

NEIGHBOURS OF HIGH PARK

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CREATING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY: MEET WEST TORONTO KEYS

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PHOTOS BY CHRIS CABRAL



CREATING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY: MEET WEST TORONTO KEYS

BY CASSANDRA IRVING • PHOTOS BY CHRIS CABRAL

GAIL PENNINGTON'S JOURNEY AS A MOTHER HAS BEEN A CHALLENGING ONE. HER SON DAVID WAS BORN WITH TWO RARE BRAIN DISORDERS WHICH RESULTED IN BOTH PHYSICAL AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES.

When David was in his early years, Gail connected with a small group of friends who would prove formidable sources of support and guidance as David navigated through his school years. However, in his final year of high school, he had a life-threatening injury that raised a lot of questions about what life after high school would look like for him.

"His accident changed my life," Gail says. "I realized he can't go just anywhere because something may happen to him."

What does a parent with a young adult with an intellectual disability do once graduation has happened and the "normal" next step of further education or meaningful work is not available for their family member? This is the question that prompted a small group of High Park families to create Toronto West KEYS.

"KEYS facilitates meaningful neighbourhood opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities. By actively participating, engaging and working in our neighbourhood, KEYS helps to expand the awareness of the contributions to the community by persons with intellectual disabilities," explains H el ene Pauly n-Murray, president of KEYS' volunteer board of directors. Her daughter is a part of the KEYS program.

The organization was founded in 2009 by a group of engaged parents who saw a need for meaningful activities for their young adults with an intellectual disability. They created the name, KEYS, based on the idea that Knowledge plus Experience equals Your Success.

"We believe that neighbourhood opportunities for knowledge, work, volunteer and social experiences are KEYS to the successful creation



DAVID STRACHAN WITH HIS
MOM GAIL PENNINGTON

of strong, vibrant communities which include people of all abilities. Additionally, it is key that all members of our society be visible in the community – not hidden behind closed doors to become invisible,” says Hélène.

Currently, KEYS organizes several community-based work activities for adults with intellectual disabilities, including a daily Lunch n Learn program (in the Junction area) and opportunities to help out at Habitat for Humanity Re-Store, and local businesses such as Ola Day Care.

“KEYS was the perfect choice for David,” says Gail, who found out about the program from her good friend and KEYS board member Maryanne Bruni. “It is safe, supportive and I don’t have to worry.”

David’s current work placement through the KEYS program is with a local Ontario Early Years Centre.

“David is a lot of fun to work with. He always comes equipped with a smile and a fantastic work ethic. He is a very welcome addition to our Tuesday afternoon team, and we’re very happy to have him working with us,” says Christian Morgan of the Ontario Early Years Child Development Centre.

Other local business owners say their experience with KEYS adults is positive.

“It is a pleasure to have Sean working in the store. He comes in happy and proud to wear his Home Hardware red shirt, and helps keep our store clean and organized,” says Len McAuley, owner of Pollocks Home Hardware on Roncesvalles.

Laura-Jean Bernhardson, CEO and Founder of the Fresh Collective, says that when the community comes together to involve and empower adults with intellectual disabilities, everyone wins.



“It’s important that small businesses add to the community in every way possible. Working with KEYS and having Maxine as part of our team is an easy and fun way to honour that commitment in a way that we didn’t even know of before being asked to participate. Maxine’s big smile is contagious and it feels good to know we’re part of her weekly routine providing her a chance to learn and develop new skills with us.”

“All of this community experience and involvement grows the KEYS’ participants’ skills, and opens the minds of all families and neighbours who attend these businesses and services, to the potential and positive contributions people of all abilities can make,” says Hélène.

Many local residents are ardent supporters of the KEYS initiative. Ralph Awrey, affectionately known by his neighbours as the “King of Geoffrey Street”, and his wife “Saint Joan” help spread awareness and raise



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funds for the organization. For the last five years, Ralph has grown either a moustache, a beard or a goatee and asked neighbours, for a fee, to guess the best look-a-like to a known celebrity. Ralph and Joan then match all donations.

“Many High Park residents have gotten involved financially through donations or by offering volunteer work in local businesses, leading workshops, leading drumming and story-telling sessions or being a celebrity chef. There are many possibilities for residents to be involved with KEYS, and we are very grateful to our regular volunteers who provide support, instruction and guidance,” says H  l  ne.

“I treasure my volunteer role at West Toronto KEYS. The participants are challenged and supported in a program filled with cooking, art, music, excursions and opportunities for expression and friendship. I feel honoured to be part of this magnificent group of young adults,” says volunteer Sue Gavarkovs.

“My son today, as opposed to four years ago, is a totally different person. He has met friends, has fun and is learning life skills. My whole attitude is let’s just keep doing what he’s interested in and keep him where he’s safe,” concludes Gail.

For more information, email keystoinclude@gmail.com, website www.westtorontokeys.com or Facebook (West Toronto KEYS).



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