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INSPIRATIONS

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



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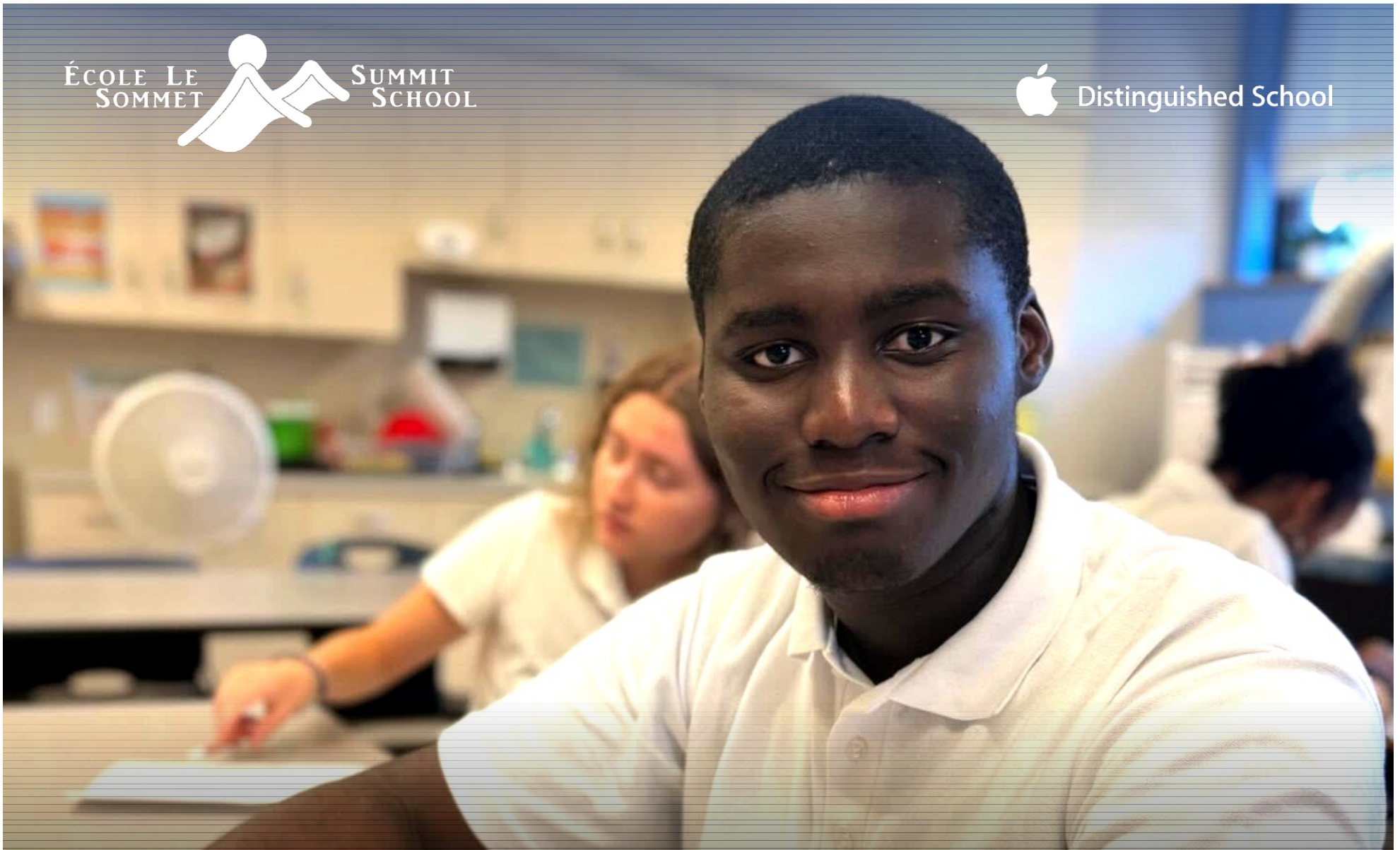


From left: Lucie Wade, Harris Wade and Ellis Nassef-Goldsmith during a special event on March 14 at Grand Potager in Verdun, where Posy Ferme Florale is located. See p. 35 for story. Photo: Andreas Kurz



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Editor's message

When writing as a form of creative expression and self-care began to emerge as a theme, the stories magically started coming our way. In this edition, you will find an article on “sense walks” for elementary-school children who wander in nature and then record their sensory experiences in writing. There is a story about adults at the C.A.R.E. Centre who take part in a lyric-writing workshop. And, we share with you the viewpoints from two different columnists who explain how writing can enhance well-being.

Simon Phaneuf's articles in French give us insight into an inclusive initiative at the Opéra de Montreal, as well as the Capable Média podcast that has taken off.

Our guest columnist in this edition's positive mental health section is child and adolescent psychologist Dr. Stephanie Margoless. She writes about dialectical behaviour therapy and how it can be helpful for parents and their teens to develop healthy coping skills.

The newly named Employment and Entrepreneurship section contains several good reads, including a story on a new podcast launched at an adult education centre that features stories from people who have overcome personal struggles. And if you enjoy reading about sports, you will find a nice selection of articles that touch on soccer, curling and hockey.

As always, we get inspired by your story ideas and are guided by your feedback. Enjoy this edition.

– Kristin McNeill

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Over the past year, we reached out to our community, and the response has been affirming and exciting. See our “thank you” on p. 4, where we recognize the partners and donors who make this work possible. We're also grateful to our advertisers for their continued commitment.

Now we invite you to be part of what comes next in two ways: share your feedback in our 2026 readership survey to help shape the next two years and support Inspirations with a quick, one-click online donation. You'll find links to both throughout this edition. Thank you for being part of our community.

– Wendy Singer, managing editor

Inspirations distributes 15,000 copies across the Greater Montreal and surrounding areas, including Laval-Laurentians, the South Shore and the West Island. Our distribution includes English-language school boards, special needs schools and over 170 drop-off spots including libraries, shopping malls, clinics and therapy centres. If you would like to receive copies, email us at info@inspirationsnews.com. Special thanks to all of our amazing students who bundle *Inspirations* for their school boards.



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by *Julie Kristof*

The need for a team in setting up students for success

As I watched the final hockey game between the US and Canada during the Winter Olympics this past February, I was amazed by the weaving and passing that create the plays and movement. This is teamwork at its best. Each player has a role, a plan and a connection to each other. And the success of the team relies on the contributions of so many behind the scenes: the coaches, therapists, medical professionals, families and friends.

The “game” that parents and caregivers of people with different needs play is not against another team. It is actually a push to create one, to find coaches, weave a path towards the net and, ultimately, hope for a world where our kids with special needs can contribute and be engaged in our society.

To be honest, it can be a very lonely path, fraught with barriers and bureaucracy –

particularly around times of transition when the team you had changes!

This is the conversation we have at the English Montreal School Board’s (EMSB) Advisory Committee on Special Education Services (ACSES) and at the school level as well. At ACSES, we are looking at a special needs student school cycle and the transition points – the points that are most stressful – and what information exists or needs to, to help families navigate those points. The goal is to make sure updated information is available and accessible, not only for families but the whole team of educators and administrators.

While ACSES is an advisory body and can make recommendations, the EMSB and some of the schools are taking the bull by the horns and getting into action. Some of these initiatives include John Grant High School’s Spring into Support evening, and

Westmount High School’s Parent Exchange series.

John Grant’s event, scheduled to take place on May 7 at the school, brings together students, families, educators and community organizations to learn and celebrate neurodiversity together. Last year it brought me so much joy to hear exclamations of “I didn’t know that existed!” and “It’s so nice to feel less alone.”

The Parent Exchange at Westmount High is a monthly series designed to bring parents together in a welcoming and supportive space. This initiative aims to strengthen school-home partnerships, empower parents with tools and insights and encourage peer-to-peer learning within our school community.

These are just two examples of efforts made at the EMSB to bring people together and

create a network of support for our families and students.

As we all bemoan Team Canada’s loss during that final match at the Winter Olympics, we recognize that this too is part of the journey. I guarantee, however, that after the tears dried up, the team gathered together to figure out what went wrong and what could have worked better. That is the nature of community and the work we do to be a team. No one should feel alone on their journey. ■

For more information about ACSES: www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb/services/special-needs/acses

Julie Kristof sits as parent commissioner of the Advisory Committee on Special Education Services on the English Montreal School Board’s elected Council of Commissioners. She is also a delegate to the EMSB Parents Committee and proudly chairs the Governing Board at John Grant High School. She is the mother of two.

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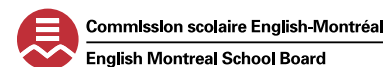
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Blending physical therapy with creativity

by *Lorri Benedik*

The first time Catherine Sones, 37, felt the excruciating pain of hip subluxation she was nine. “I was facing my bedroom dresser, when my mom called my name.

I turned toward her and the bottom half of me did not follow,” she recounted. They rushed to a clinic where a doctor found nothing wrong. He suggested that she had probably pulled a muscle and suggested staying off her feet for a day. A couple of months later it happened again, and this time she was told to rest for 48 hours.

Over the next few years, Sones suffered a variety of similar injuries while doing some of her favourite activities: soccer, ballet and curling. “The motion of curling with a 40-pound rock was particularly challenging,” she said. “I would extend my arm, release the rock and my shoulder would follow.”

Frequent trips to the Montreal Children’s Hospital provided no answers. “At one point I was told by an ultrasound technician that I had torn something, but it was not so severe that it required treatment,” Sones said.

She had no choice but to stop the activities she loved. Swimming was still okay, but she had to re-learn breaststroke because the regular frog-kick caused extreme pain.

At age 14, she suffered an injury in school, and a physician suggested it was psychosomatic. She was referred to a psychologist and art therapist. “After a few sessions, the therapist sent a report back to the doctor saying that there was actually something very wrong with my body,” Sones said. She

had noticed that Sones’ fingers bent backwards when holding a pencil.

When she was 19, 10 years after her first joint subluxation, there was finally a diagnosis of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a rare genetic condition.

“When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras” is a medical maxim coined by Dr. Theodore Woodward in the 1940s to teach medical students to prioritize common diagnoses over rare, exotic ones. It advises doctors to assume the most likely causes for symptoms, rather than considering a rare condition.

The symbol for rare diseases is the zebra.

At age 22, Sones was studying English literature at Concordia University and had a part-time job giving out samples at Costco. One day, she was leaning down, under her sample table, when someone bumped it with their shopping cart. She instinctively reached up to catch the cooler to avoid spilling food on the floor. In doing so she dislocated her shoulder.

This injury required surgery followed by months of physio and occupational therapies. Sones found it incredibly boring, doing the same exercises over and over. “My physiotherapist said that if I found an activity I could do with my arms outstretched in front of me, for 15 minutes at a time, that could replace the repetitive exercises,” she said.

“Both of my grandmothers loved knitting and had taught me to knit when I was a child; it was something I enjoyed and could do instead of physiotherapy.” Her first knitting project was a huge infinity scarf. Then she moved on to a variety of other beautiful, knitted items.

In 2014, Sones launched Zebra Knitting, and began selling her creations at craft fairs. She also learned to crochet so she



Catherine Sones in her home on February 14. Photo: Andreas Kurz |

could make stuffed animals. Zebra.Knitting can be found on Instagram. In addition to the craft fairs, Sones takes on commissions for specific knitted and crocheted items.

She also runs a knitting and crocheting program at the Contactivity Centre for

seniors in Westmount, teaches knitting and crocheting to children and adults, and continues to sell at local craft fairs.

Sones and her husband Tom are raising an adorable five-year old son, William. ■

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All-around athlete and inclusion advocate, Matthew Brotherhood

by *Randy Pinsky*

“My brother Matthew leads an exhausting and full life,” laughed Kate Brotherhood. “He really shows the unlimited potential of someone if they’re just given the chance.”

Embodying the concepts of inclusion, making a difference and change, Matthew Brotherhood has been chosen as this edition’s recipient of the Simon Chang Difference Maker Award.

Growing up in England, Kate shared how her parents fostered numerous children in need. One night, they were alerted about a baby boy with Down syndrome who had been abandoned at the hospital. They immediately took him in, and Matthew became an integral part of the family.

Both through his own actions and for the lives he touches, Matthew “is a true role model for me and a hero,” said Kate, who nominated him for the award.

“I feel very excited to get an award. It’s just fun to see my family coming here to support me,” said Matthew.

In fact, when he was born, the doctor gave him a poor prognosis. Despite the dismal prediction, Matthew has “defied every expectation...and has thrived beyond anyone’s wildest dreams,” shared Kate.

The first thing that one notices upon meeting Matthew is his positive energy, she said. His big smile and signature bleached blond hair make him a quasi-celebrity in NDG, where he is a popular busboy at the Notre-Boeuf-de-Grâce restaurant.

Beyond challenging assumptions about ability, Matthew also provides hope for families with members who have disabilities that with the proper accommodations and support, “the sky is the limit,” said Kate.

On the side, Matthew is athletically gifted and has taken part in both the Summer and Winter Special Olympics games on a provincial and national level. Whether he is competing in swimming, track and field or downhill skiing, he has been recognized for his skills and leadership abilities when representing Quebec on the national stage.

Matthew also volunteers as an assistant ski instructor at Les Sommets Morin Heights Snow School. Beyond supporting young children still wobbly on their skis, the school is actualizing inclusion in practice. “Through his work both on the ski hill and in the restaurant, he demonstrates that disability does not define who we are,” said Kate. “It can be a superpower, promoting passion and a shift in how society views individuals with disabilities.”

Growing up, Matthew’s family never let his disability define him; from attending mainstream school to achieving athletic success and finding meaningful community involvement, he has consistently challenged limiting assumptions about his potential. In 2009, Matthew was selected to take part in the National Film Board’s short animated documentary film, *Tying Your Own Shoes*, providing an inside look into what it means to be a little bit different. Several schools have screened it to promote discussions about diversity and inclusion.

Kate highlighted that despite juggling a busy schedule, for Matthew, family comes first.

“People often think that when someone has an intellectual disability, they are limited in what they can do,” said her 12-year-old daughter, Layla Rose Grintuch. “But my uncle is involved in so much; he plays six sports, works and has an activity every day. That’s why you should not look down on people like him but instead look up to them.”

When Matthew is not skiing – or working, training or spending time with his family – he is taking classes at the inclusion program of Les Grands Ballet Canadiens, as well as performing with Danse 21+, launched by his mother in 2017 (see article in Fall 2025 - Winter 2026, p.19).

“Matthew Brotherhood exemplifies the very qualities we seek in a Difference Maker,” said Simon Chang. “He brings dedication, passion and enthusiasm to everything he does whether at work, in sports, through volunteer efforts or with his family. He consistently breaks down barriers and reaches higher. I am delighted to recognize him as this edition’s award recipient.”

Reflected Kate, “Matthew is an inspiration in my daily life: to go out there and be passionate about something and, in general, be positive in life. We’re the lucky ones.” ■

Nominate your Difference Maker at info@inspirationsnews.com.

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



Simon Chang, left, and Matthew Brotherhood during the surprise award ceremony at Chang's atelier on Chabanel St. on April 29. Photo: Mark Bergman

Simon Chang, the book: A visual page-turner comes to life

by *Wendy Singer*

Over the past five years, *Inspirations* readers have had the great fortune of getting to know Simon Chang – and learning about him through his creativity, curiosity and messages of encouragement. Now, fans have the opportunity to delve deeper into Chang's story and legacy in his new book, *Simon Chang*, set for release this summer.

The book is 320 pages with over 500 photographs, offering a visually rich compilation of Chang's early photography (including black and white photos), illustrations and designs, coupled with intimate stories that document his journey.

It was created over a three-year period by Chang as creative director; Normand Bernard, operations manager for the Simon Chang Group; and Renée Therrien, former director of Marketing and Public Relations

for Simon Chang Concepts and now a member of the board of directors for the Simon Chang Foundation for Change. As content curators and writers, Bernard and Therrien spent hours interviewing Chang, listening, reviewing and selecting stories and visuals that document his work.

The book shares Chang's history, from immigrating to Canada at age nine to becoming a household name across the country, known for his extraordinary vision, talent, resilience, and hands-on approach – from fashion to philanthropy.

"This book is going to surprise people who think they know Simon. They will learn so much more about him," said Therrien. "Simon's story is truly Canadian. We don't have many Canadian stories from the fashion industry. He listened and heard what women needed and gave the independent retailer a voice."

"What's interesting about Simon's story is that he came from simple beginnings," said Bernard. "He was a kid like anyone else. He

was able to succeed because of his attitude and talent, plus he was doing something he loved."

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

Chang's archives are extensive, and the team describes editing the volume of potential content into a single book as a great challenge. "We're ready for volume 2!" said Therrien. "We're just getting warmed up."

Chang is excited to hold the book in his hands. "It's been wonderful to tell my story. Everyone has been so supportive in the process and throughout my career," he shared.

For *Inspirations* readers, the book will be a continuation of the sharing of his successes, struggles, optimism and belief that everyone has something unique to offer. ■



Simon Chang reveals a preview of the pages of his new book *Simon Chang* at his atelier on April 28.
Photo: Mark Bergman



by *Nick Katalifos*

Working together to embrace difference

The English Montreal School Board (EMSB) is proud to stand behind a fruitful partnership between *Inspirations* and the Jackie Fisher Foundation that presented the Jackie Fisher Empathy Tour this school year. The tour stopped at 23 schools, including schools from other boards, inspiring over 4,000 students. Sharing their stories were three remarkable young women, who spoke about how they navigated difficult medical diagnoses and mental health challenges – and the lessons they learned along the way.

Samara O'Gorman, Sara Levitt and Maryam Ganni have different lived experiences and viewpoints to share with students, but the common message that

formed a connection between them was how to face adversity, being open to differences, and the value of inclusion.

Our teachers tell us that this is what our students need to hear right now.

This sharing of experience aligns with the mandate from the ministère de l'Éducation du Québec to elevate personal and social skills competencies in students. It also taps into EMSB values, which include offering positive encouragement to people around us, and adopting safe and healthy behaviours.

At the elementary level (Cycle 3), as well as at the secondary level, there are educational markers for developing harmonious rela-

tionships and promoting inclusion. These are crucial competencies for our students to learn how to live, study and eventually work alongside others.

Each anecdote from the presenters was an opportunity for each student to become curious about someone else's experience, hear first-hand how they found resilience in difficult situations, and how all of us can learn to look at things differently, more creatively and with self-compassion.

There were messages about the value of self-acceptance and not judging others; how positive self-talk can hugely impact the way you see yourself and the world; hope for those who have health challenges;

the power of kindness; and how leading with empathy can do amazing things for ourselves and the people around us.

The Jackie Fisher Empathy Tour is a meaningful way of carrying those values forward. Great things happen when like-minded organizations partner together and, besides inspiring our students, I believe these types of partnerships can be a model for other school boards and other institutions. ■

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.

Turning observations of nature into art



During a nature walk at Parc Barron in Lachute with Louise Campbell in November 2025, this Grade 4 student from Laurentian Elementary School was among classmates who stopped to enjoy catching snowflakes on their tongues during the season's first snowfall. Photo courtesy of Edithe Frenette

A program that takes elementary students outside to notice the changing seasons has had a positive mental health impact.

“There are so many ways that this project is beneficial for the students and me, not only academically, but also for social and emotional learning, friendships, helping others and sharing ideas,” said Edithe Frenette, who teaches at Laurentian Elementary School (Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board).

For a long time, Frenette wanted to introduce outdoor learning to her students but didn't know where to start until she met project organizer Louise Campbell at a workshop. They applied for federal, provincial and private funding, which provided funds for Campbell to visit the Grade 4 class, first in the fall of 2025 and then again

this winter, with another visit planned for the spring.

Artist, musician and self-proclaimed nature lover, Campbell equips students with a clipboard and pencil then leads them outside to put their senses to work. What do they feel, see and hear both in the distance and close by? What kind of adjectives can they use to describe what they are sensing?

Students can take a close-up look at a tree or sit under a bridge and listen to a trickle of water.

“Kids, in my opinion, aren't meant to be sitting at a desk all day, so, especially for the kids who have a lot of energy, it's great for them because they are still able to learn and get that energy out,” Campbell said.

Frenette noted that some students who

rarely spoke in class felt more comfortable opening up about their families and home life while walking outdoors.

After the walk, students head back inside for an activity inspired by the colours and natural elements they've seen.

Campbell also uses music for the children to express what they see. She asks them to describe a scene and then composes music that conjures up an image based on their description. Or she plays a tune and gets the students to draw what pops into their heads.

“The students talk enthusiastically about what we observe, the sounds we hear, how the air feels on their skin and what they notice in nature,” Frenette said. “We jump in puddles, play in the snow and fully experience the environment around us.” ■

Spinning existing lyrics into new songs at C.A.R.E.

by Sue Montgomery

Artist and musician Louise Campbell is helping adults with disabilities express themselves using lyrics from their favourite songs.

C.A.R.E. to create opera

Phase one of an opera being created by C.A.R.E. Centre clients is underway. The idea behind C.A.R.E. Opera libretto comes from “the conviction that everyone has a story to tell and a voice to sing it with,” said musician Louise Campbell, who is co-creator along with poet Rachel McCrum. The libretto is based on a story C.A.R.E. clients choose and will be sung in their words, voices and communication methods. Libretto and music workshops are scheduled to take place between April and June. Production of the opera is scheduled sometime for the upcoming fall and winter. – K.M.

Last spring, clients at the Centre d'activités récréatives et éducatives (C.A.R.E. Centre) took part in a five-day workshop to make new songs and poems out of lyrics. Members of C.A.R.E., who number around 30 and are all over 21 with varying physical disabilities, suggested songs they liked and listened to them together. Campbell then printed out the lyrics, cut them into separate lines and scrambled the pieces of paper. The participants then placed the lyrics in a different order to create a new song. The next step was to further split the lines into segments of phrases, and, finally, into separate words.

“They made some crazy poems,” said Campbell, who has animated many artistic activities with C.A.R.E. She first met the organization's executive director, Olivia Quesnel, when she taught her how to play the clarinet.

“Our clients really enjoy activities that allow them to express themselves and their emotions,” said Quesnel. “Louise does all kinds of things to get them to express their

moods and feelings...Also, they can have fun with it.”

After the first round of lyric scrambling, Campbell created a word game, where she would say the word “red,” for example. The participants would reply with words that popped into their heads, like strawberry, love or cherry.

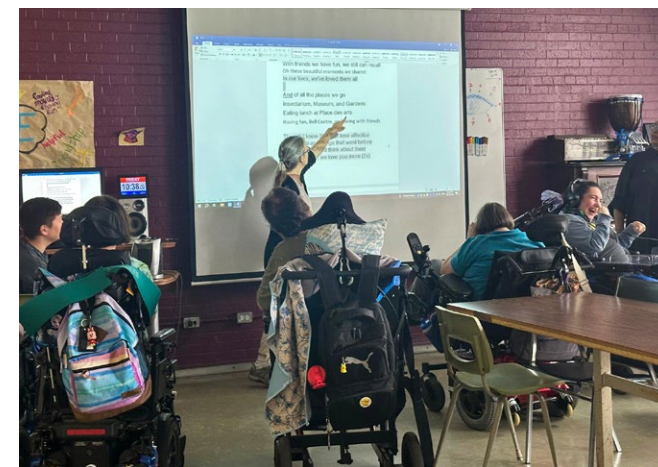
“We picked two words and got them to put those into a sentence,” said Campbell.

“By this time, we were very far away from the original song.”

Campbell has between six and 10 participants. Some C.A.R.E. clients communicate using only “yes” and “no,” and some use augmentative technology and alternative communication methods including eye gaze, Bliss Symbolics and adapted devices.

This April, Campbell took the workshop up a notch with an ambitious plan. “I hope it's going to turn into a full-fledged opera that will be designed, written, and performed by the C.A.R.E. clients,” Campbell said. “But that's a big, ambitious project, so we're taking it one step at a time.

“The lyric writing was the first step in that.” ■



C.A.R.E. clients practice singing the lyrics they co-wrote together in the lyric-writing workshop “Rewriting our Songs” led by Louise Campbell in May 2025. Photo courtesy of Olivia Quesnel

Poetry in bloom at Dunrae Gardens

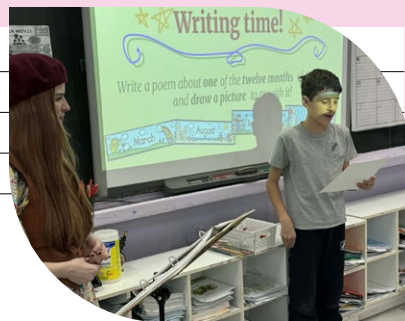
On January 12, Samara O’Gorman visited Dunrae Gardens (English Montreal School Board) to give an in-class poetry workshop for Grade 5 and 6 students. Her interactive program, “Poetry’s Return,” guided them in a step-by-step process on how to write a poem, using her latest poetry collection, *July’s Return*, as the inspirational foundation for the workshop. Each student received a booklet in which to write a short poem inspired by their favourite month of the year and pair it with a drawing. “The

workshop’s main goal is to nurture creative writing skills and foster an appreciation for the power of self-expression through poetry,” said O’Gorman. “My relationship with poetry began at a young age. A blank page was the only place where the noise of my thoughts seemed to quiet down. Through this workshop, I hope to show students that poetry is a living, breathing tool for self-discovery. It’s about finding the strength that comes from expressing yourself.”

– Kristin McNeill

July

Another great school year done,
Oh I can’t wait for the next one,
Yes, summer break, no work all day,
Sunshine and happiness makes everyone play!
– Nicholas St-James, Grade 5



Nicholas St-James (above) and Olivia Munro (below) were among the Grade 5 students who took part in a poetry workshop led by Samara O’Gorman at Dunrae Gardens on January 12. Photos courtesy of Alexandra Hindler

January

A wonderful new year to celebrate
Full of fun and joy
To introduce our new goals, and dreams
We hope for them to come true.
– Olivia Munro, Grade 5



February

Early dawn casts its gentle light
Over meadows that make inspiration take flight
It’s the moment as life begins to grow
And crystal clear rivers begin to flow
The snow will cease its harshest sins
When nature shows and life begins
The breath of earth will return
Once little seeds begin to churn
– Anna Wild, Grade 6

Creative writing: The process is what leads to mindfulness

by *Danika Swanson*

For this edition’s mindfulness column, we’re exploring the connection between mindfulness and poetry – or creative writing more broadly. These two practices complement each other beautifully. When we engage with poetry or creative expression, we’re invited into a more mindful state. When we approach a piece of writing with mindfulness, we tune into the sounds of words, the feelings they evoke and the emotions that arise as we read or write. Mindfulness practice also supports creative writing by calming the mind and creating a sense of spaciousness where ideas can emerge more freely; a quieter mind opens the door for imagination to flow.

And, the act of writing itself can be a practice of mindfulness. Remember, mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, without judgment. Many of the practices we’ve explored in previous columns emphasize choosing an anchor – a single point of focus – for our attention. In this case, the writing process becomes our anchor. The goal isn’t to produce polished work; it’s to engage fully with the process of putting pen or pencil to paper, typing on a keyboard or even writing on a white board. When we let go of expectations and allow words to appear as they come, we create space to notice what emerges naturally. What thoughts arise? What patterns do we see? What surprises us?

This simple practice offers the combined benefits of mindfulness and creative expression. Research shows that writing

can help reduce stress and anxiety, support emotional processing, increase self-awareness and calm the nervous system.

Together, this practice helps us slow down, feel more grounded and reconnect with ourselves.

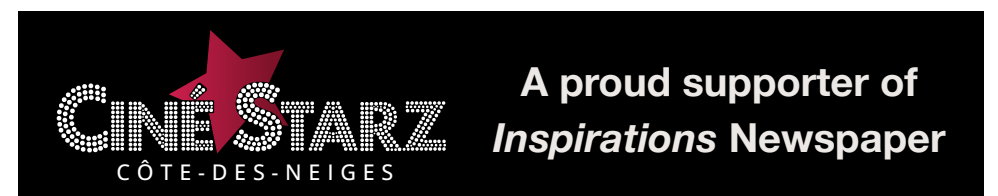
Practice

- › Choose a time of day when you can set aside between five and 10 minutes without interruption.
- › Select your writing tools: your laptop, a notebook or simply pen and paper.
- › Get comfortable. Find a quiet spot, adjust the lighting and add soft music if it helps you focus.
- › Take one mindful breath.
- › Set a timer for somewhere between five and 10 minutes and begin writing. Let your words flow freely – no outline, no goal, no editing, no judgment. Your writing doesn’t need to make sense or be “well-written.”
- › When the timer ends, stop writing and take another mindful breath.
- › Gently notice how you feel. You may glance over what you wrote but try not to analyze or edit. Remember: the value lies in the process, not the product.

Let yourself simply enjoy the act of writing – and see what unfolds. ■

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

Reference: *Using Art as Medicine* by the Science of Happiness Podcast from the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.



How we can find well-being through creative expression

by *Stéphanie Paquette*

For a long time, when I thought about creativity, the image of an incredible visual artist came to mind: someone who could paint, draw and create effortlessly – skills I admired deeply but never saw myself reflected in.

I grew up surrounded by creativity. My father is a woodworker, shaping raw materials into useful and beautiful creations. My brother expressed himself through writing, weaving words into meaning for himself and for those who found pieces of their own story reflected in his. Meanwhile, my own creativity lived quietly in my mind, where I rearranged spaces, imagined colour palettes and redesigned rooms to reflect my inner world.

It wasn't until my mid-30s that I truly understood that creativity is not limited to art. It lives and breathes within us, shaped by our interests and passions and by the ways we pursue and express them.

For me, creativity shows up in how I find solutions, sometimes collaboratively and sometimes on my own, both within my personal life and in my work. It lives in food, where pairing flavours and experimenting with recipes come naturally, and in the small decorative details throughout my home. My sense of space and colour creates environments that are warm, intentional and alive. Creativity is what you make it, and when it makes you feel good, it quietly supports your mental health.

Creativity most often shows up in how I connect with my children. At bedtime, storytelling becomes a shared creative ritual. Real experiences are woven together with bits of fiction, humour and imagination. Often, a story from our own lives, retold creatively, is preferred over one from a book.

People can process emotions, build cognitive flexibility, reduce stress and foster resilience through creative expression. It can also strengthen social connections and support a sense of purpose and meaning. Studies exploring the relationship between creativity and mental health indicate that engaging creatively is associated with more adaptive coping strategies and higher levels of psychological well-being.

Creativity doesn't require talent or supplies. It can emerge through objects already in your home, through movement, music, storytelling, decorating or shared activities. And it is not about performance but rather about expression. In that expression, there is space for healing, connection and a deeper sense of well-being. ■

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

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

This spring, Mackay Centre School and Royal West Academy (RWA), both of the English Montreal School Board, worked in partnership to run a volunteer program giving Grade 11 students at RWA the opportunity to work with students at Mackay. The program started around the year 2000 and is open to Grade 10 and 11 students at RWA. "This collaboration is a wonderful example of schools working together to foster inclusivity, learning and mutual support," said Irini Margetis, principal of Mackay Centre School and Philip E. Layton School. "It benefits both the volunteer and the students they assist, creating a positive and enriching experience for all by allowing the RWA volunteers to assist teachers in a special needs setting and by providing Mackay students with role models."

Here are some of their perspectives.

We enjoyed having a volunteer from Royal West Academy in our classroom at Mackay Centre School. She helped us a lot. She believed in all of us. She made math easier and helped our homeroom teacher. It was nice having her with us every Tuesday morning. We looked forward to her visits each week. She was very kind, friendly and helpful. We also got to ask her questions and learned about her experience in high school. We will miss her and hope to see her again. We will always welcome her into our school and classroom.

– Devontae MacDonald, Samuel Harvey Bravo, Kahmar Rosales-Tempro, Thomas Fagundes and Torrick Donovan - students from Mikaela Sandler's Grade 5 class at Mackay Centre School

Walking into Mackay Centre School for the first time, I didn't really know what to expect. I was excited, but I was also nervous that I wouldn't be able to make any real connections or make any real impact with the students. At first some of the students didn't speak to me, and I wasn't sure how to reach them. Over time, I realized that connection at Mackay required a different type of patience. It required patience to build trust with each individual student, to understand that when something takes longer it's not always a choice, and to recognize feelings that aren't always expressed with words. Some of the most meaningful moments in this experience to me were small. Riding through the hallways with a student who imagined them as roads became our little routine – it was the game we came up with to help him focus despite his attention difficulties. Hearing "I'm going to miss you" and receiving my first hug from a student who realized I had to leave for school instead of playing our usual game outside made me see that even our small, everyday interactions made an impact on him. This experience was more challenging than I expected but gave me a new perspective. It taught me that making a difference doesn't always come from big actions but rather from patience, understanding and the connections you make along the way.

– Jeeya Singh, Grade 11 at Royal West Academy



Shout out to Fiaz Khalid!



At Inspirations, we're proud to partner with Wagar Adult Education Centre's graphic design class to create internship opportunities for neurodiverse students. Each year, we welcome an intern who trains with our team at the English Montreal School Board. We extend a special thank you to Fiaz, our 2025/26 intern, for his help in design, supporting school tours, keeping our website up to date, his creativity and for sharing his clever ideas. We were so lucky to have you on our team.

A special thank you to the EMSB web team for sharing their expertise with Fiaz!

'Emotional agility': The pathway to thriving

by Janet Silverstone Perlis

For adults entrusted with helping children thrive, the goal seems clear: we want to nurture happiness, confidence and resilience. The pathway, however, is not always so obvious. We know how to support academic success, social skills and healthy habits. Yet one essential area seems overlooked: helping children navigate their inner emotional world in a way that promotes strength.

Psychologist Susan David calls this skill "emotional agility." In her book *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change and Thrive in Work and Life*, she describes how we can go about this. She states that many of us grew up believing that managing emotions meant controlling them, hiding them or pushing them aside. Emotional agility offers a far more effective path. As David explains, it's about "showing up to our emotions with curiosity and compassion" and then choosing how to respond in ways that are consistent with our deepest values. She describes how we can become "hooked" by our thoughts and feelings, which can lead to reacting automatically. When children are hooked, a single thought like "I'm terrible at this" can lead to a negative spiral in their behaviour. With emotional agility, they learn to create space between what they feel and what they do, allowing them to choose a thought-out action.

Cultivating emotional agility offers powerful benefits for children, including building resilience. David also states that children learn that emotions are data, not directives. Feelings inform us but do not lock us into behaving in a certain way automatically. For example, a high school student who is struggling with grasping a certain subject can first acknowledge they are frustrated and feel stressed about it. Then, instead of saying "I can't do math" or "I'm not smart," they can then learn to accept help from a parent or a tutor, or study with a friend.

"Even though I don't know how to do this yet, with some help, I can do it." They begin to understand that emotions are temporary and do not define them. This leads to the ability to "unhook" from critical self-talk, strengthening resilience from the inside out.

Second, emotional agility supports better decision-making. Space is created between feeling and action as children learn to pause and focus on their values. David suggests helping children to use their values as their compass. Teach children to learn they are not prisoners of their moods despite feeling strong emotions. She advocates using questions such as "What kind of person do I want to be right now?" to help a child take a step back and recall their values.

Third, emotional agility strengthens relationships. When children learn to accurately identify their feelings beyond labeling themselves as "good" or "bad," they develop what David calls "emotional granularity." The more children truly understand their emotions, the better they regulate themselves. They increase their empathy for others as well as improve their communication and friendship skills.

Fourth, emotional agility nurtures lasting self-awareness. Instead of judging themselves for feeling anxious or upset, children can learn to ask, "What is this emotion telling me?" Anxiety may signal a need for preparation. Anger may signal that a boundary feels crossed. Sadness may reflect loss or longing. When emotions are treated more as "messengers" rather than something to be feared or avoided, children may be able to use a more balanced approach.

The author is quick to point out that the goal of her framework is not to eliminate discomfort. She believes that emotional agility develops in order to handle struggles. Shielding children from every disappointment does not build strength. Walking beside them as they learn to navigate difficulty does. She also shows how this can be accomplished:

Show up (Feel fully)

Showing up means turning towards and acknowledging emotions with openness

instead of dismissing them. When a child is upset, it can be tempting to say, "It's not a big deal," or "You're fine." Emotional agility invites validation without overidentifying. "I can see you're really disappointed" communicates that feelings are real and manageable. This is not indulgence – it is the beginning of regulation. A child cannot calm an emotion that has been denied. Showing up also protects against what David calls "toxic positivity" – the pressure to appear happy while hiding real struggle. When children know all feelings are acceptable (even if not all behaviours are), they feel psychologically safe.

Step out (Think flexibly)

Stepping out involves creating a little distance from thoughts and emotions so they do not control behaviour. David calls this process "unhooking." Instead of "No one likes me," a child can learn to say, "I'm having the thought that no one likes me." Parents can gently model this by focusing on shared family values. Asking, "What would self-compassion look like here?" during a tense moment shifts attention from the heat of emotion to intentional choice. Over time, children internalize this values-based guidance.

Walk your why (Act intentionally)

Walking your why means taking small steps aligned with values, even when emotions feel uncomfortable. Emotional agility grows through simple, repeated practices – a deep breath before responding, a bedtime reflection, encouragement to try again



Source: pexels.com

after disappointment. These moments communicate a powerful message: "You can feel this, and you can choose your next step." Confidence grows not from avoiding discomfort, but from moving through it with intention.

Emotionally agile children are not children who never struggle. They are children who recover more quickly because they have practiced tolerating discomfort. They understand that feelings are part of being human. Emotional agility reminds us that resilience is not built through avoidance of feelings or rigid control. It grows through curiosity, self-compassion, flexibility and values-based action. When children learn that they can fully experience their emotions and still choose their response, they learn how to navigate life's challenges. Through these steps, their confidence grows and gives them a way to thrive! ■

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

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Meet the ‘Bag Bish:’ Model, influencer and ostomy advocate

by *Olivia Integlia*

Sara Levitt, 31, spent 15 years grappling privately with shame and embarrassment. Diagnosed with ulcerative colitis at just 3 years old and later with Crohn’s disease at age 11, she ultimately underwent surgery that required her to live with an ostomy bag for the rest of her life. Today, Levitt lives openly and unapologetically as a social media creator and model, advocating for Crohn’s and ostomy awareness. Most recently, she placed in the top 15 of Miss Universe Canada 2025.

Inspirations caught up with her recently to learn more about her story.

So, can you tell us: who is Sara Levitt today?

I studied graphic and web design at John Abbott College before completing a Bachelor of Commerce with a major in marketing at the John Molson School of Business at Concordia University. I’m a coffee fanatic, I love sushi, and I have a cat and a dog who are truly my kids and emotional support animals. I was born and raised in Dollard-des-Ormeaux, and I’m a bubbly,

energetic person with a huge curiosity for life – I genuinely love living.

Between the ages of 11 and 13, I was in and out of the hospital trying different medications. I was nose-fed and also fed through a peripherally inserted central catheter line. I was extremely sick, living with chronic pain and unable to attend school. On May 2, 2008, my condition reached a point where emergency surgery was required – it was essentially a matter of life or death. My Crohn’s disease had progressed so severely that medication was no longer effective, which led to emergency ostomy surgery.

That’s a lot for a child to undergo. Do you remember what that moment felt like?

I remember it very vividly; it was traumatic. I remember thinking, how am I going to live with this? I didn’t want an ostomy bag, but I didn’t have a choice. I struggled deeply with body image and self-confidence. It felt like my body was hijacked from me. Throughout high school, college and university, it was a big secret. Only a few people knew.

What helped you move toward embracing your ostomy bag publicly?

It was a buildup of moments. In 2019, I challenged myself to wear a bikini on a family trip to Cuba, even though my osto-

my bag was visible. Each time I shared my story with friends or partners, I grew more confident. In 2023, I returned to Cuba alone and realized how exhausted I was from hiding.

A big part of it was growth and maturity –reaching a place where I felt comfortable with who I was becoming. I had spent years asking myself, “when will I be ready?”

Later on, I traveled to Los Angeles and did a bikini photoshoot. It felt like a sign. I posted the photos for my birthday on September 26, 2023. And that’s what started everything.

You recently spoke to high school students on the Inspirations’ Jackie Fisher Empathy Tour. What message do you hope they will take away from hearing your story?

Be kind and accepting of others, regardless of their differences. Don’t be so quick to judge – you never know what someone is going through.

What projects are you most excited about right now?

I’m developing a self-love product for individuals with chronic illnesses and physical differences, focused on strength and self-acceptance. I’m also continuing my work as a model and creator, and exploring



Sara Levitt, seen here February 5 surrounded by Secondary 3 students of St. Thomas High School (Lester B. Pearson School Board) in Pointe-Claire, stayed on after her presentation to have an informal chat. It was her second stop on the Jackie Fisher Empathy Tour. Photo: Wendy Singer

opportunities in film and media to raise awareness around ostomies. There’s always a lot in motion – and I’m always building toward what’s next. ■

Connection between students, staff is key at Focus High School

by *Olivia Integlia*

Focus High School, located in Montreal’s Southwest borough, seeks to cultivate a nurturing environment that encourages students to develop an openness toward school and a love for learning.

For head teacher Skylar Adams, a nurturing environment involves more than simply providing students with a space they want to be in. “It also includes the human element. The staff treat them like their own [...] and when a kid is hurting, we hurt,” he said.

Part of the Outreach Network within the English Montreal School Board, Focus provides smaller class sizes and specialized support for students who have experienced academic or behavioural difficulties in school. Students are referred by either a social worker or their former school.

Unlike in a traditional classroom, Adams said students are given the opportunity to clear their heads before delving directly into learning, and staff recognize that personal challenges can make it difficult for a student to perform academically.

Balancing academics within such an environment is “an ongoing challenge,” he

said. Nonetheless, the school has adopted several strategies to maintain the nurturing atmosphere it has fostered. For example, staff meet weekly to discuss student performance and adapt learning strategies in response to the challenges individual students may be facing.

Better understanding what a student is currently dealing with allows staff to be more adaptive and thoughtful in their teaching strategies, Adams said. “We make a concerted effort to look at solution-based approaches.”

Paola Borzone, a psychologist at the school, echoes that support staff play a key role in

the school’s success. Each class is assigned both a teacher and a behaviour technician, she explained. “If a kid is having a moment or coming to school with any sort of emotional problem, there’s always somebody that will sit aside with them and talk to them [...] and it’s whoever the kid feels most comfortable with,” she added.

Borzone believes this approach better allows students to create a mindset that is conducive to learning.

The importance of communication also extends to parents at home, according to Adams. “I call home quite a bit,” he said,

▶ *Continued on p. 15*

Parent-teen dialectical behaviour therapy explained

by *Dr. Stephanie Margoless*

Guest
psychologist

There are many different approaches for psychotherapy that are effective treatments.

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is one, and it is different from other forms of therapy because it is skills-based with the goal of helping people to build a life worth living.

DBT assumes that people are doing the best they can in dealing with their life circumstances, which may be very painful and difficult as they are currently being lived. It also assumes that people need to do better, try harder and be motivated to change by learning and practicing more positive and healthy coping skills.

These assumptions are at the heart of dialectics and are based on concepts written about in *DBT Skills Manual for Adolescents*. Dialectical means that two opposite ideas can be true at the same time, and when considered together can create a new truth and a new perspective or way of thinking about a situation. In DBT, we move away from “either/or” language to using “both/and” language. The core dialectic of DBT

is about both acceptance and change. This treatment emphasizes both validation of our experiences of difficult emotions (i.e., acceptance) and at the same time, the need for replacing problem behaviours with skillful behaviours (i.e., change).

There are five skills training modules in the parent-teen version of this treatment that focus on increasing skills to change or reduce problem behaviours. The first four modules are the same in the therapy for adults. These skills are briefly described here:

1. Mindfulness skills to improve self-awareness, focus and confusion about self, including not being aware of what you are feeling, why you get upset or why you have trouble staying focused;

2. Emotion regulation skills to cope with emotional reactivity, emotional vulnerability, or intense and sudden mood changes with little control and/or a steady negative mood state like anger, anxiety or depression;

3. Distress tolerance skills to decrease impulsive behaviours or acting without thinking things through as well as avoid-

ing or escaping from difficult emotional experiences;

4. Interpersonal effectiveness skills to improve interpersonal problems such as difficulties in keeping stable relationships, difficulties getting what you want, maintaining your self-respect and decreasing loneliness;

5. Walking the middle path skills to work on teen and family challenges, including difficulty navigating family conflict, difficulties effectively influencing others’ behaviours as well as addressing extremes in thinking, feeling and acting and difficulties in perspective-taking.

One of the key concepts of the walking the middle path skills that I particularly appreciate is helping parents and teens see the “kernels of truth” in each other’s perspective. For example, parents and teens commonly argue about the hours spent on screens whether on social media or gaming and are often seemingly standing on either side of a canyon with opposing views. One way to help build the bridge between the two sides of the canyon is for you, the parent, to consider why your teen spends so much time online – for example, is it to

connect with friends, chat, get distracted, feel included, etc.? These are good questions to ask even if you see this behaviour, and validly so, as addictive and unhealthy for their mental well-being.

Likewise, teens can reflect on why their parents want them off their electronic devices. Perhaps among other reasons, parents are worried their teen is withdrawing from the family, ignoring their chores and responsibilities, and not studying enough to maintain their grades. That is the dialectic. These differing perspectives are both valid and true at the same time.

Finding your teen’s kernel of truth does not mean you agree with or approve of their point of view, and it does not mean that you need to give in to your teen’s demands. However, it does allow for improved communication, understanding and negotiation of differences. ■

Stephanie Margoless, Ph.D., is a clinical child and adolescent psychologist at the Jewish General Hospital and an associate member of the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University. She has written and collaborated on therapeutic resource books for young children.

Connection... ◀ *Cont'd from p. 14*

noting that he contacts families to discuss both challenges and successes students may have during the school day. Maintaining those connections is central to the school’s approach. “It develops a bridge between the home and the school,” he said.

Adams recalls a former student who returned years later to share that they had pursued a career inspired by their favourite behaviour technician at the school, crediting that mentorship as a major influence. Borzone echoed this, noting that it is especially rewarding to see students who initially struggle academically go on to make significant progress, thrive and graduate successfully. ■

Patuelli’s organization wins award

The No Excuses No Limits Movement, founded and directed by Luca ‘Lazylegz’ Patuelli, was the recent recipient of the Conseil des arts de Montréal’s Grand Prix. At an April ceremony at the Palais de congrès de Montréal, the organization was presented with \$40,000 and a work of art valued at \$10,000. Working with the ILL-Abilities collective, No Excuses is a breakdancing troupe that integrates performers with disabilities.

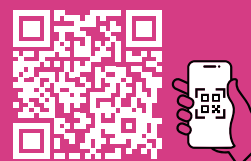
– K.M.

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A week-long program to promote safe schools in its second year

by *Victoria Della Cioppa*

Now in its second year, Violence and Bullying Prevention in Schools Week, an initiative created by the Quebec ministry of Education, underscored the shared responsibility to foster safe, caring school environments. From March 23 to 27, the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) marked the week with dynamic activities aimed at empowering students, equipping staff and strengthening school communities across its network.

The week began with a focus on professional learning. The EMSB Student Services department welcomed Dr. Dewey Cornell, who led a specialized training session for staff from 10 schools on the Comprehensive Behavior Threat Assessment. This evidence-based tool can be used by school teams in assessing and responding to student threats in a balanced and thoughtful way. The goal of the tool is to help those working in schools to neither overreact nor underreact but instead respond proportionately and proactively.

Midweek, the spotlight turned to student well-being. On Wednesday, James Lyng High School, in collaboration with Student Services, hosted a Well-being Day. In the

morning, students participated in workshops designed to increase awareness of mental health challenges and introduce practical coping strategies. In the afternoon, those same workshops were extended to students in several EMSB west-end high schools.

On Thursday, Westmount Park Elementary School hosted a livestream with Svens Telemaque, who spoke about the importance of fostering a positive school climate and how each individual can make a difference. His message underscored a central theme of the week: every voice and every action counts.

The week concluded on Friday with a photography showcase organized in collaboration with LOVE (Québec), a program which supports vulnerable youth through photography and other arts-based activities. Selected students who had participated in LOVE workshops over the past few years presented artwork centered on kindness, inclusivity and anti-bullying.

As a bonus, on March 30, Rosemount High School, alongside Student Services and the East Island Network for English Language Services (REISA), hosted the East End



From left: Makari Terrio, Ryan Jakmakian and Zacharie Messaoui were among the top six finalists for their photograph, which was part of "The Art of Noticing Youth Photography Exhibit" held at the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) on March 27. The event recognized EMSB students who took part in LOVE (Québec)'s Media Arts programs. Photo: Wendy Singer

Well-being Fair, further extending the week's impact and commitment to nurturing safe, compassionate learning environments for all. The fair's mandate was to increase the coping strategies of student participants.

Together, these initiatives reflected the EMSB's strong commitment to fostering safe and supportive school communi-

ties. Violence and Bullying Prevention in Schools Week was not only a series of events, but also a continued promise to ensure every student feels valued, heard and protected, throughout the week and beyond. ■

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



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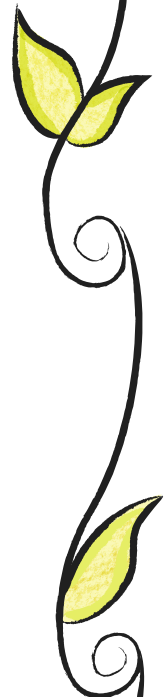
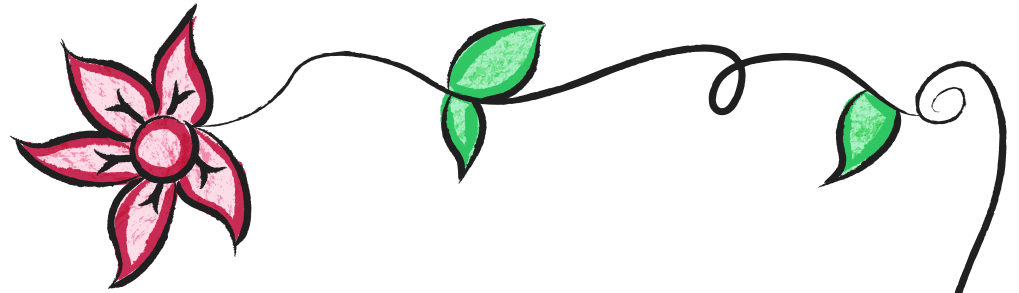
Carlyle Elementary celebrates autism awareness day

On April 2, Carlyle Elementary School of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) marked World Autism Awareness Day with an insightful program celebrating autism and raising awareness. The event began with the official launch of Carlyle teacher Christina Mamagat's (right) children's book, *Sometimes...but Always: A Look into the Spectrum*, which offers a glimpse into the autism spectrum while celebrating individuality, fostering understanding and embracing the beauty of different perspectives. Students then listened to Lauren Hill Academy (EMSB) student and autism advocate Panagiotis Argiropoulos (middle), who shared his perspective and experiences. The program continued with a lively and engaging presentation by Steven Atme (left), who incorporated music throughout, playing the piano and actively involving the audience.

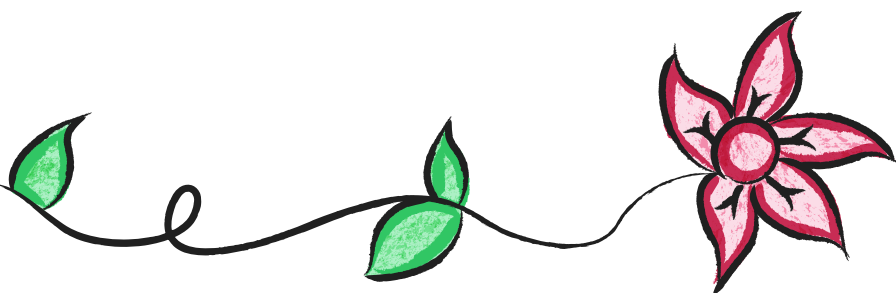
— Wendy Singer



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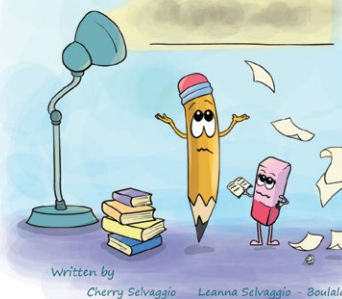
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par
Emmanuelle Assor

Les ateliers « Simon joue » : un concept unique pour les autistes non verbaux

Pendant la pandémie, Johanne Leduc, mère de deux enfants autistes, écrivaine, conférencière et ex-directrice du Salon de l'autisme, a créé les ateliers virtuels « Simon joue ».

« Avec un enfant autiste non verbal à la maison et aucun service, c'était le pire scénario imaginable! Alors je me suis dit : 'et si on s'amusait en jouant tous les deux' ? ».

En prenant le temps d'observer chaque geste que son fils Simon faisait en jouant, Johanne est arrivée à produire des capsules vidéo d'elle et de Simon s'amusant ensemble.

« Le mot n'existe pas pour ce que je fais. Je dirais que c'est de l'accompagnement de parents ou d'éducateurs pour les autistes non verbaux dont l'âge de développement se situe entre 0 et 5 ans. Je n'enseigne

pas à l'enfant, mais je guide le parent », explique-t-elle.

Son idée est de déconstruire le jeu pour le rendre accessible et attrayant. « Il arrive, trop souvent, que nos enfants aillent à l'école, mais que l'on n'ait aucune idée de ce qu'ils font, ni de leur niveau de développement », dit-elle. « Avec mon approche, je prends le jeu par rapport à ce qu'il peut apporter à mon enfant, et non selon son mode d'emploi. Je trouve ce qu'il aime et je l'adapte à lui : par exemple, on fera le jeu de mémoire en marchant s'il aime beaucoup marcher ».

Johanne ajoute qu'il faut aussi tenir compte des intérêts de l'enfant. Elle a constaté que les autistes aiment mieux des jeux comportant un début et une fin. Par exemple, le labyrinthe à perles est seulement devenu intéressant, pour son

fil, une fois qu'elle l'a modifié et qu'il a vu les billes tomber une à une dans un bol.

« Dans un jeu, on doit avoir une action-réaction et de la satisfaction! Tu veux que ton enfant ressente de la fierté et non de la frustration », ajoute-t-elle.

À l'heure actuelle, « Simon joue » comporte huit ateliers de jeux cognitifs modifiés, tels que le labyrinthe simplifié, le jeu magnétique, le jeu de mémoire et le casse-tête. D'autres jeux sont en préparation.

« Si ton enfant a 20 ans, mais qu'il a 3 ans d'âge développemental, c'est à toi de t'ajuster. On a tous appris en jouant. Le jeu n'a pas d'âge », conclut-elle. ■



Simon Julien à la maison, en septembre 2022.
Photo : Johanne Leduc

Pour plus d'information : www.simonjoue.ca
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.

MCLD Club at Dawson offers activities, discussion for students with learning disabilities

by *Randy Pinsky*

For students at Dawson College with learning disabilities (LDs) or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the door to the LD+ADHD Club is always open. Launched in September 2025, it's a place to share experiences, get advice on navigating post-secondary life and connect with mentors who understand what they are going through.

"I wish it had existed when I was in college," said Breanna Pallante, one of the club's facilitators and a Dawson alumnus. As an ambassador at the Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities (MCLD), Pallante regularly shares her story to sensitize the public about her experience growing up with dyslexia and ADHD.

According to the Learning Disability Association of Canada, LDs impact the

processing and retention of information, causing struggles in reading, writing and math.

For student Radhika Khera, having ADHD can exacerbate difficulties with concentration. "For me, it's not even finishing a task that is the issue; it's starting it," she shared.

Khera reflected she has had a challenging academic path, being both the first generation in her family to complete post-secondary school as well as the first generation in Canada, compounded by her learning disabilities. She is passionate about pursuing a career in social work "to give back, like the organizations that had been there for me."

The club is currently funded and run by the MCLD, however the organization is seeking additional sources of support, partnering with corporate sponsors such



Members of the LD+ADHD Club gather together in September 2025 for their first meeting and celebrate with socks donated by Ardene. Photo courtesy of Breanna Pallante

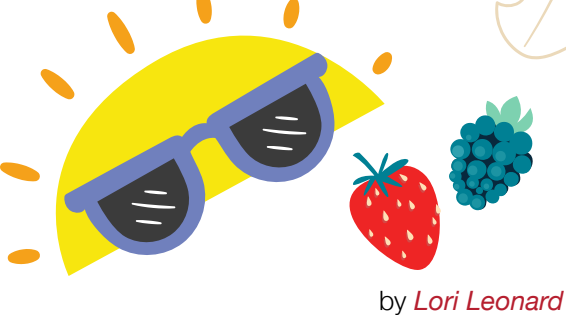
as UNIQLO, Poulet Rouge, Ardene and CF Montreal. Each monthly meeting is half discussion and half activity, sharing study skills, coping mechanisms and self-advocacy experiences.

The facilitators all have some form of learning disability and exemplify that pos-

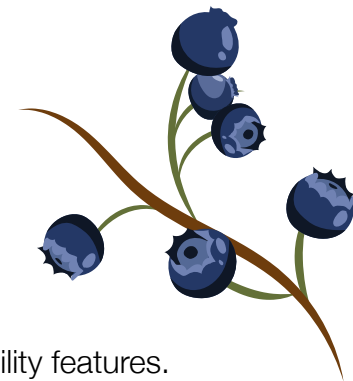
sibilities are limitless. For instance, Pallante believes that having ADHD can be an asset. "You have the energy to take on things you have a passion for."

Another topic the Club covers is the debate: to disclose or not?

▶ *Continued on p. 35*



Summer fun in the Laurentians



by *Lori Leonard*

There are many fun things to do in the Laurentians this summer. Here is just a small sampling with varying accessibility features.

Sentier des cimes Laurentides

This 1,350-meter walkway, which is situated 18 meters above ground, culminates at a tower 40 meters high, offering a breathtaking view. Open year round, the site is accessible with a wheelchair. The maximum slope is 6 degrees, and the activity and learning areas are flat. Restaurant Chez Émile is a spot for sightseers to eat lunch. Prices vary depending on time of year, and tickets can be purchased online.

Info: treetop-walks.com

Water park, Sommet St. Sauveur

Perfect for a hot summer day, the water park offers 27 water slides, 38 activities and seven restaurants, with accessibility for wheelchair users to travel within most of the park. Free life jackets are available for toddlers. Visitors also have access to a picnic area and can rent bikes. If it rains for more than 10 minutes, Sommet St. Sauveur provides a new day pass for another day.

Info: sommets.com/en/what-to-do/water-park

Val-David summer market

On Saturdays between 9 am and 1 pm, Marché de Val-David vendors offer a delicious array of local products including crêpes, poutine, local cheese, maple products, honey, sausages, Lebanese food, artisanal breads, tea, custom jewelry and art. Local farmers sell fresh vegetables, fruit and a wide variety of mushrooms. The site is accessible for wheelchair users.

Info: marchesdici.org

Viking Canoe and Kayak Club

The club's PaddleAll program aims to provide individuals with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to experience the joy of paddling. The program runs Tuesday evenings between June 23 and August 11. The cost includes equipment. Coaches provide safety orientation, both on land and in the water. Members can up their training in sprint kayaks and compete at a national-level competition in August. The dock is wheelchair-accessible, however boats for physically disabled participants are not available. Online registration begins in March.

Info: canoekayakviking.ca

As the MNA for D'Arcy-McGee and as the mother of a special needs child, I have so much respect and admiration for the schools and their staff who work tirelessly to help our kids achieve their potential. I'm proud to support *Inspirations!*

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The War Amps begins its 80th annual key tag mailing

The War Amps has started mailing 2026 key tags across the country, marking 80 years of providing this service to residents. When you use a War Amps key tag, you protect your keys and support amputees.

Seven-year-old Kenzie Stronks was born without her left arm below the elbow and was enrolled in The War Amps Child Amputee (CHAMP) Program on the same day. In the letter accompanying the key tags, her parents, Shannon and Josh, describe how The War Amps has supported their family. As a Champ, Kenzie receives financial assistance for artificial limbs, peer connections through CHAMP events and so much more.

“When she walks into a room, her amputation often makes her different from everybody else, so being able to meet kids just like

her at CHAMP seminars is very special,” say Shannon and Josh. “Thanks to The War Amps, Kenzie has the artificial limbs and devices she needs for the hobbies she loves. She has a bike device that attaches to her artificial arm and allows her to keep a safe grip on the handlebar while riding. She also has a tumbler device that fits onto her artificial arm to help with balance and floor exercises during karate.”

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.



Photo: Kenzie is benefiting from The War Amps CHAMP Program thanks to the public's generosity.

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by
Steven Atme

Fun times at Crestview Elementary

As a proud Lavallois, I was thrilled to be invited by Sheila Lindsay, special education technician, to speak and perform at Crestview Elementary School in Laval during Autism Awareness Month last spring. Something felt different around the environment, which made Crestview special. The entire gang was engaged and mesmerized during the storytelling.

The younger children were animated during the sing-along. Several volunteers acted out scenes while I told my story.

Especially at the end, many students expressed themselves by sharing with me their hobbies, asking questions, talking about their dreams and demonstrating their abilities. Seventy percent of those students are special needs plus have emotional challenges.

It inspired me to share the idea about providing creative arts private lessons and consultations for both students and staff in the future. Coincidentally, the administration was thinking the same thing. Some students asked me, "Can you please come back and see us?"

And I kept that promise when I returned in October. Daycare technician Diana Mastroianni, who also helps run morning and afterschool programs, collaborated with me on making this happen. The moment I walked through those doors, students were overjoyed. They ran up to me and gave me huge hugs yelling, "You really came!"

I was happy to be able to start this new initiative, which started off with three students and grew to nine in private and class visits, sing-alongs and consultations and even myself playing music from the library while the sound echoes through those brick corridors, bringing so much light, spark and joy. Some days are hard for students because of anxiety, which lead me to using the tools and improvisation in cheering up students and staff.



At Crestview Elementary School on January 23, Steven Atme, left, joined principal Sarah Lefebvre-Gauthier; Sheila Lindsay, specialized education technician; Kimberly Rechil, vice principal; and Diana Mastroianni, daycare technician for a day of creative arts private lessons. The photo was taken by Grade 2 student Xander. Photo courtesy of S. Atme

What caught my attention the most was that they're a community that has evolved like a family. What I've been seeing with my students there is after they are introduced into the creative arts world, we have conversations, play and joke, and this has helped them go from being anxious to being happy, shining, amazing individuals. Even their teachers needed my twisted mentality dosage from time to time.

Communication is key. Being present is key. Being heard is key. Being happy is key. That's what Crestview is all about. I'm blessed for our collaboration. I'm glad we made this come true, and we shall continue to make a difference for everyone at Crestview and out there everywhere. To our friendship and many more to come! ■

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.



The Jackie Fisher Empathy Tour continues!

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Thanks to a generous grant from The Jaclyn Fisher Foundation, this school year, three extraordinary women inspired students across greater Montreal with honest stories of resilience, self-love, and inclusion, empowering them to embrace who they are and live fully, no matter the challenges they face.

Samara O'Gorman

Sara Levitt

Maryam Ganni



Thanks to all the students and school teams that we met this year. To join the movement and empower your students, please contact info@inspirationsnews.com.



Honouring Jackie

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

Répit Emergo, at 50, continues to offer a welcome break

by *Sue Montgomery*

An organization that provides crucial respite care to families with autistic members is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year with a fundraising drive.

Répit Emergo has 220 member families across the province, with most centred in Montreal and its suburbs.

Every other weekend, from September to May, Emergo takes between 15 and 20 autistic people aged 4 and older to Camp

de Granpré in Otterburn Park near Beloeil. The organization also offers nine-night respites during summer at the same campsite. Part of their mandate is to support families by providing participants an opportunity to gain some independence and develop skills away from home and “by offering meaningful breaks that benefit everyone,” according to the website.

Réetta Hasanen, the executive director of the organization’s fundraising arm, Fondation Emergo, is also the parent of a child who has been a beneficiary of the respite weekends and camp for the past 10 years.

She recalls it wasn’t easy at first to let her non-verbal daughter, now 18, leave home. “The first weekend I cleaned the entire house to keep busy,” she said with a laugh. “Seeing her so happy has allowed me to relax, and it also took some years to accept that this is going to be necessary.”

The break allows Hasanen to spend some focused time with her younger daughter

and do things the family can’t normally do, like going to a restaurant.

In summer, the organization rents a second camp in Val des Lacs in the Laurentians. Up to 27 participants stay anywhere from four to nine nights between mid-June and mid-August and are taken care of by some 55 staff members. Like any camp, there is a lot of music, dancing and spending time in nature.

Pierre Ricard, Répit Emergo’s executive director, said competition for donor dollars is fierce but with current high living costs, as well as demand for specialized services for autistic children, the need is great.

“The first respite is not necessarily a respite because [many nervous] parents stay next to the phone,” he said. “We do a lot of surveys, and the results are always positive.”

Families pay a portion of the camp or weekend respite costs, and subsidies are available from the CLSC and Emergo’s foundation. ■

| Info: repitemergo.com



Campers gather together at the Camp de Grandpré in Otterburn Park during a summer respite camp in 2025. Photo courtesy of Réetta Hasanen

C.A.R.E. marks 30th anniversary

The centre d’activités récréatives et éducatives, also known as the C.A.R.E. Centre, has been offering recreational and educational activities to adults with physical disabilities for over 30 years. Though it was incorporated in 1995, it actually started a decade earlier for three days a week in a science lab in what is now the St. Pius X Career Centre. Growing from its grassroots beginnings marked a solution for parents who needed a place for their children over the age of 21 who could no longer attend youth sector schools. Most of the clients come from the Mackay Centre School. Located in the building that houses Wagar Adult Education Centre and John Grant High School, it offers an educational and recreational program as well as outings in the community five days a week. In the summer, activities involve community outings only. – S.M.

Adam’s P.A.C.E. marks two-decade milestone

Adam’s P.A.C.E. rang in its 20th anniversary this year by celebrating over 80 graduates.

The program was created by Ann Taylor and named in memory of her son Adam, who had Down syndrome and was battling leukemia. He was among the first students to participate, which helped realize his dream of attending Champlain College. The program, a collaboration between Champlain College and Riverside School Board, offers youth with developmental difficulties between the ages of 17 and 23 an opportunity to audit classes at the college. They receive hands-on job training and learn life skills to enable them to lead a more independent life. “Adam has left us this incredible legacy, and this year we honour his contribution,” Taylor said. – S.M.



Building relationships through art at JDAIM ‘26

Jason Goldsmith presented to about 25 people at the Congregation Dorshei Emet on February 12 at the JDAIM 2026 event called “Embracing Creativity, Art, Autism, and the Power of Expression.” He shared his story of how building a relationship with his son Ellis was the key to Ellis’ growth and learning. In his son’s early years, they communicated through drawing. These drawings were the foundation that formed the Big Blue Hug, which features glass-painted art. After his presentation, Goldsmith taught the audience the techniques. Photo: Wendy Singer

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L.I.N.K.S.' student-run café continues to evolve

by *Tania Piperni*

L.I.N.K.S. High School, a specialized school within the English Montreal School Board serving students with diverse learning needs, continues to develop initiatives that foster autonomy, responsibility and real-world readiness. One standout example is the student-run Pause for Positivity Café, which operates every Tuesday and Thursday in the school cafeteria. Now in its third year, the café has steadily expanded its services, menu offerings and use of technology.



The Pause for Positivity crew get ready for café service in February. They are students in the Work-Oriented Training Path program at L.I.N.K.S. High School. Photo courtesy of L.I.N.K.S.

The café is coordinated by teacher-manager Sara Gurreri, who has led the initiative for the past two years. This year, 12 students from the Work-Oriented Training Path (WOTP) class make up the café's staff. The WOTP program emphasizes social development, life skills and employability, and the café provides an ideal environment for students to apply these competencies. Their responsibilities include dressing appropriately for work, collaborating with peers to prepare the café and kitchen for service, following hygiene protocols and independently notifying the school secretary in the event of an absence.

Preparation for working in the positivity café begins in the classroom, where students learn the workplace expectations. They watch hygiene and safety videos, review visual guides on proper attire, practice using kitchen equipment and even make their own uniform aprons. These hands-on

experiences help build confidence before students transition into their café roles.

Recent innovations have strengthened the café's alignment with real-world employment. An iPad ordering system now allows their customers to select items using visual menus and calculates totals and change. The addition of a mobile payment machine, alongside traditional cash payments, exposes students to working with different payment methods. On Thursdays, the café operates exclusively in French, offering valuable language practice in an authentic setting.

The menu has grown to reflect current trends among teens, featuring homemade cookies and snacks prepared in the school kitchen, matcha lattes and beverages crafted with a new espresso machine and milk frother. The goal is to create a full café experience that mirrors what students would encounter in the community.

Proceeds from the café are planned for the purchase of a new coffee cart. Funds will also help cover community outings where student employees, accompanied by staff, can enjoy recreational activities and restaurant meals – outings that further their social and life skills.

The Pause for Positivity Café benefits the entire L.I.N.K.S. community. Students gain practical experience in math, communication and customer service, while also developing independence and responsibility – skills essential for life beyond school. With warm greetings and delicious homemade options, the café has become a valued and uplifting part of daily life at L.I.N.K.S. High School. ■

To watch the café in action: [facebook.com/reel/651698474670038](https://www.facebook.com/reel/651698474670038)

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.



by *Elisabeth Prass*

Not enough funding for children with autism

April was Autism Awareness Month in Quebec, a moment to recognize people on the autism spectrum, their families and the communities that support them.

For me, the month is important both professionally and personally. I am the Member of the National Assembly for D'Arcy-McGee and the Quebec Liberal Party's critic for people on the autism spectrum. I am also the mother of a son on the autism spectrum. Like many parents, I didn't learn about autism from government plans or policy frameworks. I learned about it by navigating schools, services, waiting lists and transitions.

This is a provincial election year, and as the Quebec Liberal Party develops our electoral platform, know that I will be working with my party to include policies and programs that promote inclusion and provide increased services for our special needs children.

If the Quebec Liberal Party were to be elected in October, our new leader Charles Milliard has committed to holding a Summit on Education, bringing together the many actors concerned to review the way that the government approaches education. Of course, the issue of special needs students will be an important part of the discussion. The last time such an exercise was done by the Quebec government is over 30 years ago. Our education system deserves more than the status quo; it is time for a real conversation about where we are and where we need to go.

As a parent, I know that autism is not something to be "fixed." My son is not defined by a diagnosis. He is defined by who he is – his personality, his strengths, his challenges, his future. Public policies should start from that same place: respect, dignity and opportunity.

Autism is a spectrum, and public policy must reflect that reality. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work, and that's where English school boards excel in customizing their approaches. In classrooms across the Greater Montreal area, teachers, support staff, professionals and administrators are doing extraordinary work – often quietly, always with care – to ensure that students with autism and other special needs can learn, grow to their potential and belong.

Stable funding, access to specialized, professional, timely assessments and ongoing training for educators are not luxuries; they are essential tools that allow schools to build on the excellent work they are already doing.

Progress is possible. Community organizations, educators, clinicians, and families do remarkable work every day – often despite limited resources. The government must be a reliable partner, not another obstacle.

While the 2026-2027 Quebec budget includes investments in education infrastructure and initiatives to support student success, it does not provide dedicated funding for children with autism or targeted measures to reduce waitlists and expand respite services. Families and advocates continue to wait for concrete support, and schools still need the resources to fully meet the needs of students with special needs. The government must ensure that every child can thrive, not just in general education, but with the specific services they require. ■

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

Des projets artistiques inclusifs à l'Opéra de Montréal

par *Simon Phaneuf*

Pierre Vachon travaille comme directeur de l'Action sociale et de l'éducation pour l'Opéra de Montréal depuis 2016.

Il développe une approche humaine, depuis près de 10 ans, grâce à ses rencontres avec les communautés marginalisées.

M. Vachon veut créer des projets de co-création artistiques inclusifs et accessibles.

Il collabore avec différents partenaires, comme le CHU Sainte-Justine, pour des projets reliés à la santé et au bien-être des jeunes, et la Gang à Rambrou pour des projets de diversité et d'inclusion.

Pour lui, l'opéra doit devenir un levier de transformation sociale dans la communauté montréalaise. Comment? En permet-

tant à des personnes à mobilité réduite de s'exprimer à travers l'art.

« Je me suis entretenu avec la psychiatre Patricia Garel pour créer le premier projet Espace Transition [à l'Opéra] en 2018 », raconte-t-il. Ce programme a été développé en collaboration avec les équipes soignantes du CHU Sainte-Justine. Il regroupe une dizaine de personnes de 15 à 25 ans aux prises avec des troubles de santé mentale, et il vise à favoriser leur réintégration sociale.

Guidés par des professionnels

« Avec une librettiste, on prend une œuvre à l'opéra de Montréal et on la réécrit », détaille M. Vachon. Les participants sont guidés par des professionnels de l'Opéra de Montréal. Ils travaillent sur chaque aspect de la pièce en question, afin de se l'approprier et créer une adaptation libre. Ils manient les paroles, certains extraits



Participants du projet l'Espace Transition à l'Opéra en mai 2025, dans la production Mimi et les artistes, inspirée de *La bohème* de Giacomo Puccini. Photo courtoisie de l'Opéra de Montréal (crédit : Kevin Calixte)



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musicaux, dans le but de raconter leur propre histoire.

Chaque représentation est ouverte au public, et le tout permet aux participants de s'évader de leur quotidien.

L'Opéra: un outil de transformation

M. Vachon collabore avec la Gang à Rambrou depuis 2019. Cet organisme regroupe une cinquantaine d'adultes autistes et d'adultes avec une déficience intellectuelle. « Ils organisaient déjà un spectacle musical par an. Je leur ai proposé de joindre nos forces pour créer un spectacle en lien avec l'opéra! »

La création de pièces musicales permet à toutes les personnes de s'épanouir et d'oublier leur(s) handicap(s). L'opéra devient ainsi un outil de transformation. « Les projets que nous créons ont une forte portée sociale qui permet aux gens d'exprimer leur créativité, de s'accrocher à la vie et retrouver leur dignité », expose M. Vachon.

Les projets de co-création permettent d'eux de produire des œuvres originales.

« Nos collaborations offrent un mélange intéressant. Les participants apportent leur fraîcheur et leur naïveté, tandis que les professionnels apportent leur technique et leur expertise, ce qui crée une œuvre unique. »

L'art est un outil rassembleur dont les retombées sont immédiates. C'est ce qu'a constaté Pierre Vachon au fil des années.

« Les gens s'accrochent au projet et reviennent de semaine en semaine. Ça permet d'éviter la dépression et de briser l'isolement. »

M. Vachon souhaite viser un public plus large. « J'aimerais sensibiliser les prisonniers et les femmes battues dans les refuges où l'opéra devient un sujet de conversation et de sensibilisation à des enjeux sociaux », dit-il.

Il espère aussi joindre plusieurs hôpitaux, partout au Québec, pour poursuivre et mettre en œuvre d'autres projets dans le domaine de la santé. *Chantons ! Pour prendre soin de nous* est le plus récent projet mis en œuvre pour dissiper le brouillard cérébral des patients en oncologie par le chant. ■

Inside *Love on the Spectrum*: The reality series now in its 4th season

by *Ishini Fernando*

The search for love is universally challenging; it's often overwhelming, occasionally soul-crushing, but ultimately hopeful. For those on the autism spectrum, dating presents additional challenges, from navigating social cues to managing sensory sensitivities in typical date settings. *Love on the Spectrum*, the award-winning U.S. edition of the Australian reality show based on the same name, premiered on Netflix in 2022 and focuses on exactly these experiences.

Created by Cian O'Clery and Karina Holden, the series offers an intimate look at the love lives of several autistic people, with some cast members stepping into the dating world for the very first time. In an era of heavily produced reality television filled with manufactured drama, *Love on the Spectrum* stands out for exposing

genuine moments and real vulnerability between people. The series also highlights the supportive roles of family and friends while exploring each cast member's unique personality, dreams and desires.

Bobby Salomon, a former Montrealer, Lower Canada College alumnus and McGill University graduate and now based in Los Angeles, was a senior producer on Season 1 of the show. While he initially had some reservations about the project having seen first-hand how exploitive some reality series can be, his concerns dissolved after watching the Australian version and learning about the concept. "It was the perfect blend of heart, drama and humour, which matches my sensibilities. At that point, I desperately wanted to be part of the U.S. version."

Much of Salomon's work involved connecting with potential participants and the broader neurodivergent community via videoconference calls, what he describes as his favourite moments. "Each conversation was different and special at the same time. I learned so much from all of them," he said. Building trust was important, he explained, and the team emphasized safety, respect and participant comfort at every step.

Salomon's time on the show also reshaped his understanding of neurodiversity; he came to appreciate the different ways people process the world. He believes the series challenges assumptions, particularly the misconception that all neurodivergent people are uninterested in romantic relationships.

With a Canadian edition of the show now underway, Salomon sees the expansion as a natural next step, one that not only reflects the growing appetite for the series but also offers a chance to highlight the cultural nuances between Canadian and American approaches to healthcare, social support and community.

Beyond *Love on the Spectrum*, Salomon is focused on projects rooted in empathy and resilience. His podcast, *Mindframe: Where Shift Happens*, explores stories of people overcoming trauma and supports a non-profit he is building around healing and community. He is also developing film and TV projects including a series inspired by quadriplegic ER doctor Dr. Dinesh Palipana, while completing a master's degree in clinical psychology. ■

Graphic novel tells story of marathon

by *Roanne Weisman*

If you've ever wanted to run a marathon, now's your chance, and you don't even have to leave your house. An exciting new behind-the-scenes book called *RUN: The Making of a Graphic Novel* will be released in May, and the authors have described the process of working on this project as a "marathon."

As a way to fundraise for the production of the complete graphic novel, authors Bradley Heaven and Daniel O'Connor along with writer Andrew Katz and illustrator Antonio Luzano are inviting fans to buy a signed and numbered copy of the behind-the-scenes book on Kickstarter until June 5. The "making-of" is a sneak peek into the creative partnership and friendship that created the book, in what Katz described as life-changing for them all. It will have exclusive content, sketches, and story boards.

Here's the story: Heaven and O'Connor met when O'Connor became Heaven's inte-

gration aide at John Rennie High School (Lester B. Pearson School Board). Heaven has dyskinetic cerebral palsy and is non-verbal. He could participate in running meets and soccer-baseball by using a wheelchair as well as an adaptive walker. Heaven uses eye-tracking technology to communicate. When he has no access to the device, he uses eye blinks and head movements to signal letters in order to create words in a complex and personalized communication method that he and O'Connor developed together. They joke that moving his head down is like Heaven hitting the space bar on a keyboard.

In the years that followed, their relationship became more than student and aide.

They became best friends. They also came to realize how much it was possible to achieve together. After Heaven graduated from Dawson College, he and O'Connor founded a non-profit called All Access Life, which helps people with disabilities find the best adaptive equipment.

But they wanted to do more. In the fall of 2020, they decided to run the Montreal marathon (42.2 km) the following fall. They trained for a year, raised money on social media and assembled a support team. The plan was for O'Connor to push Heaven in an adaptive jogging stroller for the first 40 km and then transfer him to his adaptive walker. Heaven would run the final 2.2 km on his

own. That distance was over twice what he had ever run in his life, and O'Connor had never run anything close to 42 km before. Running that distance meant they would have to plan Heaven's food and hydration carefully. They would also have to use their specialized communication method during the race.

When the Covid-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of the Montreal marathon, they refused to give up their dream. They signed up for the Lachine half marathon in October and in order to complete a full marathon, they planned to run their own half marathon in the dark to get to the start of the half marathon before start time.

So, what happened? Did Heaven and O'Connor achieve their goal? If you want to find out the answer, you will need to read *RUN: The Making of a Graphic Novel*, which recounts the "marathon" journey to create and publish the book. For every book sold, the authors will donate \$1 to March of Dimes Canada. ■



The collector's poster from *RUN: The Making of a Graphic Novel*.

C'est ma sœur: A timeless love story on sisterhood

by Samara O'Gorman



Source: imdb.com; credit: Charlotte Rainville and Zacharie Lavertu

In her latest short film, *C'est ma sœur* (*That's My Sister*), Montreal-based filmmaker Zoé Pelchat continues her artistic streak of coming-of-age, character-driven storytelling. Following the success of her drama *Gaby les collines*, Pelchat returned to the Berlin International Film Festival this past February with her new 14-minute short film that navigates inclusivity and the harsh realities of social prejudice.

The film follows Camille (Florence Saint-Yves), a young woman with Down syndrome who has a sole goal during the summer: to join a dance company. Having spent months alone in her room perfecting her choreography, she enters an audition room with confidence and determination. Accompanying her is her younger sister, Agathe (Anne Florence), who has put her own life on hold to chaperone Camille.

Pelchat aimed to capture Agathe's obligation as one where affection and the burden of care intertwine.

The chemistry between Saint-Yves and Florence is the film's heartbeat. Saint-Yves portrayed Camille's courage flawlessly, while Florence's character arc from a distracted sister to an empowered advocate provides the film with a unique, cathartic power. Filmed by Vincent Gonneville in September 2025, the entirety of the short was shot on 16mm. This gave the project a rich, warm and highly relatable visual language that almost transcended time. As the audience, we couldn't tell what era the film took place in, but it didn't matter; the ambiguity is exactly what enhances the story. "To tell this story, I wanted to create a luminous and imperfect world by capturing the two sisters on film, in a suburb

suspended in time. I wanted to present Camille's character as the sun of the film, Agathe as the moon, and for there to be an exchange of light between the two..." said Pelchat.

C'est ma sœur is more than just a film about discrimination and the complexities of sisterhood. As Pelchat notes, "... it's a love story." The screenplay, which feels deeply personal and authentic, was written by Léalie Ferland Tanguay, who drew from her own family's experiences. Tanguay wanted to focus on the "subtle discrimination" that is often overlooked in broader society today. When speaking about the characters that Tanguay created, Pelchat shared, "...I hope that people will be touched by them and recognize themselves in the complex and moving bond they share." ■

The healing power of art: The MMFA's Sharing the Museum program

by Randy Pinsky

Art can connect people, spark conversations and heal when other things can't, shared Louise Giroux, educational programs officer at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA). The impact of art on well-being has always been the inspiration behind the Sharing the Museum art participation initiative for local community groups since its launch in 1999. From breaking social isolation to learning new skills, thousands have benefited from the program, expanding from troubled youth and seniors to those with Alzheimer's and special needs.

According to the program's mission statement, "[Sharing the Museum]...has earned worldwide recognition for its cultural mediation model aimed at promoting accessibility and inclusion for diverse publics." This approach is defined by Montreal non-profit Culture Pour Tous as a means for "building new connections between people and culture ... ranging from audience-development activities to participatory and community art."

Originally called "Bridging Art and the Community," the museum aims to reach vulnerable individuals with guided

tours and art workshops. According to the American Alliance of Museums, the MMFA was inspired by British cultural organizations that had discovered the key role that engaging in art could have on personal development and social cohesion.

Sharing the Museum's objective is three-fold; "to awaken curiosity, learn about art, and spend time together," as stated on the website.

Giroux has held different positions at the MMFA since joining 28 years ago but shared how "the wellness program has always been a passion of mine. The activities are great to solicit the senses, engage – or just be."

As a connoisseur of art, she recognizes the impact it has had for many. Regular visits build a community for those without one and are often the only reason they leave the house. "Art can play many roles," she said in an interview with *Inspirations*. "It can be calming, unsettling, triggering yet healing."

According to the MMFA site, the museum is the first in Canada to dedicate a physical space to art and health programs and one of the first to employ a full-time

art therapist. It has partnered with over 400 non-profits and community groups, working with seniors, people struggling with eating disorders or dementia, as well as individuals with disabilities.

Among these is Up House, a self-described "strength-based, restorative community of people" dealing with mental health challenges. "I have often found art and culture to be a universal language to bring people together," said its director Lisa Bellevue. "Regularly going to the museum has really contributed to our members' journeys and recovery."

Autisme sans limites (ASL) is another participating organization. Visits are enhanced with the museum's Sensational Supplies Packs, which are filled with textured objects, noise-cancelling headphones and fidget toys (see the article in Spring 2022, p. 39). Facilitators also visually explain the process of visiting a museum to reduce the anxiety of the unknown. These accommodations help clients "build more adaptability and to be able to better navigate new environments and experiences," said ASL intervention worker Inès Anane. "They feel welcomed as they are."



A participant from Autisme sans limites taking part in an art workshop as part of the Sharing the Museum program. Photo courtesy of Autisme sans limites

Through demonstrating the power of connection fostered by art participation, Giroux hopes more museums will replicate this model so that others can equally benefit. ■

The Art Hive inclusive art studio is open twice a week.

Info: www.mbam.qc.ca/en/education/sharing-the-museum

Alink's PODS creating homes, building skills

by *Wendy Singer*

A housing initiative spearheaded by Alink Foundation with community partners is creating independent living opportunities for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and neurodiverse individuals.

Using the PODS (Planned Opportunities for Development and Support) model, Alink's first cohort of four young adults now live independently in the Arlene Fels Housing pod, renting two units on the same floor of a regular apartment building. All work during the day and share an educator, who provides support related to household tasks like cooking and cleaning, and also scheduling, hygiene and providing emotional support.

Harriet Sugar Miller, co-founder and president of Alink, describes the PODS model as a practical way to help people who are seeking independence but still need some guidance. "Most people with developmental disabilities have low to moderate support needs," she explained. "These are the people we're trying to help."

On February 6, Alink celebrated this initiative at a Lunch and Launch at the Gelber Conference Centre with community partners and advocates. It marked the beginning of Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month.

Alink became a non-profit in 2018 and a registered charity in 2023. In 2019, they began working with the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux (CIUSSS) du Centre-Ouest-de-l'Île-de-Montréal and Les Maisons Kehilla to explore supportive housing options for young adults. Although early plans were delayed by changes in social housing funding, the partners pushed forward. They recently reached the milestone of signing their first housing pod agreement with the CIUSSS.

Working in collaboration with Alink are the CIUSSS, Agence Ometz and Les Maisons Kehilla. Its programs are also supported by Azrieli Foundation, Mirella and Lino Saputo Foundation, Canerector Foundation, Federation CJA and Arlene Fels.



Alink Foundation's Lunch and Launch on February 6 at the Gelber Conference Centre brought community partners together to inaugurate its housing initiative. From left, bottom row: Alan Maislin (formerly CIUSSS), Dr. Shari Joseph (CIUSSS), Ariel Mechaly (Alink), Orly Fruchter (Azrieli Foundation), Harriet Sugar Miller (Alink), Myer Bick (Azrieli Foundation), Dominique McCaughey (Azrieli Foundation) and Gary Stoopler (formerly CIUSSS); top row: Mark Demaine (CIUSSS), Michèle Bleue (formerly CIUSSS), Mary Lattas (CIUSSS), Jodi Toledano (Federation CJA), Leah Berger (Kehilla), Janice Bicher (Alink) and Naomi Mazer (Ometz). Photo courtesy of Alink Foundation

"We know that a safe, stable home can change the trajectory of someone's life," said Leah Berger, chief executive officer of Les Maisons Kehilla. "If you have the right supports, the impact is profound."

Dominique McCaughey, past chief executive officer of Agence Ometz and currently chief operating officer of the Azrieli Foundation, has been involved in the

project for several years in both roles. "One of the most breathtaking parts of this project is how it's pulled all of these partners together," she said. "Government, foundations, community organizations, committed parents and community residents. This is a model for how an inclusive community should work." ■



Report on Parliament

by *Mike Cohen*

Health minister Michel shares her views on mental health

Marjorie Michel, appointed Minister of Health after the 2025 federal election, made a wonderful impression recently when she spoke to students at John F. Kennedy High School and Adult Education Centre (of the English Montreal School Board), located in her Papineau riding.

Michel is no stranger to politics, despite being elected for the first time. Her political career began in 2016 as a policy adviser to Jean-Yves Duclos, later serving as his chief of staff. In 2019, she became the first Black chief of staff in the Trudeau government, staying on when Duclos became Treasury Board president before moving to the Prime Minister's Office.

She went on to lead the Liberal Party's Quebec operations in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections before joining Trudeau's office in 2021 and later becoming deputy campaign director of the party.

Michel is the daughter of former Haitian Prime Minister Smarck Michel, and holds a

master's degree in social work and organizational psychology from Université catholique de Louvain in Belgium.

In her talk with the students, Michel responded to a number of questions related to mental health. Asked whom they should talk to when they have a problem, she said "we need to make sure that everybody is comfortable having someone to talk to about their challenges. This person can be your teacher, parents, friend of parents or whomever. But you need to let people know when you are not feeling well so they can support you through this time. It's not a one-size-fits-all. This is what I want to say to young people: you need to feel comfortable to talk about not feeling well. It's okay because we all experience this. If you don't deal with or talk about it, this will become bigger and at a point you will collapse.

"Even though we have succeeded in opening the conversation on mental health, asking for help is not always easy, especially when in the height of crisis. The launch of the 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline was an



Marjorie Michel in the John F. Kennedy High School library in February. Photo: Mike Cohen

► *Continued on p. 34*

JDAIM talk: The hidden strengths of ADHD

by *Randy Pinsky*

Unmotivated. Disruptive. These are labels often used to describe kids with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Yet according to France Brat, co-founder of the EDYKA educational organization, this negates their hidden talents.

On February 16, the Jewish Public Library hosted the first of a series of hybrid talks on neurodiversity called “Thriving with ADHD: Unlocking Strengths and Abilities,” in honour of Jewish Disabilities Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month (JDAIM). The audience was made up of parents and educators who wanted to learn practical strategies to better help students reach their potential.

“This talk is part of our ongoing commitment to neurodiversity and inclusivity,” said library director of programming, Yael Goutard. “Thank you for being part of the change.”

EDYKA is a charitable organization focused on providing easy-to-apply resources for educators and parents. Using a variety of tips and tools, its mission is to “promote the development and academic success of young people with neurodivergent profiles.”

In the introductory video shown, one person shared, “For me, having ADHD is like watching TV, listening to music and talking to someone – all at the same time. It’s hard to know what to pay attention to.”

Since its launch in 2022, EDYKA has raised awareness about neurodiversity in close to 50 schools across Quebec, sharing tech-

niques that can be adopted both at home and in school. In addition to fostering empathy and creative solutions, they also provide schools with free neurosensory kits funded through sponsorships, including Telus, Desjardins and The Rossy Foundation. Inside, are bands to attach to chairs to rest feet on, portable bike pedals, fidget toys, timers and other concentration-enhancing tools.

EDYKA promotes simple yet impactful adaptations. Examples include placing easily distracted students near the front of the class as opposed to next to windows, which may be tempting to look out of; breaking tasks into manageable chunks or accompanying verbal instructions with visual ones. These simple changes can lead to beneficial outcomes for everyone in the classroom.

Apps and self-monitoring programs are other effective means for setting goals and tracking progress, said Brat. She endorses the speech to text option as “often, their minds work faster than their hands can write, so this can help with fewer gaps in attention.”

As promoted in their video, “Human Neurodiversity Should Be Celebrated, Not Treated as [a] Disorder,” EDYKA highlights the strengths of ADHD. The organization believes that ADHD’s signature energy and creativity can be invaluable assets in both school and in the workplace and that recognizing these strengths can help individuals with ADHD reach their potential. ■

| Info: edyka.org.

Pilot project aims to improve police engagement with autistic people

by *Sue Montgomery*

A new partnership between Giant Steps and the Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) aims to improve interactions between officers and autistic people.

Giant Steps had already been working with the Montreal police for a few years, educating new recruits during a one-day immersion course when the idea for AutSecours arose. Police officers said they wanted more information about an individual so they could be better prepared before engaging with them. Autistic adults and their families who were consulted on the program agreed it would be helpful.

The pilot project, which launched in January, invites parents of autistic children or autistic adults to fill out a form providing as much personal information as they want. The information is then uploaded to the SPVM database. Officers automatically access the information if the person involved in the intervention is in their system, providing them the information to tailor their reaction.

For now, the project is being tested solely with students from Giant Steps. “We want to go slow and make sure we’ve thought about everything, crossed all our t’s and dotted our i’s and make sure everything is working well before the police put it at large for Montreal,” said Marla Cable, assis-

tant director of Giant Steps’ Resource and Training Centre.

Cable explained that Giant Steps, which provides primary and secondary education to more than 180 autistic children and adults, had already been working with the police for a few years, training 90 new recruits annually on how to better interact with autistic people. This year, new police recruits met with Giant Steps adult education students, some of whom have already had interactions with police.

“It’s been really interesting...because [the students] are able to reflect on what happened, why, what worked well and what didn’t – and that’s really eye-opening for police officers,” she said. Some of the things the students brought up were that they needed more time and space to process information from police and not being touched by officers.

“A lot of the strategies we use with autistic people are strategies we could use with the general population because we all get stressed and anxious [during interactions] with police officers,” she said.

Autistic people and parents were part of the conversation in developing AutSecours. “I try to make sure I’m not only representing the type of student that’s here at Giant Steps but to honour the whole spectrum...,” Cable said. ■

Report on Parliament

◀ *Cont’d from p. 33*

important step in making suicide prevention resources more readily available across Canada. Support is now only three digits away. We must continue acknowledging the importance of mental health care, breaking down stigma, and working towards the care every person deserves. When Canadians are feeling good, our country is stronger.”

The minister emphasized that improving access to mental health services and support systems remains a priority for the government. She also said that for

anyone struggling with mental health challenges, they are not alone, and help is available, pointing out the government’s mental health support website. ■

Info: canada.ca/mental-health

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



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Green thumbs, big hearts

by *Randy Pinsky*

Do you need flowers for an upcoming wedding, corporate shindig or even just to brighten your home? At Posy Ferme Florale, both dahlias and opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities are in full bloom. As an urban cut-flower and green care farm, it has made its mark as a social enterprise, hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities. They are this edition's recipient of the *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award.

"Gardening has always been a big part of me," said its founder, Lucie Wade. "When I saw [the opportunity] to make a meaningful difference in the community, it was the little bit of magic I had been looking for." Growing up with a brother with an intellectual disability, Wade is sensitive to the difficulties many have in finding post-secondary employment.

"And I vowed to be a part of the solution," she said.

In the spring of 2025, Wade rented 260 square feet of space from NGO Grand Potager, which, in turn, rents the greenhouses from the city of Verdun. She joined a small community of other small businesses and citizen projects already there.

What makes Posy Ferme Florale unique is its green care farming model, where agricultural settings are designed to help marginalized people develop skills and vocational training through hands-on participation. In keeping with the theme, the current name of its green care farming program is Fleurish.

Wade's brother Harris is a co-farmer at Posy and the inspiration behind the project. "It was really important to me that he saw it as something we did together."

The name Posy is in honor of their Dutch grandmother Paula, who figured prominently in their lives. As the younger sister of a sibling who required extra support, Wade remembers experiencing a mix of emotions ranging from fierce protection and resentment, to guilt and pride. Whenever she would feel overwhelmed, her grandmother would invite her to "come take a walk in the garden with me, you can make a little posy for the table." The term also has a whimsical quality, exactly the feeling Wade was aiming for.

As a health practitioner, she added that an additional motivation was to offer a local alternative to importing flowers from



Inspirations Entrepreneurial Award winner
Posy Ferme Florale



abroad, helping to reduce exposure to chemicals and lessen the environmental footprint.

Once the space was rented, she set about recruiting her team. Through contacting the supported employment program at Agence Ometz, Wade was matched with Ellis Nassef-Goldsmith and Jessica Rawding. Both had been struggling to find a job.

"Opportunities are few and the clientele in need keeps increasing," shared Jason Goldsmith, Ellis' father and award nominator.

"Posy Ferme Florale is a model of inclusive entrepreneurship that strengthens our community," Goldsmith wrote in his nomination letter.

With almost a year experience running the cut-flower farm, Wade aims to grow her list of corporate contracts and investors in order to expand the business and employ others with an intellectual disability.

She noted there are endless benefits to working outside. These include improved physical health, enhanced psychological

well-being, and an increased sense of belonging.

"It really is a passion project," she said.

Rawding's sister Kayla has witnessed the meaningful gains firsthand. "Working at Posy has given my sister [Jessica] something truly special – a sense of purpose that continues to bloom brighter and grander every day." She added, "The farm has not only given her meaningful work – but also a place where she can shine."

Guided tours and workshops are available upon request, and Posy will be selling bouquet subscriptions in June. ■

Info: posyfermeflorale.com/fleurish-program

Nominate an amazing entrepreneur:
info@inspirationsnews.com.

*We are grateful for the support of Leyad, whose contribution helps advance our employment and entrepreneurship initiatives and inclusive employment. We thank them for their generous gift to this edition's *Inspirations* Entrepreneurial Award winner, Posy Ferme Florale.*

Dawson club ◀ *Cont'd from p. 19*

The facilitators acknowledge it can be challenging for someone to express their need for accommodations such as extended time or adapted technology whether in an academic or work setting due to concerns about the response. In fact, Pallante recalled how the energy shifted in an interview when she mentioned having an LD. While it was a process to request accommodations, Khara said she was proud of her self-advocacy as she can now do tests online.

The LD+ADHD Club works closely with Dawson's Student AccessAbility Centre. "Breanna's vision of a safe space where students can come together for support and share their stories

has proved successful," said manager Christine Lister. "We are pleased to see this group prosper for a second semester."

Pallante credits much of her resilience to the quote "If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid," an analogy for different forms of success. Having experienced doubts about her skills due to having an LD, Pallante shared she is doubly motivated to be there for the students. "Your path may be different – but you can still get to your destination." ■

Info: ldmontreal.ca/youth-club

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Galileo launches podcast focused on personal stories

In January, Galileo Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board launched its first in-house podcast, *Galileo Talks*, creating a new space for storytelling and community connection. Hosted by Marilyn Damato, an English and French teacher in the school's Academics department, the podcast hears from Montrealers who have overcome personal challenges.

"*Galileo Talks* was created to give our students, staff and community members a voice – not just as learners or educators, but as people with real stories, challenges and growth," Damato said. She partnered with a local multimedia company to help produce and promote the podcast.

Each week, Damato selects a guest whose experience reflects resilience and transformation. Episodes to date have explored

themes such as addiction recovery, grief, trauma and mental health – lived experiences that resonate deeply within the adult education community, explained Damato. The podcast prioritizes honesty and vulnerability, creating space for conversations that extend well beyond the classroom.

Damato describes her vision for *Galileo Talks* as having a dual purpose. On one hand, the podcast connects the school with the broader community by amplifying stories of perseverance. On the other hand, it serves as a hands-on learning opportunity for students, offering them real-world experience in both media production and communication.

Students are actively involved throughout the production process. They contribute as co-hosts, provide feedback following episodes, manage behind-the-scenes elements such as lighting and framing, and occasionally step in front of the camera as guests. This collaborative approach allows learners to build confidence while developing technical and interpersonal skills.

Ivan Rivas-Santamaria is one of those students. He has appeared on several episodes of *Galileo Talks* as both a guest and a co-host. For him, participating in the podcast was the right thing to do. Three years ago,

Rivas-Santamaria was experiencing homelessness while struggling with addiction and gang involvement.

"If I can have a second chance and keep being persistent, it's possible for anyone to achieve what they put their mind to," he said.

Rivas-Santamaria says that the podcast offers a platform to share a message of hope. "It's about passing that message along through our guests and to the people watching."

Beyond skill-building, Damato hopes the podcast will help challenge common misconceptions about adult education. "Adult education is often misunderstood," she explained. "Through the podcast, we're showing that it's a space where people rebuild confidence, redefine success and find their voice."

At its core, she said *Galileo Talks* is driven by inspiration. "When students hear stories from people who look like them or have walked a similar path, learning becomes personal and more powerful. These conversations go beyond academics."

New episodes of *Galileo Talks* are released Wednesdays at 6 pm on YouTube. ■



In episode 3 of the podcast *Galileo Talks*, Marilyn Damato, teacher at Galileo Adult Education Centre, interviews student Ivan Rivas-Santamaria, who was also co-host on several other episodes. Photo: Olivia Integlia

Wagar works!

Despite the barriers that neurodivergent adults continue to face in the labour market, the belief at Wagar, an adult education centre with the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), is that neurodivergent people have many abilities, strengths and attributes that would enhance any work environment.

The Sociovocational Integration (SVI) program at Wagar has over 100 semi-skilled trades for its students to pick from, and empowers individuals to work, earn and belong by focusing on meaningful employment. Our students can try different types of employment and cultivate the soft skills necessary for successful work integration.

Most recently, Wagar SVI students have partnered up with Moisson Montréal to gain real-world work experience and

develop a variety of skills, such as communication, teamwork, time management and problem-solving, as well as hands-on skills such as food processing, sorting, packaging and taking inventory. Students have successfully gained competitive employment in inclusive and supportive companies like Lufa Farms, CBS Maintenance, Merenda, the Rose Bowl and most recently SurgMed.

Over the years, Wagar's job coach has acquired a variety of placements and training opportunities for our students. They first visit each potential worksite to do a workplace and skills assessment. The job coach then establishes the environmental needs, tasks and physical demands of the job, and then matches them with student skillset, interest and ability. They also negotiate for accommodation if needed, support students to advocate for their needs and

sensitize employers and coworkers to inclusive practices.

Wagar also has placements within the EMSB with cafeteria services and with Inspirations, as well as a range of community placements in technology-related industries, furniture making and finishing, restaurants, daycares, bakeries, landscaping, dog grooming, equipment management, general maintenance, and door and window assembly, to name a few. ■

Jennifer Campbell is a special education consultant with Adult Education and Vocational Services, and Tyler Wood is a Sociovocational Integration job coach at Wagar Adult Education Centre, both with the English Montreal School Board.

by *Jennifer Campbell and Tyler Wood*

Wagar, Miriam Foundation partner up

Wagar Adult Education Centre services adult learners in a vast array of environments. One of its newer initiatives is The Social Skills Program, also known as The Supper Club, which has been created in partnership with the Miriam Foundation, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities by providing resources, programs and services. Two evenings per week, neurodivergent students of all ages come together to socialize, learn and share a meal. The program is facilitated by two support staff and a cook provided by the Miriam Foundation and a teacher from Wagar. The program fosters a sense of belonging, enhances personal and social skills and builds connections.

– Jennifer Campbell

Capable Média : une vitrine pour les personnes en situation de handicap

par *Simon Phaneuf*

Depuis qu'elle a accepté sa surdité en 2018, Kim Auclair déborde d'ambition et de projets. Elle travaille comme consultante en relations de presse et elle a créé sa propre émission web en 2024, suivant un partenariat avec l'Office des personnes handicapées du Québec.

« J'ai collaboré avec eux pour plusieurs projets. Ils m'ont demandé d'animer la saison 1 de *Capable, entreprendre sans limites* par la suite », se souvient-elle.

Donner une voix

Mme Auclair met beaucoup d'énergie dans la création de son émission. Elle souhaite accorder une place plus importante aux personnes handicapées dans les médias. « Je pense que *Capable* peut être un moteur important pour régler beaucoup de problèmes dans la société », dit-elle.

La majorité des personnes en situation de handicap peinent à trouver un emploi. Grâce à son projet, Mme Auclair veut mettre de l'avant les compétences des gens aux prises avec un handicap invisible ou visible et leur donner une voix : « Mon but est de créer un espace où ils peuvent se sentir utiles et libres d'exprimer leur talent. »

Capable est devenu un média à part entière au fil des années. Mme Auclair a développé trois formats différents : *Capable en conversation*, *Capable en mouvement* et *Capable - avec Kim Auclair* l'émission web (autrefois *Capable, entreprendre sans limites*). Elle explique : « *Capable en conversation* permet de réaliser des entrevues à distance pour répondre à une question spécifique. *Capable en mouvement* est un format utilisé pour réaliser des entrevues lors de conférences ou d'événements, et l'émission web *Capable, entreprendre sans limites* est le format principal. »

Mme Auclair développe sa confiance et sa débrouillardise grâce à ses démarches. Son travail acharné lui rapporte beaucoup de fierté.

Elle se réjouit de la portée de son message. Pour elle, *Capable* est bien plus qu'un balado. C'est un projet qui se fait chaque année avec l'aide de partenaires engagés. « Il rassemble une multitude d'acteurs importants : des organismes sans but lucratif, des personnes handicapées et des acteurs économiques. Ce sont des gens qui se rejoignent peu, habituellement », dit-elle.

Summit School, Aldo Group join forces to bolster inclusive workplaces

by *Paul Karwatsky*

There is a moment that Carolyne Johnston, job coach with Summit School's Empower Initiative, has witnessed more times than she can count. A young person steps into a new workplace for the very first time, wide-eyed, a little nervous, not entirely sure what to expect. Then, over the course of their placement, that same person begins moving through the warehouse with growing confidence, working independently, head down and focused. "When a student has a couple of internships under their belt, you can just see the shift," Johnston said. "It's like, okay, I can do this. I know I can do this."

That journey is at the heart of the partnership between the Aldo Group and Summit School's Empower Initiative, a job-training program for neurodiverse young adults between the ages of 16 and 21. Summit's model pairs each student with a dedicated



Kim Auclair lors du tournage de la saison 2 en 2025 à Nomad TV, qui est situé au Centre d'entrepreneuriat Alphonse-Desjardins Shawinigan. Photo courtoisie de K. Auclair

Une représentation diversifiée

Mme Auclair souhaite dépeindre une représentation diversifiée des gens en situation de handicap. Elle met l'accent sur l'importance, pour chacun et chacune, de créer ses propres occasions professionnelles. « On va parler d'emploi, d'employabilité, du parcours professionnel d'athlètes paralympiques ou de ceux qui entreprennent [un projet] pour leur survie », dit-elle.

Elle mise sur la débrouillardise et l'autonomie des participants. « Je ne vais pas dans le sensationnalisme. Mon but est

de montrer les compétences et l'autonomie des gens », affirme Kim Auclair.

La saison 3 est synonyme de changement pour Mme Auclair. *Capable, entreprendre sans limites* sera renommé *Capable, avec Kim Auclair* après deux saisons d'une dizaine d'épisodes. Son objectif principal? Augmenter sa visibilité en ligne. « Cette année, j'aimerais produire la saison 3 et développer des ententes à long terme avec d'autres commanditaires », conclut-elle. ■

on-site job coach, providing the guidance needed for success and allowing partner businesses to easily benefit from their skills.

This school year, students were placed within Aldo's sample management department, and within three weeks, they were working fully autonomously. Since the partnership began in 2024, four students have attended internships at Aldo.

"It goes above being simply socially responsible. It's about creating a workplace where everyone can thrive and find their fit," said Ariane Cardi-Dubois, manager of Sample Management at the Aldo Group. "Curiosity runs through everything we do at Aldo. "Try everything" is basically our motto, and our neurodivergent interns embody that spirit." For Cardi-Dubois, one moment stood out in particular: "Jeremiah was a huge sneaker fan, and his excitement for

the product resonated with the whole team. It's not just about skills. They bring passion too."

According to Statistics Canada's Canadian Survey on Disability (2017), only 33 percent of autistic adults in Canada are employed, compared to an employment rate of roughly 80 percent for the general working-age population.

"We are asking Montreal's business community to stop treating inclusion as a gesture and start treating it as a strategy," said Herman Erdogmus, director general of Summit School. "The students are ready. The only thing missing is the next company willing to open its doors." ■

Paul Karwatsky is a communications consultant at Summit School.

Scoring confidence with every kick: The NDG Lions

by *Randy Pinsky*

If you passed by behind the Mackay Centre School last summer, you might have chanced upon the NDG Lions adapted soccer team at practice. More than just an opportunity to run around, “We do real soccer,” said board member Nancy Ho.

The Lions recreational Adaptive Soccer Program is designed for kids between the ages of 8 to 18 with a variety of intellectual disabilities or on the autism spectrum. Launched in June 2025, it started with a loyal core of participating families and now has a waitlist. This summer, the program will run out of a field in Côte-des-Neiges.

As “one of the driving forces behind inclusion at NDG-CDN Soccer,” as noted on the NDG Soccer Association Facebook page, Ho’s mantra “Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t” has helped make the NDG Lions a reality.

It has also been made possible due to former professional soccer player and

head coach Michel Mazloum, who has a background in both physical education and special needs. “He always finds a way to make things work,” shared one mom, whose autistic son Jonah has been a part of the NDG Lions since the beginning.

According to Coach Michel, “To me, there is nothing that can limit you in sports – sometimes you need to adapt the equipment, but it’s all possible.” Aside from additional time for drills and illustrative pictograms, he said little is different from a mainstream recreational team. He added, “I want every kid to feel they can be athletes versus just doing sports for fun.”

Beyond technical skills such as passing and dribbling, there are numerous intangible benefits. These include emotional regulation, learning adaptability and spontaneity, as well as teamwork and losing graciously. Thanks to the soccer practices, Jonah “gets ‘stuck’ less now,” said his mom, and he recently had his first ever playdate. She added that while he also does a swimming program and adapted hockey, he has gained the most from the NDG Lions due to the quality of sports instruction.



The team gears up for practice on the field behind Mackay Centre School in July 2025. Photo courtesy of NDG Lions (credit: Tim Chin)

Ho observed that beyond improving on technique and self-confidence, the team is also challenging assumptions about ability. When watching a game, she recalled thinking, “My gosh, they have gotten good!” Some of the more advanced players have even been recommended to Special Olympics Quebec.

She encourages other centres to consider creating similar types of programs. “We are proof that it is possible – and that it works.” ■

Info: ndgsa.ca/pages/ndg-lions

Zéro Limite builds up inclusive sports offering in Montreal’s East End

by *Olivia Integlia*

When Angela D’Amico was let go because of cuts at her workplace, she saw it as an opportunity to pursue a dream she never thought possible.

The mother of two noticed a lack of sports opportunities for children with disabilities in Montreal’s East End. When her first son was diagnosed with autism, she struggled to find programs nearby.

It was then that her husband encouraged her to develop an inclusive sports-based program. This was the perfect time to try out something she never had time for before, she remembers thinking at the time.

The idea came first, and the name came second. “I chose the name Zéro Limite be-

cause I believe that special needs kids have zero limits; they’re unstoppable.”

Designed for individuals on the autism spectrum or those with special needs, the organization provides a space for participants to take part in basketball, soccer and hockey. D’Amico adds that there is no age limit, noting that one participant is 43 years old.

Interest in the program quickly took off. There were 22 participants who signed up during the first session, D’Amico recalled.

Each session lasts one hour, during which participants complete sports drills and play various games to keep activities accessible, D’Amico explained.

Zéro Limite also allows individuals to develop social skills in addition to staying active.

“The participants learn each other’s names, and they become friends,” she said, adding that she feels “blessed” to see her son share the same experiences as his brother. “Yes, they’re moving and they’re playing, but they are also interacting with each other and building their self-esteem.”

The sessions are held in the gymnasium at the Complexe Sportif Marie-Victorin, which is near a coffee shop. “The parents get to have an hour for themselves, to enjoy themselves, reconnect with their partner or friends, knowing that their child is safe and having fun.”

While parents may choose to sit in on their child’s session, D’Amico is sure to take plenty of pictures and videos to show them the progress afterwards.

D’Amico continues to dream big. In April, she was planning to introduce swimming classes alongside a specialized trainer. She hopes to eventually create a centre for children with special needs that offers a variety of activities, including cooking and other everyday classes, lasting several hours or even running as an overnight program on weekends – something she says would benefit both children and parents alike. ■

Advertorial

The Segal Centre is cultivating a hit: Why *Grow* is the must-see musical of the season

by *Samara O’Gorman*



The Segal Centre for Performing Arts will conclude its 2025/2026 season this spring with an exciting, fresh musical titled *Grow*. The Canadian showcase is scheduled to run from May 24 to June 14, 2026, and it represents a significant milestone for the city’s theatre scene, as it is backed by the creative influence of Michael Rubinoff, the original producer of the global phenomenon *Come From Away*.

The story follows two 19-year-old twins, Hannah and Ruth, who leave their sheltered community for the first time to set out on their ‘Rumspringa,’ a traditional rite of passage for Amish youth. Their big city adventure in the modern world quickly takes an unexpected turn, and their green thumbs land them an unlikely partnership with a cannabis dispensary owner. What happens next is a comedic and vibrant production accompanied by a breathtaking score by Colleen Dauncey and Akiva Romer-Segal.

Directed and choreographed by Tracey Flye, the show features some beloved local Montreal actors, including Jake Cohen, who is proud to be part of the team bringing *Grow* to life. “It’s not every day that us Montrealers get to see brand new musicals come to life in our hometown on this scale,” shares Cohen. “The show is legit funny, well-written, and good luck getting the tunes out of your head.”

Written by Matt Murray, the musical’s fast-paced and witty narrative was originally developed at the Segal Centre many years ago when Artistic and Executive Director Lisa Rubin offered a studio space for Murray, Colleen and Akiva to work on the first draft of the show together. It’s a full circle moment for the team, and Rubin has already expressed her high expectations for the show: “Mark my words, you’ll be proud to say you saw it first in Montreal when it takes Broadway by storm.”

The theatre is committed to accessibility and is offering a live ASL interpretation of the show on Saturday, June 6, 2026, at 7:30 p.m. The theatre is also offering two audio-described performances on Sunday, June 7, 2026, at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Their audio-described performances include a Touch Tour before the show, where knowledgeable guides will assist you and provide descriptive information about the elements you encounter. The tours take place at 12 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, June 7, 2026.

For a full list of accessibility offerings, patrons can visit segalcentre.org.

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Lachine Curling Club wheelchair program in full operation

The Lachine Curling Club is making waves in the Montreal sporting community by officially launching a dedicated adaptive junior curling program. The initiative started as a pilot project last year but is now an active program focused on ensuring that curling is accessible to everyone, regardless of physical ability.

The program’s core philosophy is simple: curling should be a sport for life and a sport for all. Both traditional and adap-

tive curling require significant physical effort. The Lachine Curling Club’s adaptive program offers three means of throwing a rock, depending on physical capacities, and it uses specialized equipment to compensate for mobility restrictions.

The club’s facilities and ice surface are prepared to accommodate wheelchair users, and for those who cannot crouch into the traditional “hack” position, specialized sticks allow players to launch the stones from a seated position. Instructors at the club are trained to work with various mobility needs, focusing on technique and strategy rather than physical strength.

Beyond the game, the program emphasizes the social importance of curling. Laurie Chambers, Jennifer Kokesch and Dan Barsanti are the program’s founders. Chambers and Kokesch highlighted the importance of the “après-curling” culture, where young players gather at the club to socialize, fostering a sense of belonging and community that is often missing in other adaptive sports, the co-founders say.

The club is actively working to expand its program by inviting new junior members to take part in a free trial. Both Kokesch and Chambers emphasize that no prior experience is needed, as the club provides all the necessary adaptive equipment for

beginners. Although the focus has been on starting a juniors program, Kokesch said they would welcome any adults who would like to give it a try.

As the Lachine Curling Club continues to strengthen its adaptive offerings, it stands as a model for other sports organizations in Quebec. “It’s a welcoming place for all curlers,” shared Chambers.

“There’s a camaraderie amongst the kids here,” said Kokesch. “All of their diagnoses and needs are different, but they are all on the ice playing the same game, enjoying it together.” ■

Info: lachinecurling.com

More than the score

by Mike Cohen

Lorenzetti Foundation’s fundraising event scores hat trick

The Barry F. Lorenzetti Foundation Cup continues to make a meaningful impact, raising vital funds for mental health initiatives while delivering a memorable on-ice experience.

The third edition of the event recently took place at the Bell Centre, followed by an elegant all-star luncheon at Maison Principale. Together, the events raised an impressive \$215,000. Representing *Inspirations* newspaper, I was pleased to be among a select group of invitees.

Michael Denham, executive vice-president and vice chair of National Bank of Canada, served as honorary chair and also suited up for Team Lorenzetti, which edged the Montreal Alouettes squad 11–9 in a spirited matchup.

Though the crowd numbered fewer than 100 spectators, the Barry F. Lorenzetti Foundation spared no effort in creating a first-class experience – particularly for corporate participants who made significant contributions for the opportunity to skate on NHL ice. The atmosphere was

authentic: long-time Canadiens public address announcer Michel Lacroix and organist Diane Bibeau were both on hand, while Beaconsfield native Brittany Kennell delivered the national anthem. Players were introduced individually and featured on the scoreboard

throughout the game, adding to the professional feel.

Lorenzetti acted as general manager for his team, with former Canadiens enforcer and mental health advocate Chris Nilan serving as head coach. On the opposing side, Alouettes GM Danny Maciocia filled the same role, while Hall of Fame quarterback Anthony Calvillo – who admitted he does not skate – took on coaching duties. Adding to the fun, mascots Youppi! and Touché entertained throughout.

The rosters featured a mix of familiar faces. Team Lorenzetti included former Canadiens Francis Bouillon, Paul Byron, Patrice Brisebois, Louis Leblanc, Sergio Momesso and P. J. Stock. The Alouettes side countered with former Canadiens Richard Sevigny, Jocelyn Thibault and Mathieu Dandenault, alongside football standouts including Byron Archambault, Louis-Philippe Bourassa, David Deschamps, Alexandre Gagné and former NHL tough guy André Roy.

Beyond the excitement on the ice, the event’s mission remains its driving force. The Barry F. Lorenzetti Foundation is dedicated to advancing mental health care by raising awareness, improving access to ser-

vices and combating stigma. Its initiatives support bereavement programs for families who have lost a child, PTSD services for veterans, hospital infrastructure upgrades and youth mental health programs for those aged 9 to 25, including transitional services into adult care. The Foundation also promotes inclusion through sports programs that provide underprivileged youth with purpose while encouraging academic success.

Nilan, who shares a close bond with Lorenzetti, was the subject of the powerful one-man show *Knuckles: The Chris Nilan Story*, produced by Lorenzetti, in which he openly discussed his struggles with mental health and addiction.

“The mission is to try and erase the stigma of mental health and asking for help,” Nilan said during the luncheon. “Too often, as a community, we are not compassionate enough. Today, we are raising money – and more importantly, getting involved.”

As for Lorenzetti, he takes immense pride in this marquee event, which continues to advance his foundation’s vital work in supporting mental health initiatives. ■

Info: fondationlorenzetti.org

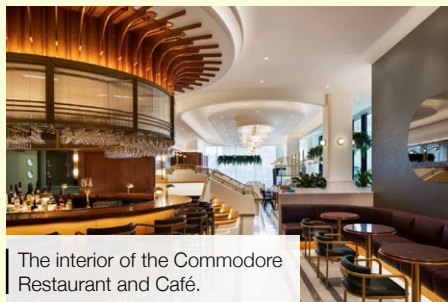


From left: Anthony Calvillo, Danny Maciocia, Susan Dabrowski, Barry Lorenzetti and Chris Nilan. Photo: Mike Cohen

Lunch at Commodore Restaurant and Café is a ‘Honeyrose’ of an experience

I recently enjoyed a sensational lunch at the French bistro-style Commodore Restaurant and Café, tucked inside the Honeyrose Hotel in Montreal’s Quartier des spectacles, just steps from Place des Arts.

The meal began with a celebratory toast over glasses of Prosecco, followed by the arrival of soft, warm bread served with a delightful “Honeyrose butter.” I started with a piping hot bowl of salmon chowder, then moved on to a perfectly



The interior of the Commodore Restaurant and Café.

grilled 10-ounce sirloin, accompanied by crispy fries, seasonal vegetables and a house-made Béarnaise sauce. For dessert, I opted for the classic crème brûlée – a fittingly elegant finish.

Open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Commodore offers seating for 55 guests in its dining room, along with an additional 36 spots on a seasonal patio. Inspired by French cuisine and infused with contemporary touches, the menu is refined and the atmosphere evokes chic 1920s elegance. The restaurant and hotel entrance are fully accessible, as are the washrooms, and the main dining level is stair-free. The restaurant is located on the same floor as the hotel entrance, which is street-level. The washrooms are in the lobby next to the restaurant.

Info: www.commodoremontreal.com

Reuben’s Deli & Steakhouse soon to celebrate 50 years

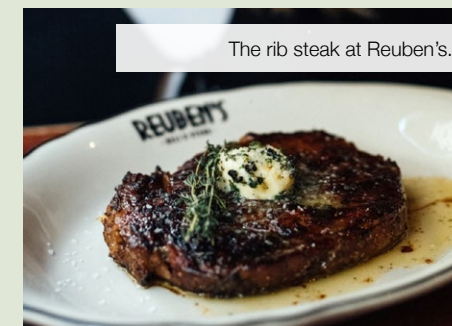
As the Tzemopoulos family prepares to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their beloved Reuben’s Deli & Steakhouse on St. Catherine St. (between Stanley and Peel) later this year, they’re making visits even more convenient by offering free indoor parking next to their sister restaurant, Deville Dinerbar, just around the corner. This offer is available seven nights a week from 4 pm to 11 pm at 1475 Stanley St.

I dined at Reuben’s on two recent occasions. On my first visit, I joined my colleague Steve for a comforting start of piping hot cream of potato soup. The sandwiches here are always a highlight. I chose the roast-beef melt with fries, while Steve enjoyed the restaurant’s famous open-faced sandwich. I paired my meal with a refreshing Stewart’s cherry cola and finished with a decadent slice of chocolate cake.

A couple of weeks later, I returned to sample their signature rib steak, which certainly lived up to expectations.

Due to ongoing construction, vehicle access to the front entrance is currently limited, though cars can still reach nearby Deville on Stanley. The restaurant offers accessible entry and a wheelchair-friendly washroom on the main floor.

Info: www.reubensdeli.com



The rib steak at Reuben’s.

Sterlings Steakhouse & Bar remains culinary delight two decades on

For over 20 years, Sterlings Steakhouse & Bar has been a cornerstone of Laval’s Centropolis complex. Founded by Vasili “Billy” Panousopoulos and now operated alongside his son Michael, the restaurant continues to impress with its polished yet welcoming atmosphere. The spacious dining room and bar can accommodate more than 300 guests, making it ideal for both casual meals and special occasions.

My friend Jesse and I began our evening with appetizers: crab cakes for me and Norwegian smoked salmon for him. For the main course, I initially had my heart set on the house specialty, rib roast beef au jus, but it had already sold out (though I returned weeks later to try it). My backup choice proved equally satisfying: a 16-ounce junior-cut rib steak, cooked to a perfect medium rare and served with crispy fries. Jesse opted for the 12-ounce filet mignon, topped with pepper sauce and flambéed with cognac.

We ended the meal on a high note, with key lime pie for me and tiramisu for Jesse – both excellent choices.

Sterlings is fully accessible, with step-free entry and accessible washrooms. Guests can be dropped off at street level, and a large nearby parking lot offers easy access via wide sidewalks.

Info: www.sterlingsrestaurant.com



The rib roast beef au jus at Sterlings.

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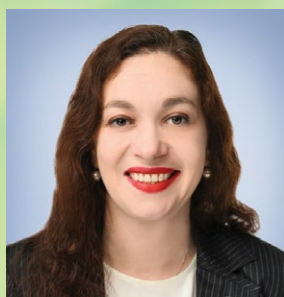
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kindness, and together
we uplift this inclusive
journey.

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vies et élève nos cœurs,
ensemble nous
soutenons ce bel élan
d'inclusion.



This edition's Simon Chang Difference Maker, Matthew Brotherwood, seen here holding his award, surrounded by his family and Simon Chang on April 28 at Chang's atelier. Photo: Joonas Horn

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