, is to include a module on the psychology of money. The first lesson could include a discussion on how to distinguish between needs and wants. Students would be given different expenses and asked to label them as one or the other and explain why. This helps teach them how to use that thought process anytime they are faced with an expenditure decision.

Another area to explore is the effects of social media on advertising, where students gain an understanding of how wants are created through ads on social media and how to exert control over spending habits. I give the example that spending $20 here or $50 there seems minimal but that it adds up quickly.

Other basics of finance such as using credit cards, the notion of interest and what constitutes an emergency fund are topics that are important to discuss. I have found the best way to teach these concepts is not through mathematical expressions but through role-playing. For example, to demonstrate how compound interest works and the dangers of borrowing beyond one's financial means, I assign some students the role of the borrower and others the pay-up-front group. Every month I ask the borrowers to simulate paying the minimum amount and to figure out the interest they would owe. My hope would be that after some exploration, students could grasp the concept around credit versus debit. ■

Suzy Knafo is an associate investment advisor with Borelli Private Wealth - RBC Wealth Management. She is teaching a course at John Grant High School and is currently involved with a non-profit organization that seeks to bring financial literacy into schools.

Federal government makes changes to Disability Tax Credit

by *Sue Montgomery*

The federal government has changed the application process for people with disabilities and their families to qualify for the Disability Tax Credit (DTC) and to ease the certification process for medical practitioners.

For 2026, the amount of the credit is $10,341, which provides a federal tax reduction of up to $1,448. To be eligible, a person must have a severe and prolonged impairment in physical or mental functions.

The federal government's *Spring Economic Update 2026* stated "the government is committed to supporting persons with disabilities and their families to access all the supports they need." One of the changes is expanding the list of medical practitioners to include podiatrists and broadening the types of impairments that can be certified by physiotherapists, speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists.

Until now, only general practitioners could certify a person's impairment and its impact on daily living. This change will apply to DTC certificates issued after 2026 for the 2027 and subsequent tax years.

The changes also recognize provincial or territorial public guardians and trustees as being qualified to claim the tax credit for adults in their care who have a medical certificate of incapacity. Several long-lasting medical conditions, such as Alzheimer's disease, Down syndrome and paraplegia appear on a list for a doctor to select but without having to provide details of how the medical condition affects the patient's daily life.

According to the Canadian government, these changes are expected to provide $345 million over six years in tax relief through the DTC along with increased payments of federal benefits such as the Canada Disability Benefit and the Child Disability Benefit. Besides these benefits, a DTC certificate also allows the holder to access the Registered Disability Savings Plan (including the Canada Disability Savings Grants and Bonds) and the disability supplement to the Canada Workers Benefit.

A pamphlet sent by MP Anna Gainey to constituents said "...after hearing from many of you that the Disability Tax Credit application was too complicated, we've simplified it and made it the gateway to other federal disability supports." When reached by telephone to explain the changes, her office stated that the pamphlet was intended to provide information and directed any further questions to the website.

To help decipher how the changes tangibly affect Canadians affected by the credit, *Inspirations* spoke with Harold Akerman, who has a 34-year-old son with Down syndrome. He said a large issue with the benefits is that it often takes the Canada Revenue Agency about three months to respond.

In order to help address that, the government proposes to provide $42.5 million over five years, starting in 2026-27, to the Canada Revenue Agency, to administer the changes, according to the Canada Revenue Agency website.

"As long as you have the ability [of more staff] to have more people certified, the better it is," Akerman said. A more user-friendly process could cut out companies that retain a cut of the benefit when they apply for the DTC on behalf of people, said Akerman, who is a certified public accountant.

He advised people to ensure they are using the proper forms. As of September 8, the form to use is T2201 (with the year 2023 or later written in parentheses). ■

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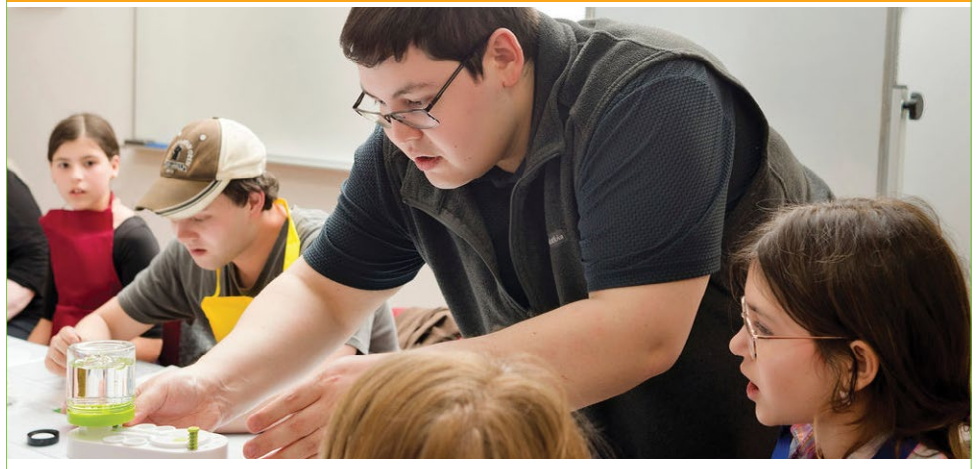
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Samara O'Gorman **Sara Levitt** **Maryam Ganni**



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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 memory and legacy forward by sharing her message of kindness, empathy, and inclusion with students.







Advertorial

When strangers became family: *Come From Away* arrives at the Segal Centre

by Samara O'Gorman



Originally conceived by Canadian theatrical producer Michael Rubinoff, *Come From Away* is the longest-running Canadian musical in Broadway history and it's coming to Montreal's Segal Centre just in time for the holiday season from November 22 to December 13, 2026. Due to popular demand, the run has already been extended until December 20th.

Co-produced with the Thousand Islands Playhouse, and co-written by Ontario couple Irene Sankoff and David Hein, the show resonates deeply with Canadian audiences. It's based on a true story, transporting audiences back to September 11, 2001, when American airspace abruptly closed, forcing 38 planes carrying nearly 7,000 stranded passengers to land unexpectedly in the small, isolated town of Gander, Newfoundland. Before writing the musical, Sankoff and Hein travelled to Gander to interview the residents whose real-life accounts inspired the musical.

Rooted in Celtic traditional music and familiar cultural traditions, the musical embodies the unique and resilient Canadian spirit. Rather than turning inward during a moment of global panic, the East Coast locals of Gander rolled up their sleeves to transform community halls and hockey arenas into havens, welcoming international travellers with open arms.

Lisa Rubin, the Artistic and Executive director of the Segal Centre, is thrilled about the production coming to Montreal: "There is a reason *Come From Away* is one of the most beloved shows in North America. It's funny, uplifting, deeply human, and the kind of show that restores your faith in people. We cannot wait to welcome it to our stage."

As the world marks the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, *Come From Away* offers more than just a night out. It serves as a reminder that even when fear and uncertainty grip the world, human connection and community can turn strangers into family, proving that generosity and kindness know no borders.

In line with the Segal Centre's commitment to creating inclusive community experiences, two audio-described performances will be offered on Sunday, December 6, 2026, at 2:00 pm and 7:30 pm. Additionally, Touch Tours will be available, giving patrons a guided, tactile exploration of the stage, set elements, and costumes before the show. These tours will take place on Sunday, December 6, 2026, at 12:00 pm and 5:30 pm.

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



From Quebec City to the King's letter: The greatest days

by *Steven Atme*

In February 2026, I was on a video conference call with the member of Quebec's National Assembly for D'Arcy-McGee, Elisabeth Prass, because she wanted to know about my Legislative Article Proposal for Special Needs & Mental Health National Movement's Progress and the results from a meeting with the staff of the Minister of Health, Sonia Bélanger. At one point during the meeting, Elisabeth said something which caught me off guard.

Considering she has been following my music and charity career for years, which gave her inspiration for her son, she wanted to make a declaration honouring my life's work across Quebec and Canada before the National Assembly. Hearing this news had me crying.

The big day came on May 13. I went to Quebec City, where, inside the legislative building's Salon Rouge, Elisabeth stated the Honour Declaration while I stood up in the gallery beside my beloved father Elie and good friend Rocco Speranza, who witnessed the significant sentimental moment. Also present was another MNA, Guillaume Cliche-Rivard, who also helped with the movement.

Two hours later across the street, I met with Lieutenant Governor of Quebec Manon Jeannotte at the cabinet building. I told her about my work and future projects, including the performance and conversation with then-Governor General Mary Simon last year and correspondence with King Charles III.

Later, Mme. Jeannotte asked me to perform on the piano. I played for her an original composition, "Precious Memories," followed by singing "Smile" by Charlie Chaplin. "Goosebumps!" she exclaimed. She also added in French, "Hearing your music made me transcend to another place. A peaceful, tranquil place. The way you worked your fingers is an art form creating the unique rich sound as it flows like water." I responded that people must realize when they play music that others hear the sound while the musician might be thinking too much mechanics. But if we feel free when we play, we can play with our hearts, and it delivers such a significant meaning in our musical phrases. It captures them more than words can say.



Steven Atme plays the piano and sings for Quebec's Lieutenant Governor Manon Jeannotte on May 13. Photo courtesy of S. Atme

Exactly a week later, I received a response from the office of King Charles III, saying the King was delighted to hear about my musical achievements and the impact my advocacy and mentorship had on the lives of individuals and families with autism across Canada.

Thank you, everyone, for your love and support. I'll forever cherish them with all my heart and will not stop. I love you. ■

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.

A Users' Committee explained

by *Sofia Ioannou*

Users' committees have been in place in health and social services in Quebec for many years and were entrenched in law in 1991. These committees exist in all health and social service establishments, such as long-term care centres, short-term hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, CLSCs and Readaptation Centres for persons with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, physical disabilities, etc.

The Santé Québec Ouest-de-l'Île-de Montréal Universitaire - Users Committee of the programs for intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, physical disability (DITSADP) is available to all users of these services for support, guidance and assistance with a difficult situation or with a concern or question about a service.

The committee, currently comprised of six members, is mandated to inform users of their rights and responsibilities; to accompany and assist them in a particular situation should they require support; and to answer questions they may have about a particular service. It can assist an individual in finding a solution to a particular question or concern they may have about a service. In addition, the committee can provide information about the type of services that are available and review satisfaction with services provided.

Users' rights include the right to services; the right to consent to care; the right to participate in decisions; the right to be accompanied, assisted and represented; the right to access a user's file; the right to confidentiality; and the right to complain.

The committee hopes to see its membership grow as well as an increase in the number of users registered on the mailing list, so that they can be informed of upcoming Users' Committee events, important information sharing and more.

The Users' Committee works closely with the management team of the DITSADP services to discuss issues that may arise, to be updated on events or services offered and to exchange and clarify service-related issues. The committee can be reached by calling 514.363.3025, ext. 2422. A committee member will be in touch to assist with their query.

The annual general meeting of the Users' Committee is scheduled for November 26. ■

Sofia Ioannou is a member of the Santé Québec Ouest-de-l'Île-de Montréal Universitaire - Users Committee of the programs for intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, physical disability (DITSADP).

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Memories shared at Camp Massawippi's 75th anniversary

by *Randy Pinsky*

Browse through the list of activities offered at Camp Massawippi and you will find adapted sports, campfires and… waterskiing? For the past 75 years, the specialized camp for individuals with motor, hearing and visual challenges has prided itself on making the inaccessible, accessible - and it's not slowing down now.

On August 9, campers and staff, both past and present, came together to celebrate the camp's three-quarter-century milestone. Stories and memories were shared, and participants reconnected with friends from years gone by. The camp has been a second home for many, a retreat from regular life.

"We talk about the Massawippi Magic," said Lisa Crutcher, assistant director. "It sounds clichéd, but I strongly believe that anyone who comes through our gates will be transformed forever."

The camp in Ayer's Cliff in the Eastern Townships was opened in 1951 by the Montreal School for Crippled Children and integrated ten years later into the Mackay Rehabilitation Center. It was renamed Camp Massawippi for its 50th anniversary.

As the campers often have complex medical needs, specialized personnel are always on site, resulting in "strong bonds of trust being forged," said Crutcher.

With 75 years of history comes 75 years of needed repairs, laughed executive director, Karl Boulé. From mending roofs to installing air conditioning, a lot of work goes into maintaining a historic camp. The camp receives financial support from Habilitas Foundation as well as other private donors.

The site is completely accessible, the product of years of determination and, often, imaginative problem-solving, said Boulé.

Crutcher reminisced, "I will never forget the day a camper in a wheelchair first joined us - she called out, 'Mom, Dad - I can go everywhere!'" Rob Wheeler, parent of Alexandra Wheeler, said, "The uniqueness about this camp is that there is the combination of experience and willingness." If someone has an interest, the staff will find a way to adapt to their abilities.

"We want the campers to have the full camp experience in their own way," said Crutcher.

Alexandra is one such camper. Having attended Camp Massawippi for 15 years, she is the camp's unofficial mayor. "I know everything inside-out," she proudly shared. Her father has noticed an increase in her confidence. "It is affirming for her to be on her own, to try new things."

Boulé draws on his background in philanthropy to develop key partnerships and keep the camp active year-round. It has become a popular location for retreats as well as hosting themed weekends for Halloween and Christmas.

Come next summer, lifelong friendships and unforgettable memories will be made at a camp where barriers do not exist. "Camp Massawippi is just the best place to be," said Alexandra. ■



Alexandra Wheeler, below, with Ykaëlla Ménélas at Camp Massawippi's 75th anniversary celebration in August. Photo courtesy of Lisa Crutcher

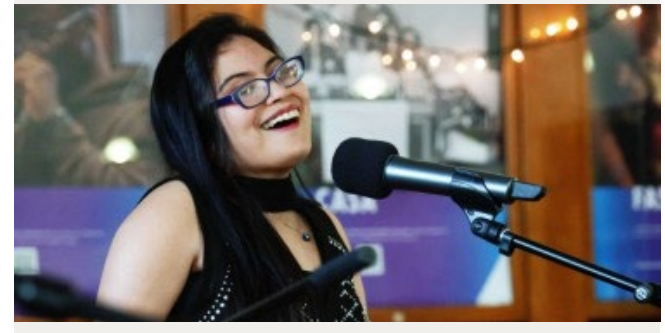


MCLD: Celebrating 60 years helping those with learning disabilities

Participants in the Sports K.I.D.S. program enjoy a basketball activity at Centre Greene in August. K.I.D.S., which stands for Knowledge, Inclusion, Development and Support, is a Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities (MCLD) program offered weekly in the summer for children to explore a different sport in a supportive and inclusive environment. "One of the most special parts of our program is that each child is paired with their own volunteer, who provides individualized support, encouragement and guidance throughout the activities," explained Breanna Pallante, MCLD community outreach coordinator. The organization is celebrating its 60th year. - KM

Photo courtesy of the MCLD

CAHD celebrates 30 years



On June 4, the Centre for the Arts in Human Development (CAHD) celebrated 30 years with up to 170 guests, who gathered at Concordia University's Guadagni Lounge. "It was a remarkable milestone to celebrate creativity, inclusion and personal growth," said Lenore Vosberg, senior associate director. Part of Concordia University, CAHD is an educational, clinical and research centre serving neurodivergent adults or adults with disabilities or those who have different needs. Seen here is Group 15 participant Ashley Seguin who performed "The Way We Were." - KM

Photo courtesy of CAHD, credit Trevor Browne

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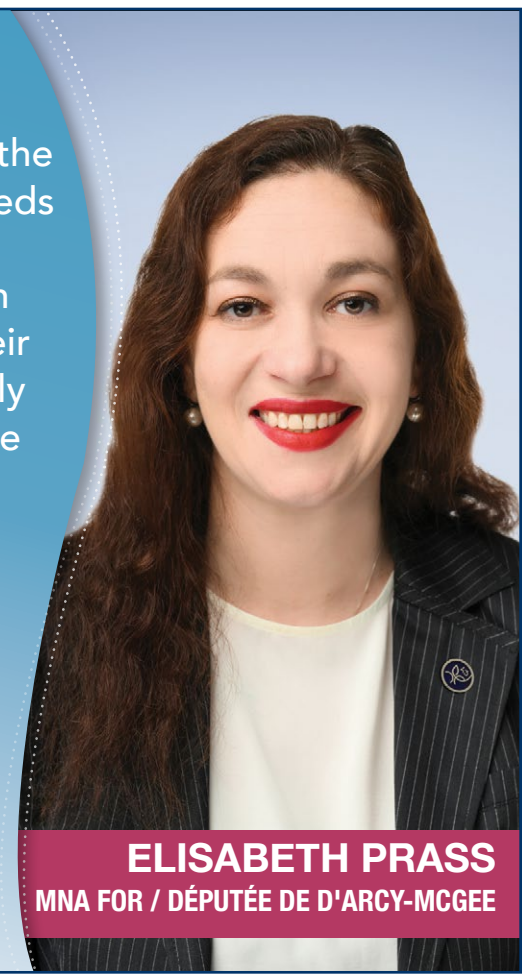
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Seeing the world through a different lens

by *Silvia Martignetti*

Last March, students from the Le Plateau des Arts program at the John F. Kennedy Adult Education Centre (English Montreal School Board) proudly participated in the D'un Oeil Différent art exhibition at the Écomusée du Fier Monde.

The weeklong exhibition celebrated the artistic talents of individuals living with intellectual disabilities or autism while encouraging the public to view the world through different perspectives. By focusing on creativity, expression and individuality, D'un Oeil Différent promoted inclusion and provided artists with a meaningful platform to share their work and engage with the broader community.

For the students of Le Plateau des Arts, the 2026 exhibition was an outstanding success. Most of their artwork was sold, rewarding them with the experience of seeing their creations appreciated and purchased by members of the public.

Preparing for the exhibition was a significant undertaking. Students spent months developing their artwork, experimenting with techniques, refining their ideas and working toward deadlines. They carefully selected artistic styles that reflected their individual perspectives and dedicated countless hours to bringing their creative visions to life. It required perseverance, decision-making and commitment, making the process as valuable as the final exhibition itself.

The impact extended far beyond the gallery walls. Through their participation, students strengthened important life and employment skills, including time management, communication, problem-solving and goal setting. They also gained a greater sense of self-confidence by achieving a meaningful accomplishment and sharing it with the public.

Perhaps most importantly, the exhibition fostered a strong sense of belonging and community inclusion. By contributing to a public cultural event, students experienced firsthand that their talents enrich the community and that their perspectives deserve to be seen and celebrated. The exhibition reflects a growing understanding that disability should not be defined by limitations, but by the unique strengths, creativity and contributions that each individual brings to society.

Building upon this experience, students have begun the new school year preparing artwork for the 22nd edition of D'un Oeil Différent, taking place from March 10 to March 21, 2027. Inspired by the positive response to their work, they are eager to continue exploring new artistic techniques and sharing their creativity.

The John F. Kennedy Adult Education Centre takes tremendous pride in these student artists and enjoys seeing their artwork, displayed throughout the school. We look forward to following their artistic journey and celebrating the remarkable work they will bring to the next exhibition.

Le Plateau des Arts program is a collaboration with the Centre de réadaptation en déficience intellectuelle et en troubles envahissants du développement (CRDITED) de Montréal. ■

Silvia Martignetti is a Social Participation teacher at the English Montreal School Board.



Kevin De Felice Proietti with his "Tree of Life" painting at D'un Oeil Différent art exhibition in March 2026. Photo courtesy of S. Martignetti

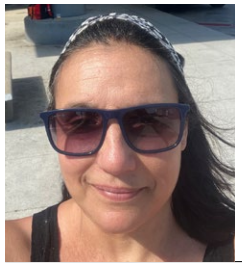


Art exhibit in Pointe-Claire showcases Maison WILOH

On August 11, a vernissage was held at Victor Rose Espresso Bar in Pointe-Claire Village to raise awareness about Maison WILOH, a West Island community residence that is being planned for adults with autism or intellectual deficiencies. Entitled "Creativity, Inclusion and Belonging," the exhibition was a collection of artwork done by future potential residents with the support of Montreal artist Peter W. Hart. "Every individual deserves a space where they feel valued and supported," said Maria Caravaggio, a Maison WILOH parent. "Walking into Victor Rose Café and seeing my daughter's and her peers' creativity celebrated alongside Peter Hart's showed exactly what Maison WILOH is building – a community where everyone truly belongs." Her daughter, Jessica Stepto, is seen here with her painting "The Heart of Love." – KM

Photo: Lucia Griffin Photography





Dans la bulle de Daniel

par *Emmanuelle Assor*

Au mois d'avril dernier, le documentaire *Bulles : Un film de Mélissa Lefebvre et de Paul Tom* a été présenté au Théâtre Outremont, devant une salle comble et fébrile, composée des familles, amis, éducateurs spécialisés et médias touchés par l'autisme. Officiellement, « Bulles donne la parole à des ados autistes qui nous invitent dans leurs mondes imaginaires » d'après le site de Télé-Québec où l'on peut voir le film gratuitement.

Concrètement, Bulles est un documentaire « participatif » dans le sens où c'est un projet qui s'est étendu sur plusieurs années avec la participation de deux cohortes d'élèves en classes spéciales, guidés par leur géniale professeur d'art dramatique à l'école Paul-Gérin-Lajoie-d'Outremont, Mélissa Lefebvre.

Le soir du lancement du film, chaque participant/e a dû monter sur scène pour présenter son univers, témoignant de toute la fantaisie que chacun/e porte en soi. Un défi en plus pour ces autistes-artistes en herbe.

Dans le cas de Daniel (l'un des participants), le projet a débouché sur la création de son livre d'illustrations, *Les dragons adorables : Une fête pour Doyov*, qu'il a lu au public du Théâtre Outremont et dans d'autres endroits où il a été invité par la suite (des écoles, des hôpitaux, des CPE).

Après la diffusion de Bulles, j'ai eu envie de rencontrer Daniel pour discuter avec lui de l'impact de Bulles sur sa vie et ses projets futurs. Son univers est composé de personnages de son entourage, qu'il dessine avec un style ludique et coloré. Quand je lui demande pourquoi il a choisi des dragons pour le projet et pourquoi il les trouve adorables, il m'explique tout simplement : « Depuis que j'ai 11 ans, j'ai toujours voulu écrire un livre illustré avec les personnages de mon monde. Pour mes dragons, je me suis inspiré des dragons de Shrek, l'un de mes films préférés. J'y ai ajouté le mot adorable : un mot de douceur, pour toujours. »

De cette expérience au Théâtre Outremont, il a découvert qu'il aime aller à la rencontre du public : « J'ai aimé monter sur la scène du Théâtre Outremont. Je suis fier de moi aussi, car j'ai présenté ma bulle avec ce livre qui parle de mon univers. J'ai hâte d'écrire d'autres livres. »

Pour Daniel, qui dessine depuis qu'il a deux ans, le dessin a une fonction apaisante. Cela le rend calme et heureux. « Quand je dessine, ça me fait chaud au cœur. Dans la vie, je suis une personne très positive et optimiste. Dans mes livres, mes dragons sont bienveillants », me dit-il.

Son message : on est tous différents, avec nos forces et nos faiblesses, alors il faut s'entraider. Ses rêves? Présenter ses futurs livres dans une tournée de lieux éducatifs; faire exister ses histoires en dehors des dessins et, ultimement, créer un film avec l'IA qui pourrait animer ses dragons.

Son projet actuel: « Là, je prépare un livre : c'est l'histoire d'un dragon hypersensible au bruit. Dans son parcours, mon dragon va trouver des façons de s'autoréguler et de se recentrer sur lui, comme moi je le fais dans ma vie quand j'en ai besoin. »

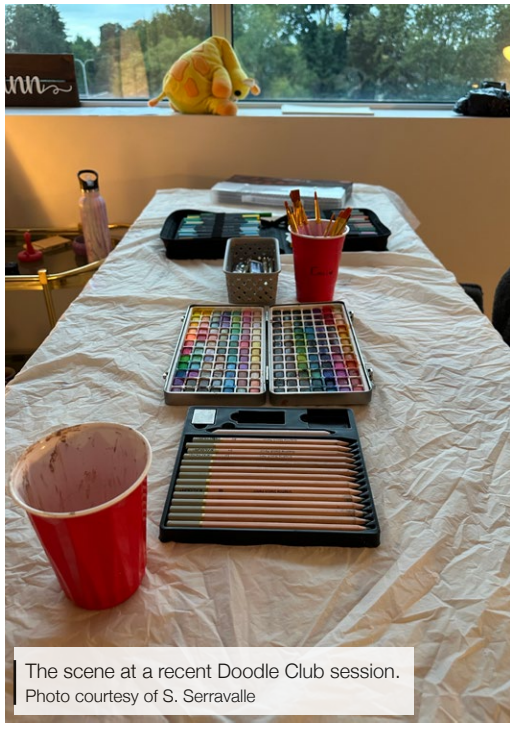


Paris en 2025. Photo courtoisie de sa mère.

Les dragons adorables : Une fête pour Doyov est en vente chez Renaud-Bray et sur leslibraires.ca. ■

Info: telequebec.tv/contenu/bulles.

Emmanuelle Assor est journaliste de formation. 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.



The scene at a recent Doodle Club session.
Photo courtesy of S. Serravalle

The Doodle Club provides creative space to socialize

by *Sue Montgomery*

An art program for youth who experience anxiety in social situations has started in Côte-Saint-Luc.

Sara Serravalle, an art teacher with the New Frontiers School Board, started the program for students referred to her by the English Montreal School Board. Her sister, a psychologist who works at Emery Psychology, mentioned to her employer that Serravalle taught art and was good with children. In April, the Doodle Club was born.

It started with four girls, who ended up bonding and attending an event together. "I noticed them coming out of their shells, and for me, that was the most satisfying part of it," Serravalle said. Two students returned for the Fall session.

Serravalle stresses that the program isn't art therapy, but simply a place where youth between the ages of 12 and 17 can get together and express themselves in small groups. They create using pencils, water colours, clay, markers or crayons, following her prompts.

"I try to tailor the prompts to their interests, like 'draw your pet' or 'draw your dream pet,'" she explained. She also plays soft music and provides juice and snacks.

As the students do their creative drawings, they'll chat about exams or the start of school and realize they aren't alone in their worries.

"The main goal is to provide a safe place for them, and I think I've achieved that," she said.

As the students draw, Serravalle sits with them and crochets – a craft they might sometime be interested in learning.

The cost is $75 per 90-minute session for eight weeks, Monday evenings. ■

Allier inclusion et plaisir avec Les pas pour rire

par *Simon Phaneuf*

Devenir comédien semble parfois un rêve inatteignable. Pourtant, certaines personnes parviennent à déjouer les pronostics. La troupe de théâtre Les pas pour rire exprime son talent à travers diverses représentations et ateliers depuis 1996.

La troupe de théâtre compte 12 personnes à Valleyfield et 12 autres à Vaudreuil-Dorion. Ils suivent leurs cours de septembre à mai, pendant l'année scolaire.

« Le projet est né du désir d'une personne atteinte de déficience intellectuelle (DI) de pratiquer le théâtre », raconte Sonia Viau, directrice générale du projet.

La troupe est destinée aux adultes atteints de DI ou du trouble du spectre de l'autisme (TSA). Le pouvoir de rêver favorise la réalisation de projets atypiques.

Parmi leurs récentes créations, les membres ont réalisé le spectacle *Franky Sinatra* à l'école secondaire des Échos le 30 mai dernier, un événement qui a réuni environ 200 personnes.

Des possibilités de création infinies

La création des pièces est basée sur les intérêts des participants. « Ils peuvent incarner le personnage de leur choix. Chaque œuvre est originale », explique Mme Viau. Les comédiens sont responsables de l'écriture, du choix de leur personnage et de la conception de leur univers. Les possibilités de création sont infinies, car « on veut leur donner toutes les possibilités ».

Mme Viau aborde son travail avec passion et rigueur. Elle souhaite mettre de l'avant les forces de chaque participant pour démystifier les barrières. « On veut mettre en valeur l'inclusion, le professionnalisme et le plaisir », dit-elle.

Des retombées immédiates

L'apprentissage est au cœur de la création pour tous les participants. Les membres de la troupe pratiquent pendant plusieurs semaines pour créer une œuvre unique. Cela passe par la diction, le développement de la force physique et le travail de la mémoire.

« Notre but est d'offrir une expérience théâtrale de qualité de niveau semi-professionnel », ajoute t-elle.



Fany Courty, Benoit Pagé et Ariane Gagnon Jeanrie dans la production de *Télé, réalité?* en juin 2025.
Photo courtoisie de Les pas pour rire.

Sonia Viau croit qu'elle peut démystifier la réalité de sa clientèle. Les retombées de son travail sont immédiates. « Le public est souvent surpris après nos spectacles. Les proches des comédiens sont heureux de voir leur progrès et le résultat final est très rassembleur ».

Elle soutient qu'il n'y a aucune limite à la création. « Il faut se faire confiance. L'apprentissage se fait sans pression, et tout le monde est bienvenu. »

La troupe de théâtre a souligné son 30e anniversaire en avril 2026. ■

Info : lespaspourrire.com



How we measure our education system

by *Elisabeth Prass*

I would like to thank the voters of the D'Arcy-McGee riding for entrusting me with a second mandate. I also thank Quebec Liberal Party leader Charles Milliard for appointing me Official Opposition Critic for Persons Living with a Disability or Autism Spectrum Disorder, and for Mental Health. These responsibilities are deeply personal to me.

As the mother of a son on the autism spectrum, I understand firsthand the challenges families face navigating a system that too often falls short of meeting their children's needs. I also recognize the extraordinary commitment of parents, educators, and professionals working to ensure every child can thrive.

Over the years, I have prioritized advocating for better access to specialized services, educational resources, respite care and family support. While progress has been made, much remains to be done.

One important opportunity ahead is the "États Généraux sur l'Éducation," a province-wide reflection on the future of Quebec's education system. This process must not overlook students with special needs.

Educational success cannot be measured solely through diplomas and test scores. For students with autism, intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties and other special needs, success can mean learning to communicate, developing independence, building social relationships or acquiring skills that enable greater participation in society. These achievements deserve the same recognition and support.

That is why the États Généraux must include meaningful representation from special education teachers, educational technicians, professionals and organizations representing people with disabilities.

As Official Opposition Critic, I will keep these issues at the forefront, advocating better services and resources, holding the government accountable, and defending the rights and dignity of every individual.

My commitment is both personal and political. I want my son, and every child like him, to have the opportunity to reach their full potential. If we are truly going to reimagine education in Quebec, every student must have a place in that vision. ■

Elisabeth Prass is member of the National Assembly of Quebec for D'Arcy-McGee and Official Opposition Critic for Mental Health and for Persons Living with a Disability or with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Les Petits Rois creates a home to thrive in

by *Sue Montgomery*



Brian Tsheke, left, and Henri-Louis Aguiar-Carrier prepare dinner at Les Petits Rois.
Photo courtesy of Vânia Aguiar

It took Vânia Aguiar five years to realize her dream of building a safe, pleasant home for her severely intellectually disabled son and other adults like him. She wanted a place where they could thrive among friends, and parents wouldn't have to worry about what would become of their children when they were no longer able to care for them.

Les Petits Rois, a modern-looking two-story building, opened in February 2024 on quiet Lavoie St. in Côte des Neiges. Inside, eight residents – four women and four men – are gaining some independence and a sense of accomplishment, despite their intellectual disabilities. They have settled into their own rooms, decorating them with their favourite things, be it Canadiens hockey paraphernalia or all things equestrian. Their doors bear their photo and name.

All eight will be able to stay for the rest of their lives, if they wish. The apartment is occupied by a full-time director.

When searching for a home for her son, Henri-Louis, now 31, Aguiar said she would sit in her car after touring places and sob. "They were so depressing," she said. Les Petits Rois is anything but. A large, open living room and kitchen look out onto a backyard filled with trees, a barbecue and rock steps winding down to a mini basketball area. In the winter, residents slide down the snow-covered hill.

"I wanted it to feel like they were hiking on a mountain," she said.

The home is decorated tastefully with screens using smart technology to teach the residents how to cook and clean up, brush their teeth properly, do their laundry and how to dress for the day's weather. There is art on the walls and light pouring in.

A guest room and adapted bathroom are available for family members to spend the night.

During the day, the residents travel by adapted transport to their various unpaid jobs at Énergir, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Loto-Québec or Cirque du Soleil. Aguiar said that these simple roles give them a sense of accomplishment. "I believe profoundly in their potential," she said.

Aguiar is also president of Fondation Les Petits Rois, which she established about 25 years ago to help change the living conditions of people living with intellectual disabilities.

Each resident pays 25 percent of their monthly income from Quebec's Social Solidarity Program, available to people living with severe health-related limitations. The rest is made up through Quebec's supplemental rent program.

Her goal is to influence the government to recognize that the more that is invested in housing like Les Petits Rois, the less it costs in the long run. Her model could be replicated across the province and country for the homeless and the elderly as well, she said.

Aguiar's next goal is to build a second home on the land right next to Les Petits Rois.

People must be between the ages of 22 and 35 to be admitted to the residence and may stay as long as they wish. ■

Info: petitsrois.org

Maison de l'autisme launches first in video series

by *Samara O'Gorman*

For teenagers receiving an autism diagnosis and the families supporting them, finding clear, actionable and empathetic guidance is often a daunting challenge. To bridge this gap, a new series of video capsules, "Parenting an Autistic Adolescent," is offering vital resources designed specifically to foster mutual understanding between neurodivergent youth and their support networks.

Initiated by Maison de l'autisme and supported by a grant from the Toronto-based organization Unity for Autism, the project was spearheaded by a dedicated committee and produced by the organization's very own Danny Goyette, who is on its board of directors. Driven by the core philosophy of being created "by and for" the community, the project captures both the parental outlook and the autistic individual's lived experience and illuminates the nuances of daily life that are frequently misunderstood.

"It really reflects the parents' perspective... and then we also talk about the autistic perspective, which is often quite the opposite," explained Goyette, who first joined the Maison de l'autisme as a participant in the support group, and later became coordinator and producer of multimedia content for the website. "That's one of the main goals: to make sure both sides can see how the other reacts ... so they really understand the stress they are going through and try to figure out tips and strategies to help."

For Goyette, who received his diagnosis later in life, framing these concepts with clarity is deeply personal. The project team gathered insights through community surveys and direct interviews conducted by committee member Emma Blanda. These discussions highlighted the unique hurdles faced by youth who navigate school for years without a diagnosis, and the disconnect that occurs when support fails to adapt post-diagnosis. "Teenagers get diagnosed late; they go to school the next day, and nothing changes," Blanda said. "The school thinks, 'You don't need anything because you were here yesterday; there haven't been any challenges.'"

The first three video capsules released are about food, personal hygiene and parental experiences. Upcoming instalments plan to dive deeper into complex mental states, crisis management and lesser-known experiences such as the interplay between anxiety and inertia.

For Blanda, whose daughter was diagnosed at age three, the project highlights the irreplaceable value of having autistic adults co-leading the initiative. "I can go to a meeting and say, 'This is what happened today,' and they can explain it to me in a way that I'm going to understand," she says.

With plans to expand the series from its initial themes to nearly ten comprehensive modules, the committee hopes the capsules will continue to spark meaningful conversations in homes, schools and community organizations across the region. ■

Info: lamaisondelautisme.ca/pt-parents-ados

Specially designed hairbrush makes mornings easier

Inspirations Entrepreneurial
AWARD WINNER
Janice Ayotte
The Neuro Standard

by *Randy Pinsky*

For families of neurodiverse children, hairbrushing can be a daily battle of meltdowns and sensory overload. Local mom Janice Ayotte took her own family's struggles and designed the Knot Your Typical detangling hairbrush to make the routine more manageable. Ayotte is the recipient of this edition's entrepreneurial award.

Hairbrushing can be an overwhelming and even intolerable sensory experience for those on the spectrum and with sensory sensitivities. Working through tangles can be painful; ears can get combed by accident and repetitive motions close to the head can irritate. All of this can be overstimulating.

In recognizing Ayotte's determination to find a solution to this problem, her husband and business partner Jason McKergow nominated her for the award for a product she describes was "developed out of frustration, out of necessity."

"Whenever Janice has an idea, it's not an issue of if we can do it – it's when," he said.

Since the product's soft launch in March 2026, the Knot Your Typical brush enterprise has transformed the family basement into a warehouse and has shipped thousands of these brushes. On the product website, clients describe it as "an absolute gamechanger" and a "magic brush."

As someone who is herself on the spectrum, Ayotte can understand sensory sensitivities and triggers. She observed that the prevailing approach is to use therapy to overcome stressful situations as opposed to addressing the source itself. "I have struggled with hairbrushing and other sensory stimulation all my life – but I can handle it," she related. "My daughter cannot. I did this for her and others like her."

What makes this brush different from others on the market? For starters, Ayotte carefully broke down every component that can be triggering, such as the handle, the feel, the bristles – and then tested prototypes. With a background in sales, she delved into all the product development steps – from concept and design to development and production – to make her dream a reality. She also sees the product as promoting independence and self-care.

Every model was tried out by her daughter Maya and friends at the Donald Berman Yaldei Developmental Center and adjusted accordingly. The final product has different length ultra-soft bristles, a calm green colour and is comfortable to hold. "I can't tell you how many parents have told me it's the first time they have been able to brush their kid's hair," said Ayotte.

While the brush can be beneficial for anyone with sensory sensitivities, there are two design elements with the neurodivergent client in mind. As predictability is important for many autistic individuals, Ayotte wanted to ensure the brush would complement as opposed to disrupt already established routines and preferences, so she designed the brush for wet or dry hair with a built-in parting tip to remove the stress of transitioning to a comb. "Janice has thought of absolutely everything, and she has put her heart and soul into this [product]," wrote McKergow in the nomination letter.

For her part, Ayotte observed on her site, "When design is built around sensory needs, everyone feels the difference." This was the impetus behind the name of her company, The Neuro Standard. "We are setting a new standard in products for neurodiverse individuals."

From a dream out of necessity to a bustling business, Ayotte hit the big leagues when she landed an order with the tuck shop of We Rock the Spectrum adapted gym franchise in Montreal. "I told them, 'This is not another fidget or a squishy; it's a solution to a problem.'" They are now on the elite list and will be automatically included in all new gyms.



Janice Ayotte with her specially designed hairbrushes. Photo courtesy of J. Ayotte

Local client Gillian Book shared, "I love it. This brush has honestly saved me as an autistic person with sensory difficulties."

After less than a year on the market, the Knot Your Typical hairbrush has helped hundreds of families untangle knots without tears, said Ayotte. "There is nobody in the world who has so much love, drive and determination to improve the lives of special needs children," shared McKergow. "To me and to so many others who know Janice, what she is doing is incredible, admirable and truly impactful." ■

Info: theneurostandard.com

We are grateful for the support of Leyad, whose contribution helps advance our employment and entrepreneurship initiatives and inclusive employment. We thank them for their generous gift to this edition's Inspirations *Entrepreneurial Award winner, Janice Ayotte, founder of The Neuro Standard.*

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La Cabane Citipouss : des aliments sains qui portent leurs fruits

par *Simon Phaneuf*

La Cabane Citipouss commercialise des fruits lyophilisés, Les collations de Cloé, depuis environ 2 ans pour la population montréalaise.
Sa fondatrice, Marianne Faraud, explique comment le projet
a débuté.

« Ma fille Cloé est malentendante et atteinte de déficience intellectuelle légère. Je voulais créer un projet qui allie l'inclusion des personnes handicapées et la saine alimentation. » Elle y travaille à temps plein depuis la fin de ses études, car sa mère souhaitait lui donner un moyen d'intégrer le marché de l'emploi.

Mme Faraud souhaite faciliter l'intégration des personnes handicapées dans le marché de l'emploi. « Tous les profits engendrés par l'organisme servent à l'embauche de personnes en situation de handicap. »

On dénombre quatre employés et une stagiaire au sein de la Cabane Citipouss. Trois d'entre eux sont en situation de handicap. Les tâches sont adaptées aux compétences et au rythme de chacun.

Un travail d'équipe en plusieurs étapes
La lyophilisation consiste à déshydrater des aliments congelés. La préparation des fruits lyophilisés se déroule en plusieurs étapes, auxquelles les membres de l'équipe contribuent. « On commence par peler les fruits. Puis, on les place dans un congélateur pendant la nuit pour qu'ils soient placés dans le lyophilisateur le lendemain », explique Mme Faraud.

La Cabane Citipouss lyophilise trois variétés de fruits: la pomme, la banane et l'ananas. Ils perdent environ 95 % d'eau sans être dénaturés à la fin du processus. Les consommateurs peuvent s'en servir comme accompagnement au déjeuner, par exemple », expose Mme Faraud.

Tous les employés se partagent les tâches de manière équitable afin de contribuer à la production des collations. Cela inclue le découpage des fruits et le conditionnement.

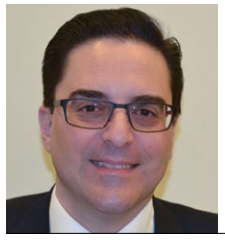
Plusieurs enjeux importants
Le domaine commercial comporte plusieurs enjeux importants. Obtenir des partenaires d'affaires est essentiel à l'agrandissement de l'entreprise.
« On est très dépendant de ça, car c'est ce qui nous permet de grossir, d'obtenir plus de commandes et d'embaucher du personnel », dit Mme Faraud.

Elle a deux objectifs précis pour les années à venir: développer davantage d'activités afin de garantir la production et faciliter l'embauche de personnes en situation de handicap. Pour Marianne Faraud, l'objectif est de créer de vrais emplois rémunérés, où les compétences et la contribution de chacun sont reconnues. Le projet vise à faciliter l'accès au marché du travail des personnes en situation de handicap.

Cela apporte aussi un sentiment de fierté à la fois pour les employés et pour leurs familles. « Je suis contente, car j'intègre des personnes à la société », conclut Mme Faraud. ■



Marianne Faraud emballe les fruits lyophilisés à la Cabane Citipouss en avril 2026.
Photo courtoisie de M. Faraud



Sociovocational program leads to opportunities

by *Nick Katalifos*

Part of our mandate at the English Montreal School Board is to help different types of learners succeed. Among them are our special needs adult students who come to our centres to learn social skills, life skills and vocational skills. We take great pride in our unique Sociovocational (SVI) program, which we offer at Wagar and Galileo adult education centres.

The role of these centres is to provide students with the skills, experience, confidence, independence and workplace behaviours that we hope will eventually lead to employment. We do so both in the classroom and through the strength of internship partnerships with employers, where students are getting real-life experience in a variety of community settings.

Though the mandate of the SVI program is to certify students in a semi-skilled trade (and not secure work placement), we support them in finding meaningful work opportunities and advocating for competitive (paid) employment. Currently in its fourth year of the program, Galileo has had a very positive beginning considering the diverse needs and backgrounds of the students who attend the centre.

At Wagar, which has been offering the program for over 15 years, students have more than 100 semi-skilled trades to chose from with the ability to be certified. These include garden centre work, attendant-pet care, food and beverage server, cook's helper and furniture or cabinet assembler, to name a few. They are encouraged to sample different trades based on their curiosity, skills and interest – and with a flexible time frame to complete the certification.

The vocational integration program at both centres approaches work inclusion through the lens of self-determination. The idea is to give our students as many opportunities as possible to take ownership of their learning and build a sense of autonomy and agency. This includes experiential learning through internship placements, competency-based training in the classroom and onsite, and self-esteem building.

Through our programs at Wagar and Galileo, we have witnessed our students develop greater independence, maturity and confidence through their participation in internships. Being in a real workplace gives them the opportunity to take responsibility, interact with different people, communicate their needs and develop appropriate social and communication skills. Not only does this contribute to their workplace skills but also to their personal growth.

And employers stand to benefit by adding a valuable, loyal and committed member to the team. Our internship partners find bringing on an intern or hiring a special needs individual to be very rewarding – watching the person learn, grow, gain confidence and be ready to work at something meaningful.

We are constantly evaluating how we can continue to grow our trades programs and expand our connections with employers so that we can continue to provide our special needs students with more and more training and meaningful working opportunities. ■

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.

Les gâteries de Flavie : un projet entrepreneurial à L.I.N.K.S.

par *Myriam Farley*

Tout a commencé par une simple question : « Quelles sont les gâteries préférées de Flavie? » Cette question s'est rapidement transformée en projet entrepreneurial pour les élèves du programme *Parcours d'apprentissage diversifié* de l'école secondaire L.I.N.K.S. de la Commission scolaire English-Montréal.

Inspirés par Flavie, leur chienne d'assistance en milieu scolaire de la Fondation ASISTA, les élèves se sont lancés dans la création de leur propre entreprise de gâteries pour chiens, baptisée Les gâteries de Flavie.

Avec mon soutien et celui de l'orthophoniste Lauren Garfinkle et les enseignants Francesco Greco et Bianca Giancola, les élèves ont participé à toutes les étapes du processus entrepreneurial.

De la recherche de recettes à l'achat des ingrédients, en passant par la préparation, la cuisson, l'emballage et la création de matériel promotionnel, les élèves ont acquis une expérience pratique tout en développant des compétences essentielles à la vie quotidienne. Le projet leur a permis de mettre en pratique leurs connaissances en mathématiques, en communication, en service à la clientèle, en sécurité alimentaire et en travail d'équipe.

Bien sûr, aucune entreprise de gâteries pour chiens ne serait complète sans une goûteuse officielle ! Flavie a accepté ce rôle avec enthousiasme, aidant les élèves à découvrir les ingrédients et les recettes qui méritaient son sceau d'approbation.

Le 23 avril, les élèves ont fièrement présenté leur entreprise au siège social de la Commission scolaire English-Montréal, où ils ont tenu un kiosque de vente pendant l'heure du dîner. Cette expérience leur a permis d'interagir avec les clients, d'effectuer des transactions et de présenter le fruit de leur travail.

Sous la direction de Maria Caldarella, directrice de L.I.N.K.S., cette initiative démontre comment l'apprentissage pratique peut favoriser l'autonomie, la confiance en soi et le développement de compétences essentielles à la vie quotidienne, tout en permettant aux élèves d'acquérir de précieuses compétences entrepreneuriales.



De gauche à droite, Victoria Perrotta, Matteo Longo, Jonathan Rigatuso Mesa et Akshan Patel avec Flavie le 23 avril au siège social de la Commission scolaire English-Montréal. Photo courtoisie de M. Farley

Ce qui avait commencé comme une simple façon de faire plaisir à Flavie s'est transformé en une expérience enrichissante pour tous, prouvant que, parfois, les plus belles leçons viennent avec quatre pattes et une queue qui remue. ■

Myriam Farley est coordonnatrice de la vie étudiante à l'école secondaire L.I.N.K.S., zoothérapeute certifiée et intervenante principale de Flavie.

Strategies for leveraging strengths as a neurodiverse entrepreneur

by *Randy Pinsky*

"Work with your brain, not against it" was how YES Employment + Entrepreneurship's online workshop on "Practical Tools for Neurodiverse Entrepreneurs" started on September 24. The discussion surrounded how neurodiverse individuals process and perform in different ways, and, with the proper techniques, can excel.

Featured guest Lynne Jank, founder of Neuro Momentum Coaching and herself neurodiverse, described the challenges that she as a dyslexic person encounters on a daily basis and the means of addressing them.

Many neurodiverse people have what Jank calls "spikey profiles," where they may score low on routine tasks but above average in creativity. As one participant said, "It's about having perspective because we can be really good at something others find hard and vice versa."

For instance, individuals with dyslexia may have difficulty following written instructions but can have exceptional problem-solving abilities. Those with ADHD may have trouble staying on task yet can be creative thinkers.

According to a 2025 article by Gallup World Poll, "neurodiverse employees represent an untapped pool of talent that often encounters barriers to career growth, from exclusionary hiring practices to workplace environments that do not support or benefit from their diverse ways of thinking and working."

In spite of their potential contributions, many offices are still unable or unwilling to accommodate neurodiverse employees. As a result, Jank observed that a high proportion "self-select" and start their own businesses.

As stated on the YES website, "entrepreneurship can offer freedom, flexibility and the chance to build a work life that fits who you are." For example, American neurodiverse psychotherapist Jennifer Gerlach related in Psychology Today how she struggled in conventional settings but now excels in her private practice – with a swing. She said, "Sometimes rejection fosters innovation."

Jank provided strategies that she herself uses to address overwhelm or follow-through. Some were sensory, such as having both cold water (for inspiration) and hot water (to calm). Others were more practical, such as breaking down tasks, working backwards and having checklists for those who struggle with executive functioning. Lists are also helpful for those hindered by "time blindness" (being unaware of the passage of time) or those who get derailed by "shiny object syndrome." She recommended celebrating the small wins and using a "second brain" of apps or note-summarizing software such as Granola.

Participants discussed their challenges with motivation. "The problem is how to trigger that hyper-focus," said one. "Once I enter that state, it's perfect, [but until then...]." Another described the difficulty controlling energy. "Our brains are like Lamborghinis with bicycle brakes."

Jank is inspired by the slogan promoted by the StrikeUP Canada resource for women entrepreneurs: "Embrace a different kind of brilliance." She advocated, "Be loud and proud of your neurodiversity - there's a place for everyone." ■

The new CASP-II Education Program explained

by *Sarah Lynch*

The Quebec ministry of Education's new CASP-II Education Program is currently being implemented across the province in both specialized and mainstream classrooms. It is designed to support and educate students aged 16 to 21 with moderate to severe Intellectual Developmental Disorders (IDD) as they prepare for adult life. Replacing the Challenges Program, CASP-II focuses on developing the practical skills and competencies necessary for social participation, vocational involvement and increased independence.

Unlike traditional academic programs, CASP-II emphasizes functional life skills rather than academic achievement. It aims to help students apply their strengths and abilities in meaningful, real-world contexts, enabling them to navigate everyday environments and contexts with greater confidence and autonomy.

Learning takes place through authentic, hands-on experiences that reflect daily life. Students build skills in areas such as personal care, community participation, decision-making and workplace readiness through activities that encourage active engagement and practical application.

The CASP-II Program has six "life areas," which provide the framework for meaningful learning, skill development and evaluation. They include: Personal Care and Well-Being, Home Life, Community Life, Leisure, Travel, Volunteer and Sociovocational Work.

Though the CASP-II Program consists of the same competencies as CASP-I, it introduces a new competency "Participates in Contributive Activities," which encourages involvement in volunteer opportunities and employment-related experiences. A defining feature of CASP-II is its collaborative and student-centered approach. Teachers and professionals work together to create individualized learning profiles, establish meaningful goals and determine the level of support required for each student's successful participation in a learning activity. Evaluation is continuous and collaborative, shared among teachers, specialists and support staff.

The philosophy of the CASP-II Program is that all individuals have the right to participate fully and meaningfully in society. The program fosters self-determination by helping students develop autonomy, confidence and a sense of belonging.

Through community-based learning experiences and real-life activities, students with IDD are encouraged to make informed choices, advocate for themselves, build meaningful relationships and contribute to their communities. ■

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

Bringing together adult learners at Galileo

by *Sue Montgomery*



Marie-Pierre Forest, right, helps a customer, a fellow Galileo student, choose an item of clothing in October. Photo courtesy of Marisa Filiberti

Students at Galileo Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board are picking up useful business know-how through managing and working in the school's updated thrift shop.

Teacher Marisa Filiberti came up with the idea for the Budget Boutique after watching an online video about a school in the United States that had set up a similar shop for their special needs students.

All money earned through the boutique benefits the students by paying for outings, special lunches and activities. But the advantages stretch beyond the financial. "They learn skills such as sorting and organizing, pricing, tagging, keeping the boutique clean and organized," said Filiberti, who is helped by colleague Lisa Germile. "They learn to greet customers, so all their social skills are being used."

The boutique brings together adult learners from Galileo's three programs - Francisation, Academic and Common Core Basic English. This provides students the opportunity to practice their French and English language skills while interacting with and learning from the centre's special needs students, according to Martina Schiavone, the centre's principal.

Students who are enrolled in the Social Participation Program at the Montreal North school also learn how to handle money and work as a team. "Counting money, serving customers and taking care of the merchandise allows me to see everything I'm capable of accomplishing," said Daline Sim, a student working in the boutique. "Each task I complete successfully builds my confidence and makes me proud of my progress and the work I do."

The shop opened for business about two and a half years ago after Filiberti received a generous donation from Avon – 700 boxes of brand-new clothing and shoes. The stock was stored in the school's science laboratory - a double classroom. Students from each of the 14 special needs classrooms were assigned a particular size of clothing to sort, tag and place on the racks.

Now the store's stock has grown beyond adult clothing and shoes. It also carries baby clothing, Christmas decorations and cosmetics. Prices are far below what they would be in a regular store. For example, a pair of shoes that would cost $80 in a store sells in the Budget Boutique for about $5.

Sales are every Wednesday morning from 9:30 to 11:30, and each class is allotted about 20 minutes to shop. It's a great resource for many of the students who are new to Canada and don't have a lot of disposable income, Filiberti said. ■



How can we restore joy?

by *Julie Kristof*

How can we restore joy? Restore hope? I've been thinking about this question a lot over the past months. My Dad passed away in August and the thought of the world without him is painful. We are grieving, yet we must move forward and navigate our lives.

This feeling is similar to how I felt when my daughter was diagnosed with her illness when she was a baby. I know this is true of other parents. What follows is also deep pain and grief; for what could have been, for what was expected and for the challenges that lay ahead for them and for us. This pain recurs with every milestone and every challenge, and there are many.

In The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get Here from There, by the late professor Charles R. Snyder, the idea is put forward that hope is not only a wishful emotion but an active strategy with goals, mindset and pathways. Since this publication in 1994, the clinical science of hope and joy have been studied and applied in many settings, including a recent establishment of the Institute for the Study of Hope, Dignity and Wellbeing, an international network of researchers and clinicians.

The realization that I could take an active role in creating my own hope and joy has been very powerful for me. More importantly, we can help others navigate grief and be more supportive by putting mechanisms into place for parents of students with various needs. Joy and hope are not passive but take work, habit and practice.

We are going into a new school year that is filled with challenges and barriers to success for our kids. It always feels like a fight: I have to explain this again? The budget has been cut? My child isn't eligible for services? Busing?

We must move forward in the midst of our challenges, and I wish for everyone to be able to move forward with joy! After all, we want to live our best lives with our children despite the challenges. Hope theory has a bunch of recommendations, but these resonated with me: Set meaningful goals, anticipate barriers and be involved in community.

The English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and the Advisory Committee on Special Education Services (ACSES) provide tools for students and parents that can help build joy and hope.

ACSES has developed several toolkits that appear on the EMSB website, including one focussed on individual educational plans (IEPs) and how to develop meaningful goals for students and identify potential barriers. The conversation around your child's IEP is an active and important one for parents and educators. ACSES is also currently developing guides for students and parents going through educational transitions – times that can be very difficult and emotional.

Other initiatives, some from schools, bring parents and students together to be part of community and connection. For example, John Grant High School hosts the Spring into Support Community Night, an annual event that brings together students, families, educators and community resources. I encourage you to attend workshops and events to learn and to meet other families who live similar experiences.

Last, but certainly not least, Inspirations is one of the best resources for those affected with so many different needs.

Restoring joy and hope is an active endeavour! We are not alone in our challenges, and we can navigate them together. If you are not finding the information or support you need, let's try to create it together.

In this school year, I will be flexing my "hope" muscles, setting my sights on more meaningful goals and working with you all to make sure that you have what you need to do the same.

Wishing everyone a joyous and hopeful school year! ■

> *Info:* emsb.qc.ca/emsb/community/parents/tool-kit.
>
> *Julie Kristof is vice-chair of ACSES and chairs the governing board at John Grant High School. She is the mother of two.*

Wagar students delve into garden maintenance project

by *Stuart Chappell*



Marc Baguio helps fill the repaired planter with fresh soil in September. The photo was taken by Brigitte Chung. Both are Sociovocational Integration students at Wagar Adult Education Centre.
Photo courtesy of Wagar

The life of a garden planter is quite unglamorous and very challenging, especially in Montreal's tough climate. Year after year, it sits outside, holds soil, supports plants, absorbs rain, survives snow and freezing temperatures – and gradually deteriorates. The planter, like other small pieces of garden infrastructure such as birdhouses and window boxes, helps make a garden grow, but it is all too often neglected. We tend to notice the flowers, vegetables and fruit that are growing healthily, while the physical structure that makes a home for them get overlooked.

That was the case until recently, when Wagar's Sociovocational Integration gardening class students learned of the impending plight of two very weathered and forgotten planters and enthusiastically rolled up their sleeves to give these objects a well-deserved second life.

In early September, we gathered around the planters and made note that many of the boards were damaged, and parts of the bottoms had rotted away. The students could have become dispirited by the enormity of the task before them, but following our class motto, "Do the best with what you have," they instead decided to take a closer look to see what could be saved, repaired and rejuvenated.

Over the weeks that followed, the students revealed themselves to be incredibly flexible, dedicated and cooperative – all critical soft skills in the workplace – as they worked to rejuvenate the planters.

Together, they worked like gardeners and landscapers, first emptying the planters, then sanding, staining and lining them, and finally refilling them with fresh, healthy soil in preparation for planting garlic and onions this fall.

There is something rewarding about taking an old, overlooked object and bringing it back into use. As the gardening class teacher, I've been genuinely impressed by the way the students have taken on the task and, in the process, developed important workplace skills.

What's more, they have learned that gardening isn't always about growing things. Sometimes, it's about fixing the things that help plants grow. ■

> *Stuart Chappell is a Sociovocational Integration (SVI) teacher at Wagar Adult Education Centre with the English Montreal School Board.*

‘The Last Rebel:’ Summit grad Josh ‘Angel’ Cooney is a champion in Montreal wrestling

by *Paul Karwatsky*

On the last Thursday of every month, wrestling fans pack the Piranha Bar in downtown Montreal to cheer, boo and lose their voices. When “The Last Rebel” steps through the curtain with the Pit Fight Wrestling (PFW) 25/8 Championship on his shoulder, the crowd knows exactly who he is: Josh “Angel” Cooney, champion and proud Summit School graduate, class of 2023.



Josh “Angel” Cooney poses with his PFW 25/8 Championship belt beside the Guy Lafleur statue outside the Bell Centre in September 2026, the day after a championship victory over Sammi Miami at PFW’s Bite the Hand event. Born and raised in Montreal, Cooney calls Lafleur his all-time favourite Canadiens player. Photo courtesy of J. Cooney

Cooney has loved wrestling for almost as long as he can remember. His first memory is an episode of World Wrestling Entertainment’s SmackDown, which he watched when he was about two. He fell hard for the sport when he discovered the gritty, territory-era promotions World Class Championship Wrestling and Mid-South Wrestling.

Cooney started training in 2020, and in 2022 began learning under Carl Leduc, son of Quebec wrestling great Paul Leduc, who taught him old-school Canadian strong style. He was smaller then and learning to take bumps was the hardest part. Over time, the challenge became mental. “What got me through it was my faith in God, the unwavering support of my parents and a deep-rooted belief in myself,” he said.

His first pro match came in August 2022 against Keven Gray, a second-generation Quebec wrestler. “All I had to do was listen to him, follow his lead in the ring, and everything was going to be fine.”

As a kid, Cooney invented a character called “The Angelik.” As he matured, the character became “The Last Rebel,” a name born from doubt. “I felt like I had to rebel against the people who didn’t necessarily believe in me,” he recalled.

Winning the PFW title proved them wrong. He recently carried the belt across the border to defend it at Super Nova Wrestling near Boston. “It’s not just about the title itself, but the trust that a promotion has in me to carry that responsibility.”

Cooney traces that road back to Summit School, where he is believed to be the first student in the school’s history to become a professional athlete. The school took him in at age 13 when he was struggling at a different school. “[Summit] helped keep me in school, and all the opportunities came with it,” he said. He played on Summit’s basketball team, which travelled to Toronto for the Special Olympics in 2019 and came home with gold. That trip taught him what it felt like to travel with friends, which is exactly what he does now, every weekend, performing across Quebec, Ontario and beyond.

Next, Cooney wants to wrestle in the United States and Europe, especially England. His advice for young people with big dreams: “If your dreams don’t scare you, then they’re not big enough. Put in the work, block out the noise and never let anyone tell you your vision is out of reach.” ■

Wheelchair ice skating part of Dorval’s inclusion action plan

by *Samara O’Gorman*

Winter sports in Quebec are a cherished tradition, but for individuals with mobility challenges, participating on the ice has historically been difficult. The city of Dorval is actively working to change that through inclusive recreational offerings, including specialized sleds for wheelchair ice skating.

The sleds enable wheelchair users to experience skating alongside family and friends and are based at the Edgar Rouleau Arena (formerly known as the Dorval Arena) and can be used both indoors during free-skate sessions and outdoors on the city’s covered refrigerated rink.

To ensure safety and ease of use, municipal staff members are specifically trained to assist users with getting into and out of the equipment. The ice-skating sled allows people with reduced mobility to glide on ice directly in their own wheelchair without needing to transfer out of it. The sled attaches securely to most manual wheelchairs, with an accompanying skater who pushes and guides the user from behind.

While the sleds serve a specific need and may not be used every day, Mayor Marc Doret emphasized that their presence reflects a shift toward ensuring every resident has the opportunity to participate. “We want a place where families can gather without having a member on the



sidelines looking in.” The introduction of ice sleds is part of a broader, years-long initiative guided by Dorval’s Universal Inclusion Action Plan.

For Doret, fostering inclusion across the West Island is a collaborative effort among local municipalities. “Inclusion is a state of mind... we’re not doing this for the masses, we’re doing this because we believe that having children or older people have the opportunity to participate in activities with their families, be it in a pool, a park, or on an ice rink, is what matters.” As Dorval continues to roll out accessible infrastructure, the administration hopes these initiatives inspire neighboring communities to raise the standard for accessibility across the region. The sleds are also available to use in the municipality of Dollard-des-Ormeaux. ■

Stronger together, in thanks to the Gary Ulrich Family Foundation



Inspirations extends its heartfelt gratitude to The Gary Ulrich Family Foundation for adopting Josh ‘Angel’ Cooney’s story. Passionate about the positive influence of sports on students’ lives, Ulrich recognizes that athletics teach far more than the game itself: discipline, resilience, respect and how to persevere through challenges. His generous support helps *Inspirations* share stories like this one, that celebrate how sports can build confidence, foster personal growth and open doors to new possibilities.
The Ulrich family is seen here at Solomon Schechter Academy with staff and students at the unveiling of the school’s Hall of Fame wall.

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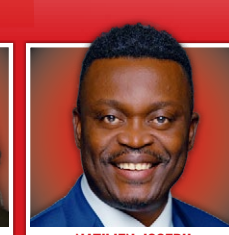
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Habs Captain Nick Suzuki steps up for mental health and the Asista Foundation

by *Mike Cohen*

There were plenty of good shots taken at the Nick Suzuki Heroes Golf Tournament in August at the Club de Golf Saint-Raphaël on Île-Bizard. But the most meaningful moments included those who had four legs, wagging tails and a remarkable ability to bring calm to those around them.

For the second consecutive year, I was among those fortunate enough to attend the tournament, an event that combines golf, community spirit and an increasingly important cause: mental health.

At the heart of it all is Montreal Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki, who has become a passionate ambassador for the Asista Foundation and its mission to make a difference, one service dog at a time.

Founded in 2011, the Laval-based foundation gives dogs from challenging circumstances a second chance while training them as service dogs for individuals and organizations dealing with mental health needs. Through its A Hero Within All of Us campaign, Asista is helping bring over 100 specially trained dogs into schools, healthcare settings and community organizations across Quebec and Ontario.

Four paws, big impact

One of the stars at the golf tournament was Flavie, a golden retriever mix and a trained, certified facility service dog. Working alongside her handler, Myriam Farley, Flavie supports students at L.I.N.K.S. High School of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). And Flavie is far from alone.

The EMSB has several Asista dogs working in its schools. Keira and Jessie are at Dalkeith Elementary School in Anjou, where they are cared for by principal John Wright. Gustav works at Rosemount Technology Centre with Assunta (Susie) Munno, while Journey is at St. Raphael Elementary School with handler Clementina Fraga, a school secretary.

This year, the Student Services Department also welcomed Nala. Her handler, Samantha Smith, brings Nala to the five elementary schools where she works as an animator: Willingdon, St. Monica, Hampstead, Elizabeth Ballantyne and Edinburgh; and at Westmount High School.

Suzuki has seen that impact firsthand.

A few years ago, I was at Dalkeith when Suzuki visited the school to see for himself the difference Keira and Jessie were making. At a press conference before teeing off at this year's tournament, I asked him what he had seen the dogs bring to schools. "Experiencing it firsthand, the kids absolutely love to see the dogs, and they seem to bring calm," he said.

Suzuki's commitment to Asista has become even more personal. He and his wife Caitlin welcomed Ruby, a service dog, into their home and have been involved in her training journey for nearly two years. The couple has also recently welcomed a new member to their family, becoming parents for the first time.



From left, Myriam Farley with Flavie, Solange Barbara and John Agionicolaitis of the Asista Foundation, Nick Suzuki and Michelina Scala, who works for the foundation and as a dog handler at the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, at the golf tournament in August. Suzuki arrived on a military helicopter as a way of bringing awareness to Canadian Armed Forces personnel who battle mental health challenges. Photo: Mike Cohen

"Working with Asista has made this cause very personal for me," Suzuki said. "Seeing the way [Ruby] connects with people has shown us firsthand what one dog can do for a community."

The third annual Nick Suzuki Heroes Golf Tournament was the most successful edition yet, raising $124,815 to support Asista's Mobile Facility Service Dog Program, which aims to reach even more schools, healthcare settings and community organizations.

"Nick has embraced our mission with tremendous sincerity," said John Agionicolaitis, vice president of Communications and Public Affairs at the Asista Foundation. "His support has helped us reach new communities and better equip organizations responding every day to increasingly complex mental health needs." ■

Info: asista.ca

Mike Cohen is manager, Marketing and Communications with the English Montreal School Board, a municipal politician and writes about food, travel, Montreal, politics, people and events. He is the publisher of Inspirations.



On the move at motionball Montreal

Motionball Montreal's 2026 Marathon of Sport was held October 4 at Vanier College. It raised more than $143,500 for the Special Olympics (SO) and brought together 300 participants, including 60 SO athletes from the Montreal area, young professionals, family members, community supporters and volunteers. Twenty teams in brightly coloured motionball t-shirts moved through a series of 10 sporting stations during the day, from basketball to frisbee, taking a break to enjoy a complimentary lunch and to refuel. Motionball is a national non-profit organization that engages young professionals in fundraising and awareness initiatives that support SO programs to promote greater understanding and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. The Montreal event was led by volunteer event directors Brittany Ladora, senior consultant at the National Bank of Canada; Anthony Colonna, senior tax manager at EY; and Riccardo Zerbino, tax partner at Baker Tilly Canada. – WS

Photo: Andreas Kurz

INSPIRATIONAL EATS

by *Mike Cohen*

Toronto has become something of a home away from home for me – mostly for family reasons – but there is another benefit to my frequent trips down Highway 401: the opportunity to explore the city's ever-evolving culinary scene.

Over the years, I've discovered some terrific restaurants and eateries that not only serve up memorable food but also make accessibility a priority. Here are a few destinations worth putting on your Toronto dining itinerary.

Lyla Toronto: Four 'chapters' of deliciousness

We thoroughly enjoyed our very first visit to Lyla Toronto, a stylish restaurant in the city's Queen West neighbourhood, close to Liberty Village and BMO Field.

Opened in 2024, Lyla brings together Italian, French and contemporary Mediterranean influences, marrying coastal flavours with modern techniques and subtle international touches. Co-owners Daniel van Welie and Amen Habtemariam have created a sophisticated yet welcoming dining room.



A steak dinner at Lyla Toronto.

There's a Montreal connection here as well: Van Welie grew up in Saint-Laurent before leaving Montreal about 15 years ago and heading to Toronto. On our visit, the three of us decided to try Lyla's newly introduced Chef's Menu, priced at $110 per person. The meal is divided into four "chapters," making dinner feel almost like a culinary story unfolding one course at a time. For diners with mobility challenges, Lyla is also a comfortable choice. There is a wheelchair-accessible entrance and patio, no stairs to navigate upon entering, and the washrooms are located on the same level as the restaurant.

Info: lylatoronto.com

The Bagel House: Bringing a taste of Montreal to Toronto

Remember the days when Torontonians would visit Montreal and return home with bags of bagels because they simply couldn't find the same quality back home? Well, in 1999, Sat Chouhan and Jessie Sahdra decided to do something about it. The two friends, who learned the bagel business while working at Montreal institutions including REAL Bagel, Fairmount Bagel and St-Viateur Bagel, set out to bring that Montreal-style experience to Toronto. The result was The Bagel House, which has now grown to six locations. I recently visited their newest location at Promenade Shopping Centre, and it's a great spot to sit down and enjoy a bagel breakfast or lunch—or simply grab something delicious to take home. This is a standalone facility, with easy wheelchair accessibility at the entrance, accessible tables and washrooms.



From left, Sat Chouhan, Jessie Sahdra and Chouhan's son Jashon.

Info: thebagelhouse.com



INSPIRATIONS NEWS PODCAST

with hosts *Mark Bergman* and *Samara O'Gorman*

inspirationsnews.com/inspirations/podcasts

Eggspectation: Montreal breakfast, Toronto style

If you're craving a taste of a Montreal-style breakfast while visiting Toronto, Eggspectation is a natural choice. The Montreal-founded restaurant group has expanded well beyond Quebec, with locations across Canada, the United States and the Middle East. Its downtown Toronto restaurant on Bay St. near the Eaton Centre, is particularly popular—and once you see the menu, it's easy to understand why. With more than 100 items, Eggspectation goes well beyond the traditional breakfast. There are plenty of choices for lunch and other daytime cravings as well. Accessibility is also well considered. Wheelchair access is available through both the office-building entrance and the Albert St. entrance, with an accessible washroom on the main level.



The All-American is a popular choice at Eggspectation.

Info: eggspectation.com



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Inspirations celebrated Simon Chang and his Foundation for Change on October 7 at the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). Seen here are members of the EMSB's Galileo Adult Education Centre's puppet-making educational art team, who were named as Simon Chang Difference Makers in 2022. From left: Martina Schiavone, principal; Lisa Trotto, teacher; Simon Chang; students Tanya Marie De Sousa, Alexis Gérin-Lajoie, Peter Dimirdjian; and teachers Vera Tronca and Alain Tourigny.

The Simon Chang Foundation for Change

celebrates **six years of collaboration**
with *Inspirations* and of making
a positive impact
in our community.

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Wendy Singer, Simon Chang and Mark Bergman.

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