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INSPIRATIONS

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



 **THE SIBLING
PERSPECTIVE**

 **THE GIFT OF
GRATITUDE**

 **EXPOSITIONS
IMMERSIVES
ET ENFANTS
AUTISTES**



Participants engage in a karate practice with instructors Kathryn Yao (front) and Megan Vincelli in March (see p. 38). Photo: Andreas Kurz



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Editor's message

Every edition, we try to feature a piece by a new writer, or several, as the case may be. In this Spring issue of *Inspirations*, we offer readers perspectives from two people sharing their personal accounts. Yosef D. Robinson is our guest columnist, and we learn about his educational and professional paths. We also offer another column from Emmanuelle Assor, a writer and mother of an autistic son who shares her insight into immersive museum exhibits.

We are always grateful (please see the article about gratitude on p. 14!) for being able to include the writings of professionals in every edition. We count among us psychologists, social workers, speech-language pathologists and consultants working in the fields of personal development, and autism. Teachers also form an important part of our writing group, offering us glimpses into their classrooms and student experiences. All their insights are valuable and their time, which they give voluntarily to write for us, is greatly appreciated. The Riverside School Board and Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board join the English Montreal School Board in submitting articles in this edition. The more school boards we can include, the better.

The age of writers is also something we try and vary. In this issue, readers learn about tips on how to communicate with teachers from a Grade 4 student and can enjoy reading the winning poem composed by a high school student. Our special feature focuses on siblings and their relationships - many of the testimonials you will read are written by young people. All speak to your feedback on our most recent readership survey conducted last spring.

These articles complement those from our team of reporters, whose pieces seek to bring information and context to what's new in the area of special needs and positive mental health.

Let's continue to encourage a variety of news, topics and perspectives!

– Kristin McNeill

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With this new edition, we are excited to introduce our new fundraising initiative. Since our inception 17 years ago, our advertisers, sponsors – including Simon Chang – and our parent organization, the English Montreal School Board, which provides invaluable in-kind support, have been our financial backbone. We thank you all for your partnership.

Now, as we turn to our most important partner, our community, we're humbled by your enthusiasm for the growing mission of *Inspirations*: to support, inspire and encourage.

On p. 23, discover an empowering initiative led by Lorri Benedik in support of neurodiversity and mental health. Each name listed on the page represents someone who believes in breaking down barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities and their loved ones. We welcome you to join this movement. Visit our website to find out how!

Wrap your arms around those you care about and your hands around this edition. Enjoy!

– Wendy Singer, managing editor



INSPIRATIONS

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Awesome mom's love sets flight to her daughter's talents

by *Lorri Benedik*

When Francine Boyer gave birth to daughter Lena Baldoni, the score measuring her newborn's health was a perfect ten. "That number is not given out easily!" joked Boyer. "I had always thought it was reserved for doctors' babies."

Boyer was already mom to 22-month-old Alyssa (Baldoni) and she had been running a home-based daycare for years. "At around 10 months I noticed that Lena was not turning her head for sounds or babbling like other kids her age," Boyer said. "At first we thought she might be hearing

impaired, but testing ruled that out." Soon, Boyer noticed her daughter was not playing with toys, preferring to line them up over and over again. She hated getting dirty and could not endure clothing with long sleeves. "You have no idea how difficult it is to find a snowsuit with short sleeves," Boyer recalled. "We ended up getting capes for her."

What Lena loved most was the Disney channel; when she heard the music, she would stop whatever she was doing and sit mesmerized in front of the screen.

At 20 months, Lena was diagnosed with autism. Boyer closed her daycare and began focusing full time on her daughter's applied



Lena Baldoni, left, and her mom Francine Boyer, on February 23 at their home in Sainte-Geneviève. Photo: Andreas Kurz

behaviour analysis (ABA) training. Once a week they would attend sessions at the Montreal Children's Hospital, and every day she was at home with Lena doing what she had been taught by the specialists.

When she turned 3, Lena started attending a preschool program three afternoons a week. This was the first time, in years, that Boyer had a few hours to herself.

On Sundays, Lena's dad would take care of her for two hours while Boyer did a special activity one-on-one with Alyssa.

When Lena turned 4, Boyer enrolled her in l'École spécialisée John-F.-Kennedy in Beaconsfield of the Centre de services scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys where they focused on life skills. Students there learned reading and basic math by going to the grocery store. They would return to school and create meals with the items purchased.

It was at age 5 that Lena began to show a gift for drawing. She would use her writing skills to add descriptive wording to each piece of art she created.

Several years ago, after Alyssa moved out, Lena expressed an interest in living independently like her big sister. Boyer proceeded to convert their home into two dwellings. Lena, 32, lives upstairs and has her own kitchen and art studio. She prepares two dinners per week and invites her mom. She loves trying new recipes.

Lena has evolved into a gifted artist and has created over 900 paintings. A website produced by Boyer, Sourire Animé, displays and sells her daughter's artwork. Lena still completes two or three paintings each week. "Money is not important to Lena," said Boyer. "It's the look on the face of someone who acquires one of her paintings that is her favourite currency."

She has always been very athletic and involved in sports. At age 8, Lena began competing in Special Olympics track-and-field as well as swimming. She enjoys the events and the camaraderie between participants.

In recent years, she has developed a love for extreme sports such as parachuting, parasailing and tightrope walking. Lena recently completed her second polar plunge, with her awesome mom close by, watching and filming the event.

She currently works at the Ste. Anne's Hospital in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, where she folds laundry, waters the plants, feeds the birds and fish and sometimes helps out in the kitchen.

Lena also teaches drawing to elementary school kids.

Alyssa is now a teacher and hosts special lunches with students. She credits her mom with teaching her the value of one-on-one time. ■

For more information on Lena Baldoni's artwork: www.sourireanime.com.



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Building Dreams





Educator Henri has ‘fierce belief in her students’ abilities’

by *Randy Pinsky*

“Over 60 students have gone through the Adam’s P.A.C.E. program, and it’s just getting better and better, thanks to people like Natalie Henri advocating for them,” stated Ann Taylor, chairperson of the program’s steering committee. Recognizing that Henri “has gone above and beyond the call of a teacher to make the program the best experience it could be for adults with challenges,” Taylor nominated her for this edition’s Simon Chang Difference Maker Award.

Twenty years ago, Taylor’s son Adam had one dream: to follow his high school friends to college. At the time, however, there were few post-secondary school options for adults with developmental disabilities. After much lobbying, Taylor and several other determined parents on the South Shore launched the P.A.C.E. (Post-secondary Alternative Community-based Education) program of the Riverside School Board, where special needs students could attend CEGEP with individualized support. While battling leukemia, Adam was among the first students to participate, realizing his dream to attend Champlain College Saint-Lambert.

Riverside School Board renamed the initiative Adam’s P.A.C.E. in his honour, and the program has expanded with work placements tailored to student needs and interests.

As teacher of Adam’s P.A.C.E., Henri has been instrumental in expanding the program, emphasizing life skills and social integration. Through an innovative partnership with Champlain College’s Student

Services department, Adam’s P.A.C.E. now has 15 volunteers who regularly socialize with the students. “It changes the vibe in the classroom for them to be with people their own age,” shared Henri. “And that’s the thing I am most proud of.”

From a classroom off campus, Henri petitioned for a location by the library so that P.A.C.E. could be closer to the mainstream of Champlain life.

The students get the full CEGEP experience as they directly participate in school activities; an opportunity that is “enriching and sensitizing for all involved,” observed Henri. In fact, the Champlain Student Association specifically invited P.A.C.E. to join the First Year Leadership Program (FLIP). “Champlain’s Student Services department has been extremely supportive and forward-thinking,” expressed Taylor.

Third-year P.A.C.E. student Paige is thrilled to be on the FLIP Leadership Program executive team, though admitted to having reservations at first. “I was feeling unsure and very nervous of how it would go, but Miss Natalie encouraged me...we have one-on-one meetings...to help us make a plan to reach our goals,” she said.

Taylor commended Henri for “always thinking of new and innovative ways to build meaningful, mutually beneficial connections.” Of particular mention is the students’ involvement in helping run Champlain’s food pantry initiative, created in response to a college-wide need. Every week, P.A.C.E. students assemble boxes for those experiencing food insecurity as well as assist with the food drives twice a year. Not only does this allow them to be a part of a community effort, but they foster empathy.

Something that sets this dedicated educator apart is her fierce belief in her students’ abilities, observed Taylor. Her non-accept-



Natalie Henri, teacher at Adam’s P.A.C.E., (front row, fourth from left) with Simon Chang and Ann Taylor, chair of Adam’s P.A.C.E. Steering Committee to her right, with students, alumni and staff at the Simon Chang Difference Maker celebration at Champlain College on April 25. Photo courtesy of Champlain College

tance of excuses and high expectations (“you have a voice – let’s hear it”) pushes them to make decisions and express opinions. “My motto is to raise the bar for them because they are capable,” said Henri. “If you give them the chance, they can surprise you.”

Alumni Donnicks is a key example of challenging limiting assumptions. Not only did he graduate from P.A.C.E., but he secured a part-time job at Champlain College Fitness Center and now takes the bus to work independently.

Henri acknowledged how, though often well intentioned, low expectations about abilities can be internalized as self-limiting beliefs; something she actively works to combat.

She coordinates guest speakers on various topics to provide the students with resources and connections, and the parent-support group is particularly valued by the families.

Taylor spoke from the heart when she said, “Natalie is the epitome of the kind of

teacher I would have wished for Adam.” In her nomination, she wrote, “successful inclusion for youth with special needs in a college setting...doesn’t just happen - it requires a committed, passionate and capable leader...who understands the value of the students’ place within the college environment and who will endlessly advocate for their rights.”

Simon Chang attended a ceremony on April 25 at Champlain College. “I am so delighted to honour Natalie Henri with the Difference Maker award. In visiting her classroom, it is obvious to see the enormous impact she has on her students. She empowers them with confidence, and they have responded due to her trust and encouragement. Congratulations to the whole class for all that they have achieved, and will continue to achieve, together,” he said.

Nominate your Difference Maker at info@inspirationsnews.com.

Une seconde vie pour nos vêtements avec Simon Chang

par *Martine Brosseau* et *Khalida Smahi*

Dans le cadre du projet Les petits artisans, nous avons décidé de relever un défi créatif et écologique : revamper un morceau de vêtement pour lui donner une nouvelle vie!

Grâce à l'aide précieuse du designer Simon Chang, cette aventure, qui a eu lieu le 11 décembre, a pris une dimension exceptionnelle, ce qui nous a permis d'explorer différentes techniques comme la couture, la broderie, l'ajout de motifs ou encore l'assemblage de tissus variés.

Dès le début du projet, M. Chang a généreusement partagé son expertise et son univers avec nous. Il nous a fourni des tissus et des matériaux pour nous aider à transformer nos vêtements avec style et originalité. Lors d'une rencontre inspirante, il nous a ouvert les portes de son processus de création en nous présentant son cahier d'esquisses, un précieux recueil où naissent ses idées et ses collections.

Pour approfondir notre compréhension du monde de la mode, nous avons eu la chance de visiter la salle d'exposition de Simon Chang. Cette immersion nous a permis d'observer ses créations, d'analyser les tendances et de mieux comprendre le travail minutieux qui se cache derrière chaque pièce de vêtement.

Pour conclure cette belle aventure, nous aimerions organiser une petite exposition de mode afin de présenter nos créations. Grâce à cette expérience unique, nous avons appris non seulement à redonner vie aux vêtements, mais aussi à valoriser notre imagination et notre savoir-faire.

Martine Brosseau et Khalida Smahi sont enseignantes à l'Académie John Caboto. Elles partagent une passion commune pour la créativité et l'artisanat. Depuis trois ans, elles animent le club Les petits artisans, un lieu où les élèves peuvent laisser libre cours à leur imagination et développer leur talent dans une ambiance chaleureuse et bienveillante pendant l'heure du dîner.



Les élèves de l'Académie John Caboto se sont rendus à l'atelier de Simon Chang sur la rue Chabanel le 11 décembre.
Photo courtoisie de Pickle Creative Agency

A student's 10 tips on how to talk to teachers

by *W.B.*

Tip 1: Charm is your armour.

You need to be nice and look well present-ed. Try to act natural and be your best self.

Tip 2: Greetings, first impressions matter (so make them good!)

Posture always helps confidence/courage. If this isn't your first day, say "Bonjour/hello Madame ——— or Miss ——— or Mr ———." If it is your first day, I recommend you sit at your desk and watch how others introduce themselves during the icebreaker first and then take your turn and introduce yourself. Or chatting with your teacher can also help.

Tip 3: Don't fret and don't be afraid to ask for help.

School is only seven hours a day, five days a week, for the next 12 years.

But seriously, even if you do "fret", because I know I have, there are always people to help! You just need to ask.

Tip 4: Think of ways you can grow your relationship with your teacher.

Tip 5: Learn the way of the "hall pass."

A hall pass, if you don't already know, is a pass the teacher gives you to let you go somewhere in the school, such as for a bathroom break or if you need to stretch your legs.

Tip 6: Try to help your teacher.

Simple things can go a long way to build your relationship with your teacher. For example, offer to hold the door open or to carry things.

Tip 7: Look to support staff.

Often, teachers have many students who need their attention at the same time. The way you can help yourself and your teacher is to go to the support staff.

Tip 8: Hands up!

Oh ya! I almost forgot to tell you the most basic thing: Raise your hand when you want to ask a question.

Tip 9: Mind your Ps and Qs.

Be kind and polite. It's important to always be respectful.

Tip 10: Be honest with your teachers and with yourself. Honesty is always the best policy.

These are the tips I find helpful. I hope that this will help you, too. Thank you very much for reading.

W. B. is a Grade 4 student at Willingdon Elementary School (EMSB).

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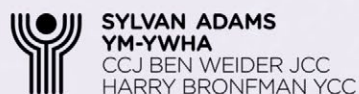
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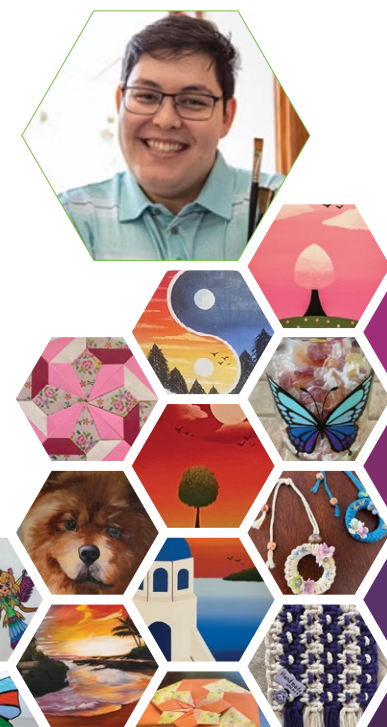
Discover how autistic artist **Ismael Bello** brings creativity to life with handcrafted designs full of vibrant colors and intricate patterns, like:

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Summit School earns Apple Distinguished School recognition

by *Paul Karwatsky*

Summit School has been recognized as an Apple Distinguished School, a designation that is in effect for the next three years. It is awarded to schools that demonstrate exceptional leadership in integrating technology into education using Apple products. Summit School's innovative approach uses Apple technology to enhance student learning, fostering an inclusive and dynamic environment tailored to diverse learning needs.

"Being recognized as an Apple Distinguished School is a testament to our commitment to innovation and excellence in education," said Herman Erdogmus, director general of Summit School. "Technology plays a crucial role in making learning accessible, engaging and empowering for our students."

Apple Distinguished Schools are recognized for their ability to leverage iPads and Macs to create personalized learning experiences, enabling students to explore, problem-solve and develop critical skills in new and meaningful ways.

To celebrate this milestone, and to also mark the official opening of the school's new Creative Arts and Physical Education Centre, Summit School was planning an event in May that included creative performances and a showcase of technological innovation in education.

Ethel and Morty Fruchter Summit Café named business of the month

The Ethel and Morty Fruchter Summit Café at the Donald Berman Maimonides Geriatric Centre has been named Business of the Month by the Côte Saint-Luc Local Commerce Committee. The café is a business run by Summit School to provide on-the-job, tailored training for students in the areas of customer service, teamwork and business operations. The award highlights local businesses that provide outstanding service and demonstrate a strong commitment to the community.

"This recognition is a reflection of the incredible work our students and staff put

into this initiative," said Josh Cunningham, vice principal of Entrepreneurial Development. "The café is more than just a business – it's a meaningful opportunity for our students to receive real workplace experience in an environment designed to meet their individual learning needs." ■

Paul Karwatsky consults on communications and marketing for Summit School.



by
Steven Atme

A trip down Cherney Lane: My memories of Gloria

The late Gloria Cherney was the founder of Summit School and an icon to the Special Needs World. Devoting six decades to special education, she was ahead of everyone's time.

In 2001, Gloria and my former Parkdale Elementary School teacher Maria Cordova were frequently in touch regarding a few students who had been transferred to Summit, one of them being me. The 13 years at Summit School that followed changed everything. Gloria could read students well and by accompanying them, watching their actions, speech, learning process and talents, she helped them succeed in education and become remarkable people.

A lot of her time was spent visiting classrooms, which was how I met Gloria for the first time. From there to passing her in the hallway, where we chatted, something

caught her attention. She was a huge admirer of classical music. When she found out I composed music on the piano and heard my first piece "Sorrows," she began investing so much energy opening up opportunities for me in the creative arts world. Some of these involved professional projects with Jesse Heffring, then a media teacher at Summit, who was interested in my 2011 composition, "Summit School Anthem." Gloria granted me a scholarship to the McGill Conservatory of Music, and as she predicted, I persevered and graduated.

I'll never forget two sentimental moments. The first one was: after I mentioned to Gloria that I had organized my first public speaking event ("Special People Have Dreams") and would be presenting at Saint Joseph's Oratory, she spent her Sunday attending the big event. The second one was when Gloria had her 97th birthday party in June 2023, surrounded by her family and

closest friends. She had gotten back into playing the piano and wanted me there. We accompanied each other playing her favourite song, chatted and much more. At one point, she gave me a long tight hug and whispered, "Promise me you won't stop your music. Promise me you won't stop everything you do for everybody. I'm proud of you. I love you, Steven."

Thank you, my second grandmother, for everything you've done for me, students/staff from past and present to creating an amazing future humanity. We reached our twin peaks thanks to the rock, the foundation that started it all. To Gloria, 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.



Gloria Cherney, left, and Steven Atme at the piano at her 97th birthday party. Photo: Glenda Bernstein

Honoring Black History Month through design at Wagar

by *Elias Tanbe*

At Wagar Adult Education Centre, the Socio-Vocational Integration (SVI) students in the Graphic Design course took on a meaningful and creative challenge this past February during Black History Month: They designed over 20 posters showcasing Black historical and contemporary figures.

This initiative emerged during the layout design class, where we decided to put our skills into action in a way that celebrated both Black History Month and the achievements of individuals who have broken barriers despite facing disabilities and other challenges. Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Octavia Butler and Bessie Coleman were among those featured. Each student carefully researched and selected a remarkable

Black person, from activists and artists to athletes and scholars, to recognize and honour their contributions.

Using their graphic design skills, students crafted visually compelling posters, incorporating typography, imagery and layout techniques to tell each person's story.

To take the project further, the students brainstormed about how to display their work in the most impactful way possible. That's when Amir Hosein Islami came up with a brilliant idea. Noticing that tape and sticky tack weren't working well, he designed and 3D-printed custom wall clips to hold the posters securely in place. This small but innovative solution ensured that the work was presented professionally and durably.

The exhibition turned out to be a huge success, drawing attention to the intersection of Black history, disability awareness and design. More than just an assignment,



From left: Hunter Cullen, Raquel Iny, Mitchell Deschamps, Nathan Stacey, Amir Islami, Christopher Ortnr, Jackson Jimenez, William Brinckman-Smith and Elias Tanbe. Photo courtesy of E. Tanbe

the project became a powerful learning experience, blending history, creativity and problem-solving.

Each poster serves as a reminder of resilience, achievement and representation. Through this project, the students not only

honed their design skills but also contributed to a meaningful conversation about diversity and inclusion.

Elias Tanbe is the program creator and teacher of the Socio-Vocational Integration Graphic Design course at Wagar Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board.

Poetry contest winner!

Co-hosting this poetry contest with *Inspirations* was a true delight. We invited students to write short poems about kindness and friendship, aiming to build a stronger sense of community and empathy in schools. For me, poetry is a powerful way to share feelings and connect with others, and I was eager to see how these young writers would express such important themes. A huge congratulations to Kulani Leduc, who won a signed copy of my book *July's Return* and a spot in the *Inspirations* news publication! To everyone who submitted: Keep writing; your words matter.

– Samara O’Gorman

Together Alone

Loneliness is a chilling, fickle breeze
Tickling, teasing at my smarting back
It leaves me in bed, sick with disease
And makes all of the hues turn to black
Then you came along, and showed me the door
Like a lamp to my mind where the shadows bore
Sometimes I still feel solitude’s grasp on my throat
But you were my lifeline when I couldn’t float
You picked me up where I had fallen
Loneliness was once a friend, now forgotten

– by Kulani Leduc, 15, John F. Kennedy High School



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Commission scolaire Lester B. Pearson School Board

The gift of gratitude

by *Danika Swanson*

As I sit down to write this column, the world around us seems to be moving at an unprecedented pace. With all the competing demands on our time, attention and care, it is easy to meet them with negativity, reactivity and a feeling of overwhelm. This is when mindfulness practice is so important; taking a moment to pause and tune into the present with kindness, curiosity and nonjudgment. This creates a space in which we can respond intentionally, instead of reacting mindlessly.

In previous columns, we have explored a variety of mindfulness practices and “anchors” for our attention. While we have looked at emotions and practiced heartfulness with a loving kindness exercise, in this edition, we’ll introduce a new heartfulness practice that explores one emotion more deeply: gratitude.

What is gratitude? It is more than just saying thank you. Gratitude is a feeling that comes from both noticing a good thing and recognizing that that good thing came from outside of ourselves. Most often, we feel gratitude for a gift or an action from another person, but we can also feel gratitude for gifts from nature, a higher power or the universe. A plethora of studies show that practicing gratitude brings wide-ranging social, physical and psychological benefits. Recent studies looking specifically at the benefits of gratitude for youth find improved physical and mental health, better academic performance, increased prosocial behaviours and a greater sense of connection and desire to contribute to society.

While there are many ways to practice gratitude, here we’ll explore a mindful variation of the classic “Three Good Things.” After identifying and naming three things we

are grateful for, we will pay attention to how gratitude makes us feel.

Practice this anytime you need a positive shift or to remind yourself of the things that make you feel happy, even when things aren’t great.

Gratitude practice:

- › Choose a mindful posture that is comfortable for you: sitting, standing or lying down.
- › Think of three things you are grateful for (people, places, foods, kind gestures, aspects of nature, songs, experiences, etc.)
- › Let your eyes close or look down with a soft gaze. Imagine those three things



A picture of the card for “grateful” and the Gratitude Gumball Machine from “Feelings Deck for Kids: 30 Activities for Handling Big Emotions,” created by a Montreal-area couple. Images courtesy of D. Swanson

Resource

Greater Good in Education: Science-Based Practices for Kinder, Happier Schools: Click on the “Student Well-Being” tab then “Gratitude.”

► Continued on p. 16

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Restoring self-regulation

by *Janet Silverstone Perlis*

Big emotions can affect both children and adults alike – at home, in school or in the workplace. Understanding how to navigate them has become an increasingly important focus as learning and productivity can become impaired no matter how old we are.

How to both understand this process and acquire the coping strategies are well documented in the book *The Whole Brain Child* by Dr. Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson. Particularly helpful is Dr. Siegel’s model of “flipping your lid” to explain emotional dysregulation and, more importantly, how to move to regulation.

Typically, when we feel calm, our logic centre (prefrontal cortex) is in control, and there is a balance between all parts of our brain. We think rationally; our emotions are regulated, and so is our decision-making. This logical part of our brain works in tandem with our emotional brain (the limbic system, which is led by our amygdala).

The amygdala is like our internal smoke detector that functions as a protective alarm signaling our body to release chemicals (adrenaline, cortisol, etc.) to activate our defense system. When a threat is registered, we then appropriately move into fight, flight or freeze. Our defense system is activated, and the control system flips with our emotional brain in control. Once danger has passed, the all-clear signal is received, and things go back to the status quo with our brain in balance.

But what happens when the perceived threat is not real, or the alarm signal keeps sounding? That is when Dr. Siegel’s model

explains we have “flipped our lid” as our emotional brain overtakes our logical brain and remains stuck in the imbalance. We can easily identify this in children’s tantrums. In adults, we can see impulsive behaviour, difficulty making decisions and thinking clearly. Access to the logic or thinking centre is temporarily “off-line.”

Dr. Siegel discusses strategies to restore self-regulation in his book:

1. Connect and Redirect

Connect: It is important to first acknowledge the feelings that the dysregulated person (child or adult) is experiencing. By validating their feelings or perceptions, a sense of safety and security is increased while the state of alarm is decreased. Also, it helps open access to the logic centre.

Redirect: Once calmer and feeling understood, the dysregulated person will only now be ready to begin practiced strategies. For example, parents or teachers helping a child walk through the rehearsed steps of a calming strategy in an empathetic manner can make it easier for the child to become self-regulated.

2. Name It to Tame It

Identifying emotions can have a major influence. By labeling feelings, it is easier to not only understand them but to manage them. This is also another way to engage the logical brain. Emotion charts or images of animals may be useful visual prompts to help recognize or name feelings. Creating links between emotions and accompanying body cues or sensations can also be powerful. Recognizing what may be initiating the “flipping your lid” process such as clenched

fists or jaws when angry can reinforce the mind-body connection.

3. Engage, Don’t Enrage

A key to helping a dysregulated person is to, oneself, stay calm. Children in particular mirror the emotions of others. If the adult with them becomes agitated, it will heighten their emotions. However, if the adult is calm, the child will regulate more easily. Demonstrating self-regulation will serve as a model for the child and be very impactful.

4. Move It or Lose It

Calming activities don’t necessarily mean being sedentary. To reduce agitation, moving can help shift from being in an emotional state to regaining balance and a sense of control. Going for walks, playing basketball, putting on music and dancing or riding a bicycle can decrease intense feelings and help move towards self-regulation.

5. Teach Mindsight

Mindsight, a term coined by Dr. Siegel, refers to developing self-awareness through understanding one’s own thoughts and feelings. Essential to mindsight is having opportunities to practice suitable strategies. Dr. Siegel also highlights the importance of learning how to adapt to uncomfortable situations and feelings. He describes the importance of reminding children that feelings are temporary. While they may feel stuck with a negative feeling, it is not a permanent situation. Using the analogy of a cloud and pointing out how it “rolls by” in the sky may help a child understand how fleeting emotions can be.

What comes out of this book is that self-regulation is a learned life skill that can lead to increased self-control, independence and resilience. ■

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



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Lester B. Pearson High School hosts mental health fair

by *Victoria Della Cioppa*

The English Montreal School Board's (EMSB) Lester B. Pearson High School (LBPHS) was host of this year's Mental Health Fair on March 19 and 20, aimed at promoting student well-being. The fair was a chance for students from Grades 9 to 11 to explore the various mental health resources available in their school and neighbourhood communities.

The event is designed to raise awareness about mental health while offering resources for practical tools and support for youth facing challenges. The fair was open exclusively to LBPHS students on March 19, then welcomed other east-end EMSB schools the next day, allowing hundreds of students the chance to engage in a series of interactive activities, each focused on building knowledge and fostering well-being.

The first activity involved visiting kiosks set up by organizations that offer mental health services and resources tailored for adolescents 14 years and older. These kiosks gave students the opportunity to connect with local groups that provide ongoing support and education. The second activity

involved the screening of a powerful video featuring an individual who shares their personal experiences with mental health challenges. A Q&A session facilitated by a mental health professional followed, giving students a chance to ask questions and engage in a meaningful discussion about mental health.

The final part of the event featured a mindfulness and grounding exercise led by a facilitator from Camp Lift, designed to show students how to manage stress, improve focus and practice techniques for emotional resilience.

This year's Mental Health Fair was a collaboration between LBPHS, the EMSB's Student Services department and the East Island Network for English Language Services. Together, they formed an organizing committee whose aim was to create a supportive environment where students could learn and develop tools to maintain a positive mental well-being. ■

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

L'école L.I.N.K.S. ouvre le nouveau Centre de bien-être

par *Myriam Farley*



Des élèves de L.I.N.K.S. profitent d'un moment de tranquillité avec Flavie, une chienne d'assistance certifiée. Photo courtoisie de M. Farley

L'école L.I.N.K.S. est fière d'annoncer l'ouverture d'un espace dédié au soutien de la santé mentale et du bien-être des élèves. Le Centre de bien-être ASISTA est une nouvelle initiative en partenariat avec la Fondation ASISTA qui accueille le dernier membre de l'école, Flavie, une chienne d'assistance certifiée et formée.

Le rôle de Flavie au sein de l'école est de fournir un soutien émotionnel aux élèves, en offrant confort et sérénité. Formée par la Fondation ASISTA, Flavie aide à réduire l'anxiété, à améliorer les compétences sociales et à instaurer un climat de calme pour les élèves qui ont besoin d'un moment pour se ressourcer. Que ce soit pour des sessions individuelles ou en petits groupes, les élèves disposent désormais d'un espace sûr et accueillant pour interagir avec Flavie, travailler ou simplement se détendre.

Le partenariat entre L.I.N.K.S. et la Fondation ASISTA a commencé en juin dernier et témoigne de l'engagement de l'école en faveur de la santé mentale des

élèves. Flavie est prise en charge par la coordonnatrice à la vie étudiante à l'école L.I.N.K.S., qui souhaite offrir aux élèves des outils pour gérer leur bien-être mental.

La Fondation ASISTA joue un rôle essentiel en transformant la vie des chiens et des personnes. Sa mission consiste à sauver des chiens des refuges et à les former pour devenir des compagnons indispensables pour ceux confrontés à des défis de santé mentale tels que le trouble de stress post-traumatique (TSPT), l'anxiété et l'autisme. Grâce à ce partenariat, l'école L.I.N.K.S. apporte directement ce soutien aux élèves.

Cette nouvelle initiative met en avant l'importance de la santé mentale et de la communauté, en créant un environnement où les élèves se sentent écoutés et soutenus. ■

Myriam Farley est coordonnatrice à la vie étudiante à l'École secondaire L.I.N.K.S. et zoothérapeute certifiée.

The gift of gratitude ▶ *Cont'd from p. 14*

- that you're thankful for surrounding you.
- ▶ Notice how that makes you feel. Where do you feel gratitude in your body? Maybe you feel warmth or spaciousness in your chest, maybe you notice a smile or softness on your face, maybe you notice your hands release. Scan your body for where you feel grateful.
 - ▶ Notice if any emotions arise. Name them if you'd like, either silently or out loud. If an emotion feels particularly strong, you may want to pay attention to it for a few breaths, before returning to gratitude.
 - ▶ When you're ready, take one mindful breath and open your eyes, or bring

your attention back to the space around you. Notice how you feel.

Sometimes, practicing gratitude might feel challenging. If you're having trouble thinking of things to be grateful for, start with things that are immediately accessible, such as your breath, your body, this moment. Or watch this lovely short video from Brother David Steindl-Rast, the "grandfather of gratitude," to help you look around and notice everyday gifts: <https://grateful.org/grateful-day>. ■

Danika Swanson is the Personal Development and Community Involvement consultant for the English Montreal School Board and was trained by Mindful Schools to teach mindfulness to elementary and secondary school students.

SEL complements academic learning at EMSB

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is not a program implemented in schools, nor is it a lesson plan integrated within school curriculums, explains Danika Swanson, Personal Development and Community Involvement consultant for the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). Rather, SEL is an approach to learning in which students are given tools to develop literacy in better understanding and regulating their social and emotional needs, complementing their academic learning.

While teaching children about their emotions is not a new practice, explained Swanson, the Collaborative for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL) has legitimized SEL within academic instruction.

US-based CASEL was developed in 1994 by a network of academics and professions, seeking to foster the best practices for teaching social-emotional literacy to children.

Researchers have since established five defining characteristics of SEL. These include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and ethical or responsible decision-making.

A Personal Development and Community Involvement animator for the EMSB, Samantha Smith, stresses the importance of integrating SEL into the classroom. Research has found a strong improvement in academic performance and mental health amongst students who are being taught SEL, she explained. “If all of our students are stressed, then their brains are not able to learn.”

While Smith and Swanson both agree that there has always been a need for SEL in schools, the Covid-19 pandemic accentuated its importance.

“The biggest challenges in education [include] attention, decision-making, rela-

tionships, performance, well-being,” said Swanson. “All of those things are supported by our ability to regulate emotionally, to feel safe and to feel open to learning.”

In Smith’s experience, SEL is becoming more accepted as a result of the new academic challenges that have emerged since the pandemic. Schools are more open to applying the SEL approach in their teaching, she remarked. “My work was valued in a new way when the pandemic happened.”

SEL is also adapting to teach new competencies, Smith said. In the last five years, CASEL has worked towards tackling systemic inequality and racism in schools. “They’ve really focused on equity and inclusion.”

Smith remains positive that SEL will continue to expand. “I’m hopeful that the Quebec education system will hold onto that and provide time in the schedule, because I feel like they see it and they want it,” she adds.

Hampstead Elementary embraces ‘Me, You and Us’

Hampstead Elementary School of the EMSB is one of many schools that has been applying SEL, an approach adopted in September 2023.

Smith said she saw a need, following the pandemic, for the implementation of SEL-based approaches in other EMSB schools as well, including John Grant High School, St. Monica Elementary School, and most recently, Westmount High School.

“There was a lot more conflict happening,” she said, recalling that she looked for unique ways to help students learn to regulate their emotions.

Smith had previously implemented the Mindful Schools Curriculum at Hampstead. However, as the need for social-emotional learning increased, she looked for alternatives.

“There are many students with different learning abilities, different first languages, different nationalities, and so there’s a large

diversity [...] and that’s kind of created disagreements,” she said.

In coordination with Swanson, she was introduced to Sophie Langri, co-founder of the Montreal-based Institute of Social Emotional Education and co-creator of the Me, You, Us approach, which was inspired by the CASEL framework and Nonviolent Communication.

Recognizing that the approach could address many of the students’ learning challenges, she presented it to the staff. “I kind of showed them why I felt like it was important,” she said. Smith then began collaborating with teachers and special education technicians at the school, offering training and providing the necessary materials to effectively implement SEL in the classroom.

In September 2023, the Me, You, Us program was launched at Hampstead and focused specifically on teaching students about conflict resolution, allowing them “to communicate in a healthy and bridge-building way,” she explained.

This year, Smith is focused on teaching students to identify, understand and communicate their emotions. “If you’re mad or sad, what need is not being met in that moment,” Smith asks her students. “That’s been really helpful for some students who never thought about that.”

Smith visits the school once a week, dedicating each month to teaching a specific SEL skill. She also added that SEL approaches align well with the Culture and Citizen curriculum, newly implemented in the Quebec Education Program. “That also has been a way to get teachers a little bit more involved,” she said, adding that some have even begun putting up SEL posters in their classrooms and applying its approaches daily.



A Grade 3 student at Hampstead Elementary School examines the feelings and needs posters from the Institute of Social Emotional Education. Photo courtesy of Samantha Smith

The implementation of such a curriculum did not come without its challenges, however. “I’ve had to adapt the curriculum a lot,” said Smith. “Overall, at Hampstead, I’m noticing more students being able to say how they feel and what they need.” Results are not produced overnight, she added.

While it is rare for Smith to see the impact that SEL has had on her students, she does reflect on one win in particular.

Earlier this year, she reconnected with a former student of hers who had graduated last year from Hampstead. Approaching the student who felt deregulated and overwhelmed at the moment, she asked them to communicate how they were feeling. “I feel mad. I just need space,” the student responded.

Smith said that all her work was worth it, even if it only impacted that one student. ■

The sibling perspective

This edition of *Inspirations* celebrates siblings and their special bonds. In the winter, we reached out to the community for volunteers who would be willing to tell us about their sibling relationships. Here is what some had to say.

My sister Mimi

My younger sister Mimi is one of the most loving and happy people I know when she is feeling well. Whenever she has the chance, she comes and gives me a hug and tells me she loves me. The next day she could be sick and not talking.

Growing up with a sibling with special needs has taught me to take everything day by day because things can always change, and that it's important to be able to adapt and go with the flow.

I am currently studying business at Concordia University. In some ways Mimi and my relationship is kind of normal. We fight, tease and giggle together. But as she gets older, it becomes more clear that she will not do the same things as other little sisters. She will always need some sort of care, maybe even eventually from me.



Siblings Mimi, left, and Alex Yazer enjoy a family vacation in February in Orlando, Florida.
Photo: Julie Kristof

I think growing up with a sibling with a special need has made me mature a lot faster

than perhaps a typical kid. Early on I had to come to terms with many harsh realities relating to my sister's illness that forced me to realize that life isn't fair. Perhaps learning that from an early age has helped me be more perseverant in the face of other challenges in life.

I have also learned to never judge anyone's situation. Having gone through rough times and watching others do the same, I've realized that every hardship is equally as bad because it's all about perspective.

Mimi's illness and needs do not define who my sister is and how she should be treated. Everyone has their own special need with differing severities, and I don't think people should be judged for the things they can't control like a special need, but instead for their character and actions.

– by Mimi's brother, Alex Yazer

From Mimi to Alex

My name is Mimi. I am 17 and attend John Grant High School.

Alex is an amazing brother who sometimes bugs me. He is super smart. I feel like I can tell him anything. We just went to Orlando as a family and visited Walt Disney World and Universal Studios. We went on rides together. I like to play games with him, and I really like his hugs. When I'm not feeling well, he tries to help me feel better, which I appreciate, but when I'm sick I sometimes prefer to be alone.

Alex makes me feel good about myself. He treats me the same as other older brothers treat their little sisters but also has to understand that sometimes I don't feel well. I know it's hard for him sometimes. I know that our family sometimes can't do the things that we want to because I'm sick, and I feel bad about that. I want Alex to be happy.

My brother Niko

Niko is intrinsically part of me. Growing up, piecing together my identity and developing my character alongside my brother, who has cerebral palsy and is quadriplegic, gives form to the person I am becoming.

Niko has taught me to widen my literacies – and to view the world through his lens. He taught me to be cognizant of accessibility – who can enter based on accommodation and who cannot. I observe this everywhere I go, and I have noticed that throughout my life, I have tended not to enter inaccessible spaces (certain stores, malls, markets, venues, etc.). This is not by explicit choice but because he is part of me, and it has been solidified in me since our youth, as we were inseparable. When we were younger, Niko would let me sit on his chair and

go on many journeys. He raised me to see the world through his eyes by always being there with me.

My brother also taught me to appreciate music. Niko is highly interested in music. He loves the radio and CDs. He used to play music on his DynaVox. I remember sitting with Niko so he could teach me how to download music onto his computer. Back home in Greece, we live atop a café bistro bar that plays music all night. During our summers there, Niko and I would spend nights on the balcony. I would lean over the ledge with my phone to Shazam songs to create a playlist. I listen to music daily because of Niko; I wake up and go to bed to it.

If it were not for Niko, I would not be able to stop and enjoy the moment. If it were not for Niko, I would not be able to look around and observe, put on some

music, and to tell the world 'hold on.' Niko continues to teach me that observation and appreciation of art fulfill the growing soul.

– by Niko's brother, Nikitas Yannakis

From Niko to Nikitas

Niko's mother Joanne Charron shared his thoughts with *Inspirations*, explaining that while Niko is non-verbal, her sons have their own language, which they interpret and communicate with others.

Niko: I truly adore my brothers and take my role as a big brother seriously. I am very protective and proud of my brothers and any chance I get I want to show them off. My brother Nikitas takes me places I want to go and does things for me that I can't do myself.



Niko, left, and Nikitas when they were little.
Photo courtesy of J. Charron

► Continued on p. 19

The challenges and gifts of neurodiverse sibling relationships

by *Stephanie Paquette*

Neurodiversity presents a unique and complex dynamic in sibling relationships. As a parent of two neurodiverse children, I am instrumental in ensuring the delicate balance of meeting their individual needs while helping them maintain a supportive and nurturing relationship. One child may have more visible needs, while the other might internalize emotions, leading to a different set of challenges.

Having a neurodiverse sibling can foster empathy, kindness and understanding. However, it can also lead to unseen struggles. The child with fewer apparent needs may be expected to adapt, accommodate or even suppress their own desires in order to maintain household harmony. They may give up their seat at the table, a toy or a moment alone because managing their sibling's emotional outbursts feels too overwhelming. Over time, this can result in disappointment, resentment or heightened conflict as competing needs arise.

It's crucial to be mindful of the silent burdens the less "spicy" child may carry. If their internal needs go unnoticed or unspoken, they may develop a dysregulated nervous system, which could lead to anxiety and people-pleasing tendencies. As a parent, I strive to balance connection, alone time, behaviour management and household structure, ensuring each child feels valued and heard. However, fatigue and overwhelm can sometimes take their toll. When I react with frustration or impatience, guilt follows. This reminds me of the importance of self-care and emotional regulation.

One of our most grounding routines is bedtime. No matter how the day unfolds, this moment of undivided attention allows for connection, storytelling and reflection. Sharing "rose, bud, and thorn" moments (the highlights, areas of growth and struggles) creates space for honest communication. If one child has had to compromise

more during the day, I offer extra one-on-one time to replenish their emotional reserves. This process reassures us that tough moments are not permanent; they ebb and flow, allowing for hope and growth.

As my eldest grows, his need for independence becomes more evident. Allowing him the space to recharge builds his confidence while also providing my youngest with the attention he thrives on. Balancing space with moments of sibling connection, where they have choice and agency over their interactions, fosters a sense of control and respect. This structure helps cultivate boundary-setting skills and allows their bond to develop naturally.

Psychoeducation plays a vital role in helping my children foster understanding and empathy. By equipping them with knowledge, they develop a deeper understanding of their unique qualities, gaining awareness of how their individual thought processes

and experiences shape daily life, ultimately strengthening their self-awareness and resilience. They are some of the kindest, most empathetic and helpful individuals I have ever met, and their ability to tune into others' emotions is an incredible gift. Siblings of neurodiverse children hold a unique role; one that comes with its own challenges but also immense strengths. Their ability to navigate complex emotions, develop deep empathy and advocate for themselves and others is something truly worth honouring.

The journey is ongoing, but through open communication and intentional efforts, I hold onto the hope that we are growing together, one day at a time. ■

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

► *Cont'd from p. 18*

My brother Simcha

I am the sixth child of 11. There are seven boys and four girls in my family. Simcha is the third oldest and was diagnosed with autism at an early age. Although he is several years older than me, I spent a lot of time with him going on outings.

Not only did we have 13 people living in our home, we often had many visitors.

Our house was always quite chaotic, but chaos also means fun and excitement (sometimes)! We grew up Orthodox Chabad. We did not have a TV in our home, and we observed strict Jewish laws and traditions.

We did have a computer in the basement, which we regularly fought over! Simcha loved to play different computer games on it. He also loved his Hot Wheels cars, particularly the police and ambulance vehicles.

Simcha always enjoyed observing many of the Jewish customs and rituals. He enjoyed

going to synagogue. I would usually walk my brother there on Saturday morning. Shabbat meant that we did not use electricity, and it was the one time a week where we all sat together at the table.

While he did attend the Summit School program, we did not have the many programs and resources for special needs individuals as we do today.

Although challenging, having a special needs brother taught me many important life skills, like how to be patient, caring and empathetic. I took the Miriam Home support worker training and eventually completed a special care counseling program. Now I work as a behavioural technician. I also started a "Special Care Counselling jobs and opportunities" Facebook page that helps individuals in the field find employment.

Simcha currently resides at a Miriam Home residence. Having such a huge family (we now count 22 grandchildren and one great-grandchild) means that he always has

an event or dinner to attend. As a family we do our best to include him in any family event, which he always seems to enjoy.

– by Simcha's brother, Avi Tanny



Simcha Tanny and his 10 siblings.
Photo courtesy of A. Tanny

Sibling resources

Siblings Canada, part of Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence, offers a website containing information to support siblings of people with disabilities. Resources include e-courses, guides, podcasts, resources for organizations and webcasts. Topics include financial security, mental health and communicating with family. Info: learning.siblingscanada.ca.

AMI-Quebec offers a young carers page in the Programs and Support section. Dedicated to people between 18 and 25 who care for someone with chronic illness, disability, mental health or substance use issues, the website offers resources, workshops, toolkits and services. Info: amiquebec.org/youngcarers.

Balancing love and responsibility: A sister's perspective on autism and caregiving

by *Tania Piperni*

Anna Katalifos, a 27-year-old PhD student in the Human Development Program in the Educational and Counselling Psychology department at McGill University, serves as an Individual Education Plan (IEP) Support Team Worker in the Student Services department at the English Montreal School Board. She is also a sister to 22-year-old Manoli Katalifos, who is autistic. Anna believes that this unique sibling experience has profoundly influenced her life choices, outlook, advocacy efforts and role as a big sister and caregiver.

Manoli received a formal diagnosis at age 3. Anna recalls noticing differences herself and having conversations with her parents about how his life would be different from hers and how he would communicate differently. Although she had some apprehensions, the close-knit nature of her family allowed her to ask questions and engage in open discussions about autism with her parents and peers, leading her to become one of Manoli's strongest advocates.

One challenge during her childhood was navigating their differing communication

styles. She feels that she had to "grow up a little faster" when she took on the role of caregiver as a child. Her efforts included adapting to his interests, such as the piano, and employing a lot of trial and error. His communication significantly improved when he turned 16, allowing him to become more confident. This helped strengthen their relationship.

Anna feels it was more about experiencing life together and less about teaching him, although she did focus on teaching him more expressive language, adaptive skills and some social skills. However, "he has taught me much more, such as love, patience and generosity. He is the most giving person I know; he is always there to support me." She shares how Manoli supports her after difficult workdays, has influenced her career in autism research and has taught her resilience, humour and calmness.

Being a caregiver has always been a natural part of Anna's life. She never felt it was imposed on her, but she has

incorporated Manoli into her decisions. "Being a caregiver has become a part of my identity. I couldn't envision my life going any other way, despite its challenges. There

'The sibling relationship is the longest one I will ever have. My future and his future are completely intertwined, and that is great.'

– Anna Katalifos



Anna, left, and Manoli Katalifos in July 2024. Photo courtesy of A. Katalifos |

is definitely an added layer of responsibility that I will always have, and it is a positive thing." She believes that helping Manoli achieve his goals has made her a more understanding, well-rounded person and a better researcher.

Each developmental stage has presented challenges for Anna. In childhood, it was navigating communication styles and social settings. Adolescence involved her own self-discovery journey and navigating the caregiver dynamic. Now in adulthood, the challenge is balancing the logistics of being a supportive sister, ensuring Manoli can achieve his goals, and attending to her own self-care to succeed in her life.

Anna has considerations for the future, such as navigating familial changes and her life transitions. She is confident that Manoli will always be a part of her life. She acknowledges that new challenges may arise, but her strong sibling relationship will guide her. "The sibling relationship is the longest one I will ever have. My future and his future are completely intertwined, and that is great."

Anna has encountered frustrations in the community despite advances in autism awareness. She notes that she has recently experienced more hopeful stories of people accommodating Manoli's needs. "People are becoming more accepting, aware and

human." While negative experiences and stigma were more common in the past, Anna has witnessed a cultural shift towards more positive interactions. Outreach in the community should focus on "making spaces and communities more inclusive."

Anna has no regrets but wishes she had worried less about developing a close relationship with Manoli. They are now truly connected best friends who share a night routine, watch movies and videos together, and have similar interests and food preferences. She realizes she always had the tools to be a supportive sister and a strong caregiver to face any adversities. Her advice to other sibling caregivers is to practice self-care strategies intentionally, no matter how minute, from a skincare routine to listening to favourite music. "It is easy to fixate on what someone else needs, which can be unhealthy for both people involved. Be kind to yourself; try to remain optimistic. People can surprise you: your sibling, the community, your friends. Reach out to other siblings and support organizations, have conversations with your family and sibling to help guide you in your caregiving role." ■

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.

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War Amps key tag mailing celebrates 50 years of CHAMP

As The War Amps is mailing key tags to residents across the country, it is also celebrating 50 years of its Child Amputee (CHAMP) Program, which supports young amputees thanks to donations from the public.

Gabriel Ferron-Bouius, 21, is a right leg amputee who grew up with the support of the CHAMP Program since he was born, including financial assistance for artificial limbs, peer connections through CHAMP events and so much more.

“I had never met anyone else who was an amputee until my first CHAMP Seminar. There, I met older Champs that I could look up to and who showed me that my amputation didn’t have to limit what I could do. I learned to walk by watching Champs like me and learned all about life as an amputee,” Ferron-Bouius says. “Now that I’m older, I get to pass this knowledge along to the younger Champs I meet. I would not be the person I am today without the support of War Amps donors.”

The Key Tag Service is a free key return service for Canadians that generates funds for The War Amps many programs, including CHAMP. Since amputee veterans started the service in 1946, it continues to employ amputees and people with disabilities and has returned more than 1.5 million sets of lost keys to their owners.

Each key tag has a confidentially coded number. If you lose your keys, the finder can call the toll-free number on the back of the tag or place them in any mailbox in Canada, and The War Amps will return them to you by courier, free of charge.

The War Amps receives no government grants; its programs are made possible through the public’s support of the Key Tag Service. For more information, or to order key tags, visit waramps.ca or call 1 800 250-3030.



Gabriel grew up with the support of The War Amps Child Amputee (CHAMP) Program thanks to donations from the public to the Key Tag Service.

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Our Little Secret tells a true tale at the Segal Centre

by Samara O'Gorman



| Noam Tomaschoff shares his life story in *Our Little Secret*. Photo courtesy of the Segal Centre for Performing Arts

What do you do when you learn that your entire family narrative is a bit...off-script? If you're Noam Tomaschoff, you write a musical, of course! *Our Little Secret: The 23andMe® Musical* is the captivating true story of Tomaschoff's life-altering discovery: he wasn't an only child, he had 35 half-siblings scattered across the globe!

Our Little Secret premiered at the Toronto Fringe Festival 2023, where it achieved sold-out performances, earned the Patron's Pick award, and was named Best of Fringe. Now, it's making its mainstage debut at the Segal Centre from April 27 to May 18. Artistic Director of the Segal Centre Lisa Rubin is thrilled that the musical will come to Montreal: "Noam Tomaschoff offers us a gift by sharing his incredible true story in this timely show. Everyone will be swept away by this fascinating tale as we continue our commitment to developing and producing new Canadian musicals."

Fresh from a successful run at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2024, *Our Little Secret* blends comedy, drama, and a diverse range of

musical styles. The show, which is directed by Tracey Erin Smith and features the talents of composer Ryan Peters, producer Russell Citron, and musical arranger Ben Deverett, was created in a whirlwind five-day burst of creativity. According to Tomaschoff, the show is also constantly evolving. "All the songs were written within five days, but it will continue to be written as the show progresses. It is never finished," he shared.

Our Little Secret delivers both joy and insight for the audience. While the musical holds numerous compelling themes, Tomaschoff emphasizes a core takeaway: "Secrets have a cost, and they take a toll. The broadest message is that openness and honesty are easier ways to live."

There will be two audio-described performances for *Our Little Secret* on May 11, 2025, at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

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

A young girl with brown hair, wearing a purple swimsuit, is lying on her back on a large yellow inflatable with a smiley face. A young child with curly hair is lying next to her, also on the inflatable. They are both smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blue pool.

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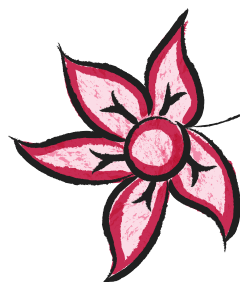
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A collage of four photos showing people interacting with animals on a farm. The top photo shows a person in a red shirt and hat interacting with a horse. The middle photo shows a person in a red shirt and hat holding a small white dog. The bottom-left photo shows a person in a blue cap interacting with a black and white dog. The bottom-right photo shows a person in a yellow shirt interacting with a white pig.

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Art by Zach Reisman
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Mad Sisters: Grundy's search for sisterhood

by *Roanne Weisman*

Most of the books reviewed in our past editions were authored by parents of those who are neurodivergent, or by people who themselves have a diagnosis. This is the first book written by a sister.



Circa 1963, from left, Nancy (9) and Susan (6) Grundy at their childhood home in Etobicoke, Ontario.

Susan Grundy, the author of *Mad Sisters*, was just 10 years old when her sister, Nancy Grundy, was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 13. Susan, now 67, wrote the memoir over several years. It was published in 2024 by Ronsdale Press.

This is an unflinching account of a family devastated by mental illness, reeling from the reality of the diagnosis, along with the complex web of family dynamics that unfolded amongst Susan, Nancy and their parents. Susan's own words give the reader an honest accounting, often written in scrupulous, painful detail – though sometimes leavened with humour – of more than five decades of family life.

For many reasons, including the frequent absences of their parents, Susan became the caretaker of the family, responsible not only for herself but also for the happiness of her sister and their parents. This began during her own childhood and continued through her whole life. The memoir details not only the losses Susan experienced due to her own limited life choices but also the relentless demands made on her time as manager of her sister's life. During these years, Nancy spent years in a psychiatric hospital and had several stays in group homes and apartments. Susan organized and packed Nancy for each of these moves, accompanied her to medical appointments and handled every aspect of her financial and emotional life. The demands on Susan's time increased after she married and had two children of her own, as well as caring for her aging parents. With the deaths of their parents in 2013, Nancy became increasingly dependent on Susan.

In a recent interview, Susan referred to the writings of psychotherapist Terry Real, who discusses the harm done to a child who becomes the family "hero" or caretaker. When children are given this much responsibility, says Susan, they come to believe that their parents love them not for who they are but for what they do. She describes this as "a tragic love story," which can have repercussions throughout life, and in her book, she writes about its effects on her own life and relationships.

Readers can benefit from Susan's further reflections, which include exploring the differences between "caring" and "saving," and the need to take care of oneself as well as the loved one.

On the last page of the book, Susan describes leaving her sister after a nice visit in a coffee shop. They walked down the street holding hands. After she left Nancy, Susan wrote that she put her hands deep into her coat pocket, "still feeling Nancy's fingers holding mine."



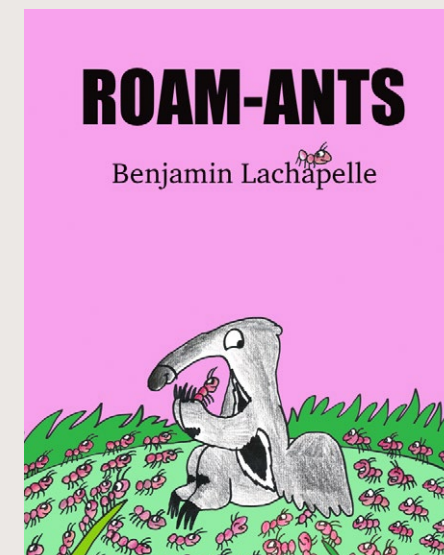
Nancy, left, and Susan Grundy at the Benny Community Garden in November 2024. Photos courtesy of S. Grundy |

Despite the heavy subject matter, *Mad Sisters* "illuminates the potential for well-being and hope amid the collateral damage from a mental illness diagnosis," Susan shared. "Our sister journey is woven with tears and laughter. This brings the

story to a larger exploration of the human spirit ... the importance of compassion and how the enduring strength of sisterhood (or brotherhood) can be a forcefield for hope and resilience. Without love and caring, we have nothing." ■

Lachapelle treats us to the next in ant series

Following his first delightfully whimsical book, *Pace-Ants*, Benjamin Lachapelle now brings us *Roam-Ants*, where the same helpful ant-like creatures are back in full force. Dozens of them are carefully drawn on every page, and in charming scenarios, they help all their animal friends build happy and meaningful lives by being the authors of their own stories, conductors of their own orchestras. Throughout the book, the message of the Roam-Ants is simple: Consider a more inclusive perspective and embrace all the meaningful ways we can live joyful and independent lives, whether single or coupled. Lachapelle explains in words and drawings that some animals mate for life, while others "roam" and discover how to love, appreciate and care for themselves and many others, because happiness comes from within. With the help of Roam-Ants, we can build our own love stories with ourselves, experience what gives us joy and what is meaningful while lovingly connecting to others. We can become the happiest versions of ourselves. In the



book's foreword, relationship psychologist Dr. Yuthika Girme, associate professor at Simon Fraser University, writes: "To truly understand the key to happiness, we first need to understand how people build a relationship with themselves; it all starts with Roam-Ants."

– R.W.



par
Emmanuelle Assor

Expositions immersives pour les enfants autistes? On y va!



Le fils d'Emma à l'expo « Nature vive » (Oasis) en décembre 2024. Photo : E. Assor

Si vous êtes comme moi, parent d'un enfant autiste, vous cherchez constamment des activités à faire avec votre enfant aux besoins spéciaux. Dans le monde actuel, il existe peu de lieux adaptés aux troubles sensoriels qui affectent les personnes autistes : on est souvent confronté à trop de bruits, trop de lumières, trop de gens, surtout dans les lieux touristiques.

Par le plus grand hasard, j'ai découvert il y a 5 ans une activité qui a particulièrement plu à mon fils. À Paris, j'avais entendu parler d'une exposition immersive sur Van Gogh, à l'Atelier des Lumières, du jamais vu auparavant. Une expo où l'on se promène librement, avec des projections animées sur les murs, le tout accompagné d'une trame sonore captivante. Surprise : on ne devait pas suivre un chemin particulier, ni écouter un guide comme au musée, les enfants couraient partout, les gens étaient en mouvement ou assis sur le sol, happés par la beauté des toiles présentées. Enfin de l'art rendu accessible à tous! Mon fils était comme un poisson dans l'eau, et nous les parents, soulagés d'avoir évité une crise dans un lieu bondé.

De retour à Montréal, j'ai été ravie de voir que cette exposition s'était rendue ici, à l'Arsenal, chef de file de chouettes expositions immersives. Avec un émerveillement chaque fois renouvelé, nous avons découvert les différents univers colorés de Dali, Monet, Frida Khalo, Tintin... Au Palais des congrès, à l'année longue, nous sommes choyés par OASIS immersion, un centre immersif intérieur comportant plusieurs salles aux thèmes variés. Quand nous y sommes allés, nous avons eu la chance de découvrir l'expérience sensorielle « Nature vive », un itinéraire thématique sur les animaux, la protection de la biodiversité planétaire et l'héritage du peuple inuit. Une activité très poétique et pleine de lumière, qui nous a fait oublier l'hiver dehors.

La seule chose qui nous manque encore, c'est une petite « trousse de réconfort pour les autistes » comme j'aime l'appeler, ce que l'on m'a gentiment remis à Miami pour l'incroyable expérience artistique immersive qu'est Superblue, un parcours de 50 000 pieds carrés à découvrir. Avant même que nous ayons passé la porte d'entrée, une dame est venue nous proposer

un sac avec des objets antistress, des bouchons d'oreilles, des lunettes spéciales et un cahier plastifié expliquant visuellement ce qui est présenté dans chaque salle.

Dans cet ordre d'idée, j'ai remarqué qu'il existe de plus en plus de journées « sensoriellement adaptées » pour un public avisé. Ce qu'on y trouve : des lumières tamisées, le niveau de son diminué, une petite clientèle composée de gens qui nous ressemblent et qui comprennent qu'un enfant autiste peut parler fort ou refuser de s'asseoir. En 2025, les horaires qui étaient parfois insensés (présentation de film trop tôt à 8 h du matin ou très tard le soir!) ont été revus et le mot se passe, ce qui me ravit. Il ne manque plus que des vols en avion avec une section « pour besoins différents et sans jugement » ... mais pour l'instant, il faudra continuer d'en rêver! ■

Pour plus d'informations :
www.arsenalcontemporary.com/mtl/fr/exhib
oasis.im, superblue.com

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

From page to stage in 24 hours: Dense & Stage Theatre's *Alice in 24*

by **Samara O'Gorman**

Dense & Stage Theatre, a collective of queer and neurodivergent artists, recently captivated audiences with their playful production *Alice in 24* - an adaptation of Lewis Carroll's classic tale, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The origins of the theatre company lie in the success of artistic producer Ian McCormack's absurdist play *Cornflake*, which toured Canadian fringe festivals last summer. The collaboration on *Cornflake* was centered on the intersection of queerness and neurodivergence, which quickly led to the official formation of Dense & Stage, with a mission to create indie theatre opportunities for queer and neurodivergent artists.

Alice in 24 debuted at Mainline Theatre for one afternoon only on January 26, and according to director Abi Sanie, it perfectly embodied their collective's mission.

"Working on *Alice in 24* represents the dream that I have for emerging artists to collaborate and put work into the world together..." The choice of reimagining *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* resonated deeply with the collective, drawing parallels between Alice's experiences and the neurodivergent experience. Alice navigates a world that often feels nonsensical. "Alice reminds me of the young, queer versions of ourselves, navigating a topsy turvy world in a quest for her true self," said Sanie.

An audience highlight of *Alice in 24* was the vibrant sense of play and improvisation that came from the actors. Sanie encouraged the cast to embrace freedom, silliness and even mistakes, fostering a strong sense of trust within the ensemble. This experience of trust was shared by the Red Queen, played

► Continued on p. 26



The cast and crew of Dense & Stage Theatre's *Alice in 24*. Photo courtesy of Darcy Chortkoff

Unique home in Laurentians houses a unique family

by *Sue Montgomery*

For over 40 years, Maison Emmanuel has housed a group of people, some of whom have lived there since their childhood. Now, as adults, they have, in many ways, become a family.

Nestled in a Laurentian forest about an hour north of Montreal is a cluster of five houses where 22 residents with a wide range of physical and intellectual disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders, like Down syndrome and autism, live and work together.

Founded in 1983 on farmland in Val Morin, Maison Emmanuel is modelled on the Camphill Movement, which started in Scotland and has grown to 100 communities in 22 countries, including several in Canada. People with and without disabilities live, work and care for each other. Their lives are focused on social, spiritual, cultural and gardening activities.

The Maison Emmanuel website states that they take daily inspiration from the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. “For us at Maison Emmanuel, ‘community’ means living and working together in a healthy and stimulating environment. An environment where sociocultural backgrounds and different human skills are not an obstacle but an asset.”

Mary Small came to Maison Emmanuel in 1999 as a volunteer from Scotland. She had intended to stay just a year but remained for an extra two and a half years. After completing her master’s in Social Work in her native country, she returned to Maison Emmanuel three years later to work and became one of three co-directors. She hasn’t seen much turnover since then.

“Some of the kids who came in the 1980s are still here, so the place has evolved with the age of the residents,” said Small. “As the



Residents of Maison Emmanuel run the Café Communautaire La Chapdelaine in Val David. Photo: S. Montgomery

children aged, there was no place for them to go, so we kept expanding.”

Residents, who are accompanied by 23 staff, help as they’re able with cooking, maintenance and in the café they run in nearby Val David. They also do weavery, candle-making and work in the garden.

The residents eat and live together in five homes and learn skills in two workshop spaces. The home also has a partnership with 1001 Pots in Val David, where residents make pottery, which is sold in a café they run in the same town.

Although people who live at Maison Emmanuel (some who are under public curatorship) are given as much independence as possible, very few have moved out on their own. “The only ones who have moved on are those whose families have moved and they want them to be closer, or people who develop extreme behaviour that we’re not able to deal with here.”

Maison Emmanuel is a registered charity and receives funding from the province. ■

Alice in 24 ▶ Cont’d from p. 25

by Augusta Wind. “*Alice in 24* was one of the most exhilarating shows I’ve gotten to do. Coming together, trusting the group, the material, our instincts and always saying ‘yes, and...?’ you come to find anything is possible.”

What makes the show even more remarkable is its creation process. While the production team engaged in planning set design, costume creation and sound development over two months before the production, most of the show – set installation, lighting, costume fittings, sound cues, rehearsals and more – happened within a single 24-hour period.

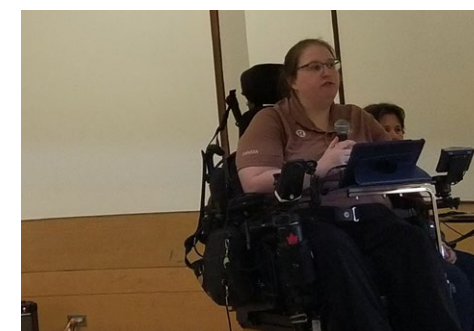
Moving forward, the collective aims to explore the themes of bodies and abilities, sharing narratives through curiosity, disability and resistance against oppressive forces. “I am immensely grateful for the trust and love that makes insane projects like this one come to life,” shared Sanie, who is also the artistic director at Dense & Stage. “It means bringing our voices as queer and neurodivergent artists to the forefront of theatre-making and empower[ing] all of us to lead and collaborate with folks whose experiences we deeply resonate with.” ■

Dense & Stage Theatre can be followed on Instagram @dense_stage.

Alink Foundation launches first-ever fundraising campaign

Alink Foundation began in 2016 as a small grassroots group of parents whose neurodiverse children had aged out of the educational system. It is now a charitable organization that supports neurodiverse adults and their families. Alink’s mission focuses on filling a longstanding gap in the neurodiverse community: developing housing and housing readiness programs. It recently launched its first-ever fundraising campaign: Building futures for neurodivergent adults – Build skills, Create Homes. Read the full story on our website to learn more.

– W.S.



Boccia champ Levine a keynote speaker at JDAAIM 2025 event

On April 3, Paralympian Alison Levine was the keynote speaker for the Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month (JDAAIM)’s “Branches of Belonging” event, which took place at Hampstead’s Dorshei Emet synagogue. (The event had been rescheduled due to a February snowstorm). One of the world’s top boccia competitors, Levine shared about the challenges and successes of her career, reiterating the need for inclusive societies and opportunities. Read a longer article about “Branches of Belonging” on the *Inspirations* website.

Photo: Randy Pinsky

Laughter benefits students and staff at Peter Hall School

by *Randy Pinsky*

A yogi and a comedian walked into a bar...

Since 1995, laughter yoga – an exercise program and wellness tool that combines laughter and yogic breathing – has been gaining in popularity across the globe, according to Laughter Yoga International. Without relying on humour and using various guided activities, laughter yoga provides an opportunity to laugh, inviting in a plethora of physiological and mental benefits.

From reducing inhibitions to lowering stress, laughter yoga is for individuals of all abilities. It was this versatility that appealed to Sherilyn Ami, director of Educational Services at Peter Hall School, when assessing whether it would be a helpful practice to offer her students and staff.

While attending the Special Care Connect 2023 conference at Champlain College in Saint-Lambert, Ami was surprised to see Wendy Singer leading a 10-minute laughter break. As a certified Laughter Yoga teacher and leader of Montreal's Laughter FIT club, Singer explained that besides making a person feel good and decreasing stress,

laughing is thought to lower blood pressure and enhance the immune system. (Singer is also managing editor of *Inspirations*.)

Laughter yoga was created by Dr. Madan Kataria from Mumbai, India, who incorporated the health benefits of laughter with techniques inspired by his wife Madhuri, a yogi. "Laughter catharsis is a great technique for emotional release and balance," it says on the Laughter Yoga International site.

Ami arranged for a training workshop with Singer in October 2024, after she led a one-hour session with the entire school staff back in February. She saw "laughter [as] a unifying language, a universal way of communication to reduce anxiety and stress."

For Fatima Belarbi, teacher at the school's Ouimet campus, the exercises have helped her class refocus and connect. "It's a good form of contamination! Laughter yoga makes everyone happy and relaxed," she stated.

She has noticed small but significant improvements among the students, less frequent meltdowns and better emotional management.



Teacher Fatima Belarbi engages her students in a laughter yoga session in December 2024. Photo courtesy of F. Belarbi

Robyn Jones, a teacher at the Côte-Vertu campus, experienced similar benefits in her classroom. She has found that activities and chants, such as "ho, ho, ha, ha, ha" help defuse potentially explosive squabbles and restore calmness. "We can't always reduce stressors, but increasing the positive experiences at school helps build their resilience and therefore their chances for future success," she said.

Though the program is still new, it looks like laughter yoga is here to stay at Peter Hall School. "With experience and doing it more regularly, it has helped us achieve a climate of less stress, [and one of] well-being and security," shared Belarbi. ■

Autism Alliance pushes for nuts and bolts of federal strategy

by *Sue Montgomery*

Autism Alliance of Canada is looking to the next government in Ottawa to come up with a clear plan to implement and pay for the country's first autism strategy.

An Act called the Federal Framework for Autism Spectrum Disorder was passed in March 2023. The following year, a strategy was launched to provide support to people on the autism spectrum, their families and caregivers. Except it didn't come with a lot of detail, according to Jonathan Lai, executive director of Autism Alliance of Canada. "The problem with aspirational goals is

they are just aspirational," he said. "There are not a lot of details in the document once you peel away the layers about the who, the what and the when.

"And when you're making policy, it has to be very specific...to make change for families, you need that kind of detail."

Such a strategy would address specific needs of autistic people throughout their lives in such areas as diagnosis, economic inclusion, awareness, accessible disability programs and housing. "What we're calling for now is funding tied with a clear plan," said Lai.

The Alliance, which was formed in July 2007 shortly after the release of the Senate Committee Report Pay Now or Pay Later: Autism Families in Crisis, has about 1,000 members, many of whom were scheduled to gather in Ottawa or virtually at the end of April for an annual summit. The goal is to guide the government to come up with a clear plan in line with its strategy. Attendees will also provide input on the National Autism Network, a new initiative the government has called for, to centre the experiences of autistic people and caregivers to advise on implementing the strategy.

About one million Canadians have been diagnosed with autism, but most provinces don't keep reliable statistics, Lai said. In British Columbia, one in 30 people are receiving services linked to autism funding.

"We're seeing the same problem across the country, so we need to come together and have a collective understanding," Lai said.

The Alliance has released a five-part podcast, called Honest Conversations with host Ally Garber. ■

For more information: www.autismalliance.ca.

Creating a sensory-rich play space for kids

by **Sue Montgomery**

Niri Azuaje is the winner of this edition's *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award for Sensetional: Her creation of an indoor sensory playground adapted for children with special needs.

Azuaje, who is autistic, is also mother to two autistic children, one of whom is non-verbal. Her children inspired her to create the playground. "The turning point for me was when I had my son," said Azuaje. "I always saw myself as inadequate and that I didn't have a place in society, so when I had my children, I loved them for who they were and wanted to make room for them."

Azuaje left her native Venezuela at the age of 29 to move to the United States. There, she was hired to run the pantry at a food bank, where she had been working as a volunteer and receiving food. She moved to Montreal with her husband who got a job in robotics.

With the help from the YMCAs of Québec and Fondation Lise Watier's Let's Start Up Pathway program, Azuaje put together a business plan in 2024 and began looking for a space for her idea. She liquidated

her small retirement nest egg and acquired a small business loan. She rented a 2,400-square-foot space in Town of Mount Royal and set about getting just the right equipment and lighting.

"She truly is an inspiration," said Rachel Simioni, from the Y des femmes de Montréal. "She expressed the difficulties and challenges she faces every day as a person with special needs, yet she applied her resilience and perseverance to the very end in an effort to realize her dream..."

Azuaje's coach, Audrey Mollard, said she has all the qualities of an entrepreneur such as risk-taking, courage, perseverance and a constant search for support and help. "In a short space of time, she has brought her project to life and created a magical place for children."

Azuaje admits to experiencing periods of doubt, thinking her project was too niche and should be shelved. But since opening its doors in December, Sensetional has been a huge success, with over 200 reservations in the last week of December alone. "It's incredible," she said. "This was supposed to be the soft launch."

Asma Al-Naser read about Sensetional on a Facebook group page and brings her 4-year-old son regularly, spending a good

two hours hanging out together. She likes that the number of people are limited and that there are enclosed spaces.

"There's something very calming about the place," she shared. "It's not as noisy as other places, where there's music blaring."

There is an option to book the space for private gatherings, but Azuaje said she wants to create a community where children with special needs can come together and play without having to follow rules that may be in force elsewhere. For example, some playgrounds insist that children wear socks and/or shoes but at Sensetional, they are optional.

Parents can write to Azuaje and request whatever special accommodations their child may need, and she will do her best to make them.

The playground is divided into seven rooms, each focusing on one of the senses. Children can enjoy climbing walls, a massive ball pit and interactive games, as well as music and drawing.

"A lot of people ask me if I'm an educator, but I just created this out of my own brain," explained Azuaje, who has a background in computer science.



Niri Azuaje stands in front of a ball "pool," one of seven rooms that makes up Sensetional.
Photo courtesy of N. Azuaje

She said one of the biggest challenges for her was being on the spectrum herself and having to learn how to do customer service. "I have to be mindful to smile and greet people, which doesn't come natural[ly] to me," she said. "And if they show up without a reservation, I don't want the kid to be disappointed like my kids were when we showed up somewhere and couldn't get in." ■

For information: sensetional.com.

Nominate your entrepreneur at info@inspirationsnews.com.

App provides visual 'how-to's' for independent living

by **Randy Pinsky**

The MagnusCards app was created to provide support to neurodiverse individuals who find navigating public transit or shopping for groceries challenging.

Nadia Hamilton is the founder of Magnusmode, which developed the app and the interactive guides that help its users gain self-confidence and independence. Growing up, Hamilton's autistic brother Troy required prompting for brushing his teeth. It was not that he did not know what to do; his anxiety of doing it wrong just overwhelmed him.

To help him, she drew step-by-step instructions he could follow. "[It] gave him the

structure to see the task from start to finish and rely on it for support," said Hamilton. In viewing how the guides also benefited clients at the Geneva Centre for Autism in Toronto, where she worked during her studies, she contemplated wider use.

"After high school, Troy graduated to the couch like so many autistic adults," reflected Hamilton. "I realized that I had so many options in life, and the world was shut to him."

On a whim, she submitted a proposal to the Toronto-based Centre for Social Innovation competition in 2011 – and won. Partnering with developers, she created lifestyle card decks on themes such as personal

New podcast episode

Inspirations has released a new podcast exploring the ways St-Hubert restaurants are transforming the dining experience for autistic people, with the help of Giant Steps Autism Centre. Click on "podcasts" from the *Inspirations* website to listen to host Mark Bergman's interview with Josée Vaillancourt with the St-Hubert Group; Alex Duquette, a St-Hubert franchise owner; and Alain Bessette from Giant Steps.

– K.M.

► Continued on p. 39

Ganni opens her own doors

by *Sue Montgomery*

Maryam Ganni has turned her deteriorating sight into a way for others to see their potential.

While backpacking around Europe in her early 20s, Ganni noticed she often stumbled and couldn't tell if the lights were on or off. During an eye appointment back in her hometown of Montreal, a retina specialist handed her a box of tissues before breaking the devastating news: she was going blind.

At the time, Ganni was working with a major makeup retailer downtown. She was professionally certified from Lasalle College and considered makeup her passion. Eventually, she had to quit because she couldn't read the labels on the makeup and didn't notice if makeup was smudged or if a customer was standing right in front of her.

Thinking she'd never again be able to practice her passion of applying makeup, Ganni

struggled to accept her condition and the changes that kept coming with it. Not wanting to be a burden to others, she kept her failing sight to herself and felt alone and isolated.

She was encouraged to go to the Montreal Association for the Blind - Mackay Rehabilitation Centre. There she spent three years learning Braille and how to use a white cane.

Later, while she was taking her certificate in entrepreneurship courses at McGill, Ganni was encouraged by her teacher to share her story, starting with her classmates, which opened the door to a career in public speaking. "It was a way to relieve all that pain and transform it into something that could help other people," Ganni said. "And when there's a big audience, I don't get nervous, because I can't see them!"

Her entrepreneurial spirit didn't stop there. She also put together a course on how visu-

ally impaired people can apply make-up. At the time, she had no idea her talent would attract so much interest.

Ganni gives speeches to groups from corporations, universities and summer camps, using her outgoing personality and obvious passion to inspire others. Nothing touches her more than people approaching her and sharing their stories after a speech, she said.

She hopes to one day have her own non-profit to help non-sighted people reach their potential. True to her slogan, "Be un-



Maryam Ganni. Photo courtesy of M. Ganni |

stoppable," Ganni said she wants non-sighted people "to be able to use their innate gift and make their dream career come true no matter what." ■

WINGS students benefit from photography program

by *Olivia Integlia*



Natascha Shena guides her student Khaled to take a picture of the front of Sinclair Laird Elementary School on one of their photo walks in December. Photo courtesy of O. Integlia

Sinclair Laird Elementary School teacher, Natascha Shena, has taken a creative approach when integrating digital literacy in her classroom.

Last year, the former art teacher introduced photography to her fifth- and sixth-grade students at the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) school.

Having recuperated a dozen digital cameras,

she invited a journalist into the classroom to lead a three-week photography module. Students learned the fundamentals of photography, including composition and editing, and practiced writing captions for their images.

Inspired by the success of the project, Shena said she was eager to reintroduce photography into her curriculum this year.

She is now working with a class of four senior Working on Individual Needs to Grow and Succeed (WINGS) students. Unique to the EMSB, WINGS is a self-contained (or closed) class within a regular school with a smaller teacher/student ration, designed for elementary aged students with autism.

Despite the additional challenges, Shena was determined to adapt the digital photography project to the needs of her students.

"WINGS classes get passed over for these opportunities because people assume that they can't handle those situations [...] but I still think that there's a lot that they can get out of it," she said.

Each week, Shena's students participate in a 30-minute photography session led by a journalist. They are assigned a theme and explore different areas of the school – such as the stage or sensory room – using props and creative prompts. Occasionally, they even go on outdoor photo walks, capturing unique shots of the surrounding community.

Shena has seen firsthand how photography benefits her students. One "asks for pictures of things all the time now!" she said. Another one is intrigued by the sound the camera makes. Beyond developing technical skills, the project has provided her students a new way to express themselves.

"It's kind of neat to see the stuff that they come up with artistically," she shared. "It gives you a little bit of a window into what they're looking at specifically."

Shena added that she has inspired other teachers at Sinclair Laird to follow suit. "I think everybody should be doing this. It's a very worthwhile program. The kids really like it, and they are improving," she said.

Earlier this month, the senior WINGS teachers helped set up a second photo gallery, displayed outside their classrooms, to showcase the students' work. Their first exhibition in December was a success, allowing the entire school to appreciate their talent. ■



by *Elisabeth Prass*

Continuing to guard the safety net for families with autism

I hope National Autism Acceptance Month in April was an opportunity for Quebecers to show appreciation to all the parents, family members, educators, healthcare workers and community organizers who make a positive difference every day in the lives of those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It is also an occasion to celebrate our children and shine a light on what they can accomplish to the best of their capacities.

It was my honour to sponsor a motion at the Quebec National Assembly that month, to bring more awareness to the issue and to the realities of our children and families. Our children may be different, but they are not less.

With a projected deficit over \$13 billion, we are already seeing the CAQ government making cuts to social services that

many constituents rely on. For instance, many families have been informed that the hours allotted to them through the Service Employment Paycheque Program have been cut without warning. The services provided through this program bring some relief to parents who act as full-time caregivers for a child with a disability or with special needs. It also provides services to adults with disabilities or who are neurodivergent. I have twice questioned the Minister Responsible for Seniors (who oversees this program) regarding these cuts, and each time she denies that she approved them, but meanwhile Santé Québec continues to slash hours. I will continue to put pressure on the CAQ government to reestablish the cut hours.

Late last year, the CAQ government finally tabled its updated guidelines for the use of

seclusion rooms for special needs students in public schools. While it is a first step in the right direction, without mandatory training and more availability of special educators who understand the realities of our children, it leaves a lot to be desired. Our children can have meltdowns – that's the reality. These rooms are meant to be a place to find calm for the child and not a place of punishment as we have seen in certain schools.

After having sponsored a petition on behalf of the Fédération québécoise de l'autisme at the National Assembly to have autism restored on the list of clear diagnoses granting accelerated access to the Social Solidarity Program that was deposited in September 2024, I was so glad when in December, the Minister Responsible for Social Solidarity and Community Action

announced that she was creating a fast track for those diagnosed with ASD levels 2 and 3 to reestablish their access to this funding program. It was cruel to remove them from the list in the first place, and we hope that the mobilization that took place around this issue will work as a deterrent in the future when the government makes cuts without understanding the impact of those who will be directly affected.

I promise to continue to fight for families like ours and to advocate for them. ■

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

Partnering to provide hearing consultations for preschoolers

by *Lory Harboyan* and *Caroline Erdos*

The Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board (SWLSB) has been offering hearing consultations to K4 and K5 students – a huge endeavor that was made possible thanks to a partnership with Résonance Montréal, formerly the Montreal Oral School for the Deaf (MOSD). Consultations started in January and are scheduled to be completed in May. The partnership reflects both educational organizations' objective to promote hearing health and ensure that all children have appropriate auditory access.

Auditory access is key to language development and has impacts across other areas of development, including social and emotional well-being. Regardless of how minimal, hearing loss significantly impacts a child's educational journey as they navigate through a system that heavily relies on the auditory modality.

Teamwork between Résonance Montréal and the Professional Services department of the SWLSB ensured a smooth process while coordinating the offer of service. Online meetings were scheduled with all the schools individually to plan the consultations, organize parental consent forms and generate the final lists of students. All of SWLSB's 27 elementary schools are participating, with a potential of a total of 1,553 K4 and K5 students, who could access the consultations. It was projected that a maximum of 32 days would be required to offer the service to the target population.

The hearing consultations are administered by an audiologist at Résonance Montréal and include three specific components: visualization of the external ear canal, tympanometry (middle ear integrity) and automated otoacoustic emissions (inner ear integrity). Reports were to be made

available to parents within 48 hours of their child's consultation. If a student was flagged for potential hearing loss, parents would receive a communication from the audiologist explaining the results and could request a full audiological evaluation.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board hopes to turn this initiative into a yearly tradition with Résonance Montréal and to continue its mission of supporting children's hearing health to help ensure overall social, emotional, academic, language and physical development. ■

Lory Harboyan is a speech-language pathologist, and Caroline Erdos, PhD in psychology, is a speech-language pathologist and is coordinator of Professional and External Services. Both are with the Pedagogical Services department of the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board.



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Galileo Adult Ed. Centre partners up with SPVM for safety workshop

by *Lisa Trotto*

Several community partnerships and hands-on learning experiences were offered to Social Integration Services and Socio-Vocational Integration Services students at Galileo Adult Education Centre this past fall.

Teaching community safety

In November, Officer Anne-Marie Gauvreau from the Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) led an engaging workshop, which addressed topics such as personal rights, healthy relationships, consent and the law. Students participated in interactive role-playing activities and discussions, allowing them to explore real-life scenarios and develop a deeper understanding of community safety. The workshop was part of a broader initiative to foster relationships with local businesses, advocacy groups and service providers like McGill dentistry students – all which support student self-advocacy and social awareness. Another community-driven learning approach was planned with Project Iris (L'Anonyme).

Work skill initiatives

Beyond workshops, Galileo students participate in structured work skills programs

that build practical abilities essential for employment and independent living. Some recent additions include:

- **Delivery and logistics:** Students learn how to manage orders, handle transactions and organize deliveries, all skills that aim to strengthen responsibility, problem-solving and time management.
- **Teacher Appreciation Week:** Students prepared over 100 personalized pencil cases and school bags, which reinforced skills in organization, accuracy and quality control.
- **Library organization:** By labeling and categorizing over 400 books, students improved literacy, attention to detail and classification skills. ■

Lisa Trotto is a Social Integration teacher at Galileo Adult Education Centre, which is part of the English Montreal School Board.



Adam Zorzi creates his own labels in a class library categorization project. Photo: L. Trotto



Galileo students attend a workshop organized by the SPVM in November. Photo: Antoinette Scrocca

REACH School builds communication stations

by *Alexandra Di Lallo*

Communication is a priority for the students who attend REACH School (of the Riverside School Board) in St. Lambert, however ensuring that students have Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools has not always been easy. The Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) team has been working hard over the last few years to tailor and model the use of AAC from low tech to high tech for their students. In November, they built a version of a core board including words for outdoor play, which have been installed at three of its four campuses. This year, the SLPs aim to build a Communication Station to provide students with unlimited access to AAC.

Alexandra Di Lallo is a speech-language pathologist with the Riverside School Board.

About core boards

Core boards are word boards used in many different settings including schools, explains Alexandra Di Lallo. They typically display about 50 high-frequency words, including nouns, verbs and adjectives, which can be used in different combinations to make a variety of messages. The words are usually colour-coded to help the user navigate and learn the placement of words.



The core board at REACH-Green Campus. Photo courtesy of the Riverside School Board

About REACH

Riverside School Board's REACH school in St. Lambert provides a specialized environment and adapted curriculum for students with neuro-divergent profiles between the ages of 4 and 21. Its students attend school in one of its two dedicated buildings or in the satellite classes in REACH Saint-Lambert International High School and REACH Centennial Regional High School.

Team creates learning module on dyslexia for educators

by *Joanna McKay, Rebecca Dörner and Courtney Paul*

The dedicated Inclusive Schools Network (ISN) team has developed an online professional development learning module on dyslexia to support educators and professionals. It is the first module in a planned three-part series and explores the intricacies of reading: how it works, where it can break down for individuals with dyslexia and the steps for identification. Participants learn about the history and definition of dyslexia, along with key reading models to deepen their understanding of reading challenges.

Accessible to anyone but aimed at teachers, consultants and professionals, the module is educational, encouraging reflection and improved teaching practices. Subsequent modules will also equip educators with techniques to support dyslexic learners.

Joanna McKay is Inclusive Schools Network coordinator; Rebecca Dörner and Courtney Paul are speech-language pathologists, all with the Riverside School Board.

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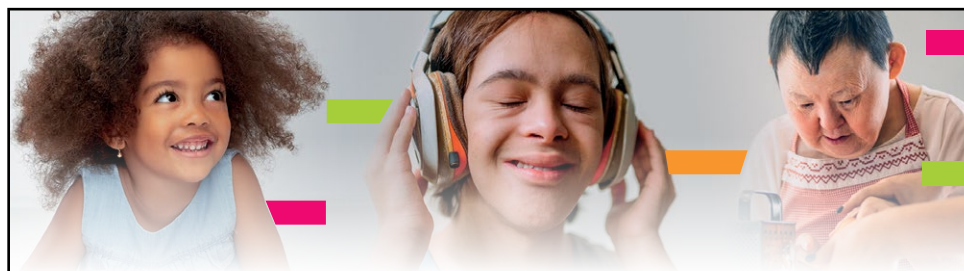
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A personal account My autism experience

by *Yosef D. Robinson*

I have come a very long way from where I was early in my childhood. Back when I was 2 in the mid-1980s, I had numerous signs that led to being diagnosed with “autistic tendencies.” We were told that I wouldn’t be able to attend school or achieve other milestones in life. My parents were quite fortunate to run into the late music therapist Darlene Berringer, who was the founder of the Giant Steps school in Montreal – well ahead of its time – just a few years earlier. I went on to attend that school until the age of 10, during which I progressively got more integrated into regular school programs. On top of that, for the next two years, Darlene would come to my next school, a Jewish one.

I attended another, more intensely Jewish school for high school, then I went to Israel for a year to study Torah at a Modern Orthodox rabbinic academy. I then attended one university in the United States for my bachelor’s degree, followed by another for my first master’s degree. Some time later, I went for a second master’s and eventually a third one, both at Concordia

University. I got very good grades at all these schools.

I originally set out for a career in urban planning and also attempted to launch an environmental career, but neither lasted too long due to the lack of opportunities for these careers and of accommodations for me on my employers’ part. Before long, I started doing freelance editorial work assigned to me by those who my father, a now-retired professor of Jewish studies, had known. Included in that work, I translated writings from Yiddish to English, including an entire book on Maimonides written by a 1930s Montreal rabbi. During almost this entire time, except during the Covid-19 shut-down, I have led prayer services at old age homes in my own Côte Saint-Luc community, including the Donald Berman Maimonides Geriatric Centre and, more recently, the Waldorf residence.

One of my most notable achievements of recent years has been to join the Montreal Shira Choir, made up almost entirely of special needs adults and directed by the

esteemed Cantor Daniel Benlolo. This choir enables me to have a voice there, with all my vocal talents. We sing lots of pop hits dating from the 1950s to now, and the camaraderie is amazing. This choir gives me new excuses to go to new places, both in Montreal and beyond.

I now consider myself to be fully integrated in all aspects of life. I have been driving ever since getting my license at the age of 17. One thing that I really like to do is to travel to new places. With some exceptions, I’ve gone by myself in the past number of years. For many reasons, I find it just easier and more satisfactory to travel by myself. I’ve travelled alone to the Gaspé Peninsula, Bermuda, Curaçao, Charleston, Savannah, Cancun, Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia, Bali, Scotland, and (most recently) Las Vegas, among other places. Wherever I travel, I like to take photos – mainly with an actual camera – on an amateur basis. I send photos to other people and upload them onto my photo frame. ■



Yosef D. Robinson in February 2024, in Sydney, Australia. Photo courtesy of Y. D. Robinson

Yosef D. Robinson is an independent scholar, writer and editor living in Montreal. He received his B.A. in Geography from Rutgers University, a master’s degree in City and Regional Planning from Ohio State University, a master’s degree in Environmental Assessment from Concordia University and most recently a master’s degree in Judaic Studies from Concordia University.



by *Nick Katalifos*

Celebrating successes, *Inspirations* reaches into community for support

*A*s *Inspirations* enters into a new phase in its evolution, I’d like to reflect on its beginnings and its future.

I am proud to have been part of the founding of this publication in 2008. I watched as it grew from a newsletter with a small niche following of mostly families of children with special needs to a bi-annual news magazine with a more widespread appeal. What started out as mainly an information resource has become a publication offering stories for a wider readership interested in learning about the realities of others.

This is a time when it’s hard to know where to turn for reliable information – and our sources are often dominated by bad news. *Inspirations* is different. It is both a valuable information resource and a source of inspiring stories about interesting people and organizations.

The English Montreal School Board (EMSB) was behind the launch of *Inspirations*, but its pages now reach way beyond the EMSB network.

With the introduction of the positive mental health section three years ago, we have broadened our following even more. This topic interests many outside of the special needs community and subsequently has expanded our readership.

As the head of the school board, I see the amazing work educators are doing with special needs students. Many of the writers who contribute to these pages are educators themselves – teachers, administrators or consultants who write insightful and informative pieces based on their own work and experiences. They write as volunteers because they believe in the value of sharing information – and the idea that what they write about could inspire others in similar positions.

At the beginning, it was parents and educators most engaged with *Inspirations*. Over the years, others have joined with interest in having their stories told – business owners, employers, heads of foundations, camp directors and many others. And many of these new voices focus on areas that include ways that neurodiverse individuals

and differently abled people are suited for certain jobs, skills, sports or activities.

It’s the successes we want people to learn about, not just the challenges.

Until recent years, *Inspirations* has funded itself thanks to our advertisers and sponsors. As *Inspirations*’ parent organization, the EMSB has provided valuable in-kind support. In order to keep moving forward, we have embarked on a fundraising and philanthropy initiative.

We hope you will join us in ensuring the rich future of *Inspirations*, filling these pages with information and stories about our special communities. ■

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.

Inspiring change on the David Garfinkle Sensitivity Tour



David Garfinkle (front middle) with Carlyle Elementary School students on March 14. Photo: Mark Bergman

David Garfinkle, a 1977 graduate of Lower Canada College, enjoyed a successful career in business and was an avid athlete until an accident in 2014 left him a quadriplegic. Now, over a decade later, he has embarked on The David Garfinkle Sensitivity Tour, sharing his story of resilience and truths about life in a wheelchair with students across Montreal.

The tour kicked off on March 10 at Westmount High School of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), where Garfinkle participated in a Q&A session led by *Inspirations*' **Mark Bergman**. Students from teacher **Jeffrey Kosow**'s Leadership class and teacher **Rosemarie Sondola**'s Leaders on Wheels program

were attentive and curious, asking many questions of their own. The next stop was Carlyle Elementary School in TMR on March 14, where **Dan Laxer**'s Media Club students assumed the role of reporters, asking Garfinkle about his injury, the changes in his life, the challenges he faces, and his positive outlook. This interview will become a podcast for all to learn from.

Students and staff alike were captivated by Garfinkle; both his story and sense of humour. "I enjoy doing these visits. It really feels good to make a difference," Garfinkle shared.

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



Julie Kristof: 'Parent of the Year'

On April 1, **Julie Kristof** was honoured as "Parent of the Year" at the Donald Berman Chai Lifeline's Rebuilding Dreams event at Congregation Shaar Hashomayim. Kristof's (second to right) many accolades include chair of the Montreal Genetic Disorder Fund and parent commissioner of the Advisory Committee on Special Education Services at the EMSB. Kristof is seen here with, from left, EMSB commissioners **Paula Kilian** and **Paola Samuel**, and chair **Joe Ortona**.

Photo: Mike Cohen

Miriam Foundation celebrates 50 years!

On November 7, the Miriam Foundation welcomed over 350 supporters to an event at Maison Principale in St-Henri in celebration of the organization's 50th anniversary.

The event, emceed by **Lee Haberkorn** of The Beat 92.5 and **Catherine Verdon-Diamond**, featured gourmet treats, live music, and performances by **Shaharah**, **DJ YO C**, and **Marco Mr Tam Tam**. Presentations from Director and CEO **Warren Greenstone**, along with clients **Herbert Cooperman** and **Steven Lengyel**, highlighted the Foundation's impact on the community over the past five decades. The celebration also marked the launch of the Tony Meti Endowment Fund for Neurodiverse Individuals, aiming to raise \$50 million by 2029. The fund, named after the Foundation's past chairman, will expand programs and ensure subsidized services for the next 50 years. Over \$600,000 was raised at the event.



Steven Lengyel, left, and Warren Greenstone speak at the Miriam Foundation's 50-year celebration on November 7 at Maison Principale. Photo: PBL Photography

N-EFF fundraiser supports wellness center

The Neuro-Efficiency Foundation (N-EFF), a non-profit organization, was founded by **Eric Boyer**, who became paralyzed in 2019 following a ski accident. Boyer created N-EFF in 2022 to help individuals with neurodegenerative disorders and spinal cord injuries. In 2024, N-EFF opened their first Wellness Center on Royalmount Avenue, where a team of professionals strive to enhance the quality of life of their members through subsidized programs, including physiotherapy, psychotherapy, technical support and advocacy.

On February 9, the N-EFF team, along with the **Garfinkle family**, held the 2025 Super Bowl Bash at Café Améa. Over \$300,000 was raised at this event.

Funds will go towards the purchase of specialized equipment for the Wellness Center.

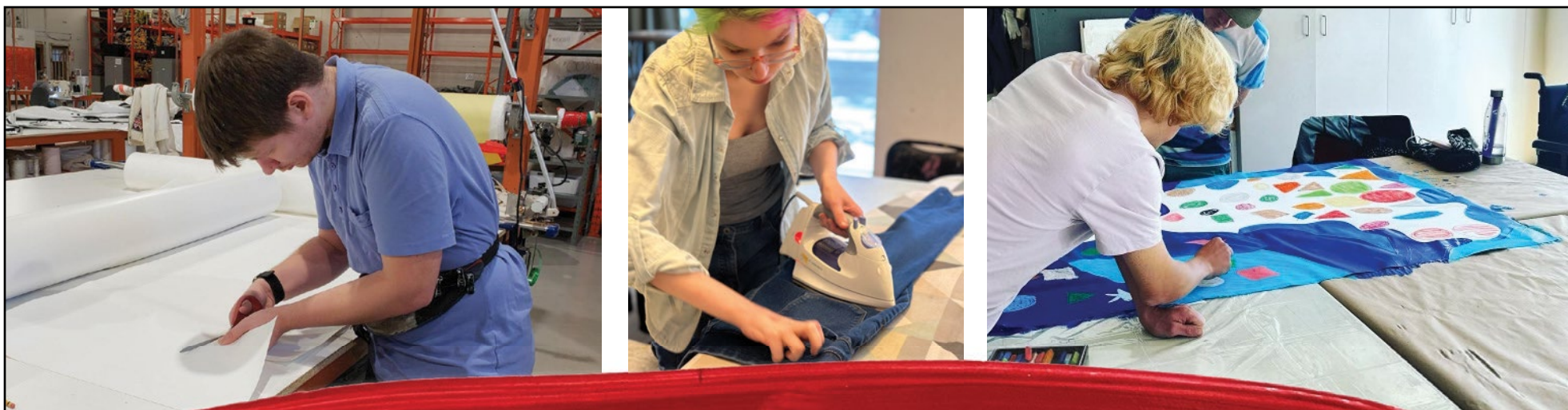


Founder of N-EFF Eric Boyer with his daughter Alexandra, left, and his wife Marie-Josée at the N-EFF 2025 Super Bowl Bash at Café Améa on February 9. Photo courtesy of N-EFF



Nick Katalifos receives accolade

Congratulations to our very own special advisor and director general of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) **Nick Katalifos**, on receiving the King Charles III Coronation Medal. Senator **Leo Housakis** (left) presented Katalifos with the medal on March 18 at an EMSB board meeting. Housakis said: "Nick is being awarded this medal for the heart and passion he shows as director general of the EMSB and the gargantuan work he has done for Giant Steps School." Photo: Nur Erdem



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Commission scolaire English-Montréal
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Altergo fête ses 50 ans

par *Emmanuelle Assor*

Il y a 50 ans, l'organisme Altergo était créé pour répondre au besoin criant d'accessibilité pour tous.

L'accessibilité universelle – l'idée que l'on permette à toute personne, quelles que soient ses capacités, de bénéficier des mêmes opportunités de vie – est un concept qui a vu le jour vers la fin des années 70, selon *La Presse*.

En 2025, l'action d'Altergo se décline en 4 axes : architectural et urbanistique, à savoir comment créer un aménagement sans obstacle; en programmes, services et en emploi – comment penser à des activités spécialisées et inclusives pour que tous puissent y participer; la communication d'informations compréhensibles par tous, sur un support adapté et un format accessible; la sensibilisation et la formation du personnel de toute organisation qui connaît mal et craint les enjeux des personnes aux limitations fonctionnelles.

En consultant le site Web d'Altergo, on découvre qu'ils offrent des services innovants, concrets sur le terrain, comme « l'expérimentation d'une situation de

handicap » où l'on propose à des élèves, membres du personnel ou gestionnaires, d'utiliser dans un cadre prédéterminé, un fauteuil roulant, une canne blanche ou un casque antibruit, les confrontant à des défis auxquels ils n'auraient jamais pensé.

Altergo offre aussi des formations pour devenir moniteur dans un camp adapté; il conseille les entreprises avec des « marches exploratoires » pour déterminer le niveau d'accessibilité de l'organisation et mieux l'adapter; il conçoit des soirées « Parle-moi de toi » avec une personne invitée ayant une limitation fonctionnelle, ouvrant un dialogue sans barrière entre les participants.

En avril, le Défi sportif Altergo a eu lieu à Montréal et sur la rive sud, réunissant 6 000 athlètes aux limites fonctionnelles. Avec sa vocation claire et ses projets variés, Altergo est un organisme indispensable à qui l'on souhaite un joyeux 50^e anniversaire et de nombreux succès. ■

Pour plus d'informations : www.altergo.ca et defisportif.com.

Karate adapted for children learning differently

by *Sue Montgomery*

Megan Vincelli and Kathryn Yao have combined their love for martial arts and their expertise as occupational therapists to offer karate classes to children with physical, developmental or behavioural challenges. Their goal, they say, is to guide children to “find their inner chi” or the source of their strength, resilience and inner balance.

“We’re running Karadapté in our free time, and it’s a blast to combine our passion in sports and our profession,” said Vincelli, who has her black belt in karate. “We’re both very innovative people and wanted to do something different.”

Given that karate is a sport that is more difficult for those living with a disability, the women decided to share their passion with children by tailoring their classes. “It’s not just about mastering karate techniques, it’s about tapping into their potential, building confidence and embracing their unique abilities,” they say on their social media. “It’s a joy to see them develop at their own speed and gain confidence,” Vincelli said.

Tara Glickman’s 5-year-old daughter has taken part in at least two sessions at

Karadapté with positive results. She is autistic and has sensory issues, making it hard for her to follow instructions if there are a lot of people or noise in a room. Vincelli and Yao, who has her brown belt, met with mom and daughter before the sessions began to discuss her particular needs. “Since they both have an occupational therapy background, they can read the behaviour of the child,” Glickman said. “I’m very grateful for the classes they offer.”

Vincelli and Yao started offering classes just before the Covid-19 pandemic and then had to shut down. They restarted the program two years ago in a new space.

Six-week sessions are held twice a year (spring and fall) at a dojo (a room where martial arts are practiced) at John Abbott College in Ste. Anne de Bellevue. Children participate with a parent, which Glickman found to be a plus. While any child in the age range of 4 to 10 is welcome, it is targeted for those with a range of limitations from autism to ADHD. See photo, p. 1. ■

For more information: karadapt.ca.

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Parent a three-time medalist at Winter Games

Rachelle Parent brings back two gold medals and a silver medal in snowshoeing for Team Canada in the Special Olympics World Winter Games 2025 in Turin, Italy. She competed in the 100m (silver), 200m (gold) and 4x100m relay (gold).

Photo: Sylvia Wong

— K.M.



A fit for every ability: The Sports Adventurers Club

by *Randy Pinsky*

For kids with physical, visual and communication challenges as well as multiple impairments, it can be difficult to find athletic activities adapted to their needs. Samantha Quinn, kinesthologist at the Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre and the coordinator of the newly revamped Mackay and Philip E. Layton's Sports Adventurers Club, is determined to change that.

From sledge hockey and wheelchair basketball to boccia and downhill skiing, the program, sponsored by Habilitas Foundation, is designed for Mackay and Philip E. Layton students from grades 3 to 6, as well as the satellite class at Westmount High. Outings are single-day events, which usually take place during the week. Students must be accompanied by a parent or guardian and are supported by rehab staff and members of the partnering centres.

"I am ecstatic to see [the club's] rebirth and expansion," said Bob Simpson, interim vice principal of the Mackay Centre and Philip E. Layton schools. "It is key to take physical activity and sports beyond our school and make the connection to programs in the community!"

Program manager of the Rehabilitation Program in Specialized Schools, Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre, Emily Lecker was also thrilled the program has been revived. "Each outing gives the client the chance to see what they are capable of doing [and] our hope is that many will learn about these great opportunities and continue doing them on their own."

At the November launch party, students had the chance to try wheelchair basketball, boccia and para cycling with representatives from Parasports Québec.

"I am seeing abilities, maturity and leadership qualities in my students that I have never seen before!" shared Grade 6 teacher Mikaela Sandler.

Quinn related how one withdrawn participant "hated every minute of downhill skiing," however found an immediate fit with sledge hockey. From a child who had to be coaxed to participate in class, her teacher was delighted to have to ask her to stop talking about her experience.

Program partners include Dollard Swimming, the Lachine Curling Club, Parahockey Montréal and Centre Viomax. "The gym's inclusive environment fosters a sense of community, where every encounter is a chance for growth and connection," reflected dad Osama Elashkar. His son so enjoyed the trial day at Viomax in December, he got a membership and goes once a week.

Next on the roster is sound tennis, mini goalball and power-chair soccer, not to mention gearing up for the Verdun BougeBouge marathon in September. "There's something for everyone," reinforced Quinn. ■



From left: Victoria and Felix play with William Gamache in November in the Mackay Centre School gymnasium.

Gamache is a wheelchair basketball player who has represented Team Quebec and is now a collaborator with Parasports Québec to promote the sport. Photo: S. Quinn

App provides visual

► *Cont'd from p. 28*

care, navigation and shopping to assist individuals who struggle with executive function (the sequencing of tasks).

The Magnusmode company – a name Hamilton described as being a combination of "magnus" (the Latin word for "great") and "mode" (a way of doing something) – went from "a brother and sister recognizing a problem to 35,000 downloads and 65 corporate sponsors with Card Decks that guide people through their services and offerings."

Thanks to corporate sponsors like Toronto Pearson International Airport, Metrolinx and Metro grocery stores, which offer their own branded card decks for navigating stores and experiences within MagnusCards, the app is free to the public.

"Creating a positive and inclusive shopping experience is our utmost priority,"

shared Trader Joe's on the MagnusCards' website. For its part, the Toronto Transit Commission wrote: "This is one more step... to remove barriers to access for all transit riders."

Several Magnusmode team members are neurodiverse themselves, combining firsthand insight with a methodology that resonates. On the app's reviews page, one user confided, "This app is the reason I [was able] to take the public bus by myself for the first time."

Starting as a small family project, Hamilton's business is now helping other "Troys" worldwide who just need a chance. Kathy, the parent of a MagnusCards app user, shared on the company site, "[they] have made me feel that my daughter Rachel will be able to do things...because she can learn them." ■



Olympiad in its third year gathers 200+ athletes

The third annual EMSB Special Olympics Olympiad took place on April 9 at McGill's Tomlinson Fieldhouse. The day was a huge success thanks to the hard work and collaboration between the Student Services and Educational Services departments of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and Special Olympics Quebec, stated Sarah Lynch, special education consultant for the EMSB and coordinator, Centre of Excellence for the Physically, Intellectually and Multi-Challenged. The event brought together over 200 athletes from 11 elementary schools, nine of which were EMSB schools and two with the New Frontiers School Board. In a new collaboration with McGill, athletes participated in six different events designed and led by the second-year pre-service teachers from the department of Physical Education and Kinesiology. Also, 20 students from Lester B. Pearson High School supported each school or served as student coaches.

Photo: Mark Bergman

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Scottsdale offers interesting accessible options for those exploring Arizona

Scottsdale is Arizona's premier destination for fine dining, shopping and luxury resorts, and I am fortunate to have recently returned from my first visit to the region. Scottsdale has over 240,000 citizens, making it one of the fastest growing cities and housing markets in the United States. It borders other well-known Arizona locations such as Phoenix, Paradise Valley and Tempe.



Experience Scottsdale recently partnered with Wheel the World, an online booking platform for seniors and people with disabilities. According to the website, users can search for travel accommodations and experiences including “fully accessible accommodations, restaurants, attractions and adventures to barrier-free trails to experience nature.”

Where to stay

I chose the Scottsdale Plaza Resort & Villas, where I was fortunate enough to stay in a beautiful two-story villa which featured a private entrance as well as an upstairs bedroom with two queen-sized beds, and a main floor which included a living room, dining room and kitchenette. There was a bathroom on each floor, as well as a balcony on the upper level and a patio on the main floor for outdoor eating. The unit also had a fireplace for those wishing to get cozy on one of Arizona's rare chilly

evenings. The hotel offers visitors a total of five temperature-controlled pools to choose from. For an elevated pool experience, you can rent one of the hotel's private shaded cabanas.

In search of relaxation, I had the opportunity to visit the Scottsdale Plaza's Salon & Spa, located next to the main pool. For any dining needs while on-site, the property has a grab-and-go place and two restaurants, in addition to Café Cabana, which offers their poolside dining option.

Scottsdale Plaza Resort & Villas is ADA compliant. Accessible locations include the main entrance and route to the registration desk, the public restroom, the meeting and event facilities, the business centre, and many accessible rooms that include ADA phone systems and visual strobe light alarms, as well as closed captioning or closed captioning decoders for the television. Service animals are also welcome. Furthermore, each of the pools has a lift.

Dining out

Let us recommend the Lincoln Steakhouse & Bar, which is located at the JW Marriott Scottsdale Camelback Inn Resort & Spa. The steaks here are nothing short of remarkable. The House Brasserie, one of the region's oldest standing residences, serves up a superb branzino. This is the perfect light dish for all the fish lovers out there and comes with celery root velouté, sautéed spinach, roasted corn, oregano vert, and



pickled radishes. Marcellino Ristorante offers the primo course. We sampled two of the restaurant's pasta dishes: the gnocchi sorrentina served with tomato sauce and melted mozzarella and the spinach and ricotta ravioli topped with a butter and fresh sage sauce and the branzino dish, topped with white wine and butter sauce. Each of these restaurants is wheelchair accessible.

Things to do

Looking to explore the city and its surrounding regions? There are plenty of things to do in the Scottsdale area, starting with Camelback Mountain, which is one of the most prominent outdoor destinations in Arizona. Take one of many scenic hikes in the area or consider rock climbing.

The Phoenix Zoo is another nearby option. Spanning 125 acres of land, it houses 140 animals, including lions, giraffes, monkeys, iguanas, wolves, bears and more.

Additionally, the zoo has partnered with KultureCity to improve its ability to assist and accommodate guests with sensory processing needs. Sensory bags containing fidget tools, noise-canceling headphones and weighted lap pads are available for checkout at the reception or the Safari Cruiser Station.

In the same vein, you may wish to explore Butterfly Wonderland. A limited number of wheelchairs are available on a first come, first served basis at the guest services desk. They also offer hearing assistance devices for people with and without hearing aids. For those who like to shop, there are plenty of neighbourhoods and shopping centres to explore, for example Fashion Square Mall, with its over 225 stores and 2,000,000 square feet of retail space. Wheelchair and scooter rentals are available, as well as valet parking. ■

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Le Boulevardier at Le Germain Hotel Montreal

While sifting through the 60 restaurants taking part in the Montréal en Lumière festival at the end of February, I targeted Le Boulevardier for a dining experience. Located in downtown Montreal's popular Le Germain Hotel on Mansfield, this place is a gem.

Headed by executive chef Florimond Hannoteau, it seats 125 in the dining room and an additional 45 at the bar. Le Boulevardier has accessible options including a ramp at street level and elevators, which take you to the second-floor restaurant. The hotel offers valet parking for a fee.

We started off sharing 12 oysters, followed by two real treats: duck confit and foie gras cromesquis with mushrooms and truffle cream, followed by a filet mignon tartare, with poached quail egg, shiitake and gochujang. Moving on to the main courses, I took the chef's recommendation of a rack of lamb from Kamouraska, with vitelotte, candied tomatoes and roasted peppers. The two others in my party shared their main courses: a lobster risotto and a sirloin steak with truffle jus and potato and asparagus, and foie gras. We did save some room for dessert: the vanilla and caramel millefeuille with vanilla ice cream and the hazelnut and maple moelleux, with chocolate cream, mushroom crumble ice cream and Coureur de bois caramel.

Info: www.leboulevardierrestaurant.com



The dining room of Le Boulevardier.

Tommy Café + Apéro

Tommy Café + Apéro is one of the few Montreal restaurants where you can get a refreshing array of breakfast and brunch items all day. The new Royalmount location is a stand-alone spot outside of the mall beside the skating rink. It is open until 9 pm weekdays and 5 pm on weekends. There is accessible access via a sidewalk ramp. You can park indoors at Royalmount for free for up to four hours with the app. There is accessible parking and an elevator to bring you to the main level of the mall. You will need to go back outdoors to reach the restaurant.

The place can seat 72 people and 20 more on a seasonal patio. For drinks, we enjoyed an Americano and a mango dragon fruit smoothie. Avocado toast is the Tommy

trademark, and it comes in different incarnations. We shared the classic: multigrain bread, smashed avocado, fleur de sel, chili flakes and lemon. From the main menu we selected the BAE (two eggs scrambled with bacon and multigrain bread, served with salad and potatoes), La Totale (French toast, scrambled eggs, maple syrup and bacon or sausage) and the Gobble (ciabatta, sliced turkey, honey Dijon, mixed greens, bacon and tomato).

Since the decadent dessert choices are not on the menu, and since they do change from time to time, we ventured towards the yummy looking display case and enjoyed the key lime pie and chocolate cheesecake. There is a nice assortment of iced coffees, teas, espressos, cappuccinos and even hot chocolates.

Info: tommycafe.ca/en/menu-royalmount



Some of the delicious dishes at Tommy Café.

Terrasse season at Petros

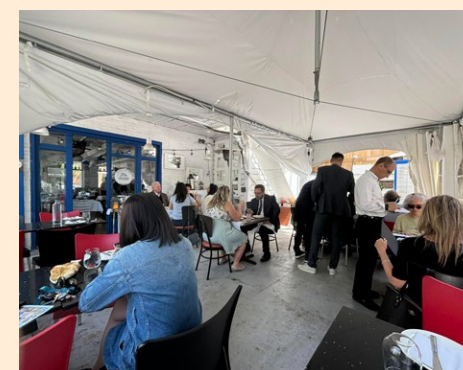
Terrasse season is upon us, so it is time for me to share two "go to" spots from the Petros Taverna group of restaurants: one on St. Joseph Blvd. in Lachine and the other in Little Italy at the corner of Saint-Dominique and Bélanger. Both patios have complete accessibility and washrooms on the main floor. They are entirely covered in the event of inclement weather. Lachine has its own parking lot. I frequent both locations. In Lachine, chefs Karim and Siful know how to please customers. In Little Italy, partners Jahad and Enam know the value of good customer service. Let me recommend the warm pita or French bread with multiple spreads (I favour the taramasalata), expertly prepared chopped salads with feta cheese, crispy fried zuc-

chini, fresh grilled fish, lambchops cooked to perfection, steak, Greek chicken and a whole lot more.

Both establishments are BYOB. Petros Lachine is open seven nights a week. Jardin Petros in Little Italy is open every day except Monday. From Tuesday to Friday, they even serve lunch. Ted Dranias is the founder and brand ambassador for the Petros Group, which also has locations in Griffintown, Westmount and the Mile End.

Info: www.restaurantpetros.ca

Mike Cohen can be reached at mcohen@msb.qc.ca.



Terrasse at Petros Laurier.

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Natalie Henri, teacher of the Adam's P.A.C.E. program, was named this edition's Simon Chang Difference Maker. She is seen here with Ann Taylor, left, and Simon Chang in her classroom at Champlain College on April 25.



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