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VOLUNTEERS: “PARTNERS ALONG THE PATH TO POTENTIAL”
by Annette Urban

“Partners along the path to potential” is the vision statement of Pathways Health Centre for Children, a treatment facility for those with physical, developmental and communication needs. The therapeutic recreation programs give opportunities to our clients to become the best that they can be. The volunteers involved have certainly proven themselves to be “partners” extraordinaire! Representing all ages, abilities and skills, their participation, interest and support lend significant value to our activities.

Friday Night Junction provides teens with social challenges with the opportunity to be independent by expanding social networks and building social confidence with peers in a non-threatening, accepting environment. Volunteers are teens/young adults who serve as role models. They communicate with clients on the same level, talk about high school issues and give feedback with age-appropriate ideas. The volunteers have as much fun as the clients and are excited to be there. A typical session is having fun for an hour in the therapeutic pool, followed by watching a video. On other occasions, they have gone to a hockey game or held a dance.

In the summers, clients aged six through 12 are involved in Striker Soccer, a community-based program. The volunteers (two teens, a university student and a “young-at-heart” grandfather) make learning the sport a fun activity. It is also a non-threatening environment because the volunteers have the attitude that it is OK not to know how to do something. They serve as mentors by giving appropriate feedback and encouragement.

According to Amy Spadafora, the staff Therapeutic Recreation Specialist overseeing the program, the volunteers “make the program”. In the 12 weeks of the program, not one volunteer was absent. At the end, one volunteer decided she wanted to make certificates for all the participants. They also handed out trophies and had their pictures taken with teammates. Their smiles were just as wide as those of the players!

In the therapeutic pool, volunteers work one on one with children under the direction of lifeguards/instructors. By giving individual attention, they help the children to become comfortable in the water. There are two types of swim programs in which volunteers are involved.

Teens assist in the after school programs, teaching the school-aged children to learn the different levels of swimming skills. In Lil' Splashers, the volunteers are mainly seniors, working with preschool-aged children. Most volunteers have been involved with this program for a number of years. When asked what they like most, the reply is "seeing the progress the child makes over time". The sessions are geared specifically to other therapies the child receives in other parts of the building. For example, "Get Writing" is for children who come for occupational therapy and have hand/eye co-ordination challenges. In the pool, volunteers use Magna Doodles, toys and shapes to supplement the therapy in an aquatic, fun environment.

Pathways has developed a partnership with the city of Sarnia and the local centre for the arts to create a one-of-a-kind program, "The Garbage Can Connection". Our clients, eight to 13 years old, have the opportunity to experience an art "adventure", decorating brand new garbage cans, which are then displayed as pieces of art. An artistic teen volunteer supports the participants in their creation, giving positive direction and allowing them to see their potential.

Volunteers have also helped with a horseback-riding program at stables in a neighbouring community. Tom Saul of Tomlynn Acres acknowledged that without their support, the program would not operate. The teen volunteers had the experience of owning their own horses. The adult volunteers were retired elementary and secondary school teachers. They each brought their expertise to help make the experience a safe and enjoyable one for the participants. During 2000, 2003 and 2007, the ParaProvincial "Games for the Disabled" took place in Sarnia, Ontario. More than 100 volunteers of all ages assisted each year with all aspects of the games. They came away with an appreciation for what these athletes can achieve.

These are just some examples of sports and leisure programs and events that our volunteers have helped make possible. Volunteering gives opportunities to the teens/young adults to learn and practice skills they will need later in their careers, such as with children or as health care professionals. Adults continue to learn with each child, program and experience. The clients learn to develop and enjoy skills in different areas that will last a lifetime.

Dave Schaller, a Therapeutic Recreation Specialist and Manager of Family and Community Services at Pathways, states that, "because these volunteers now have an awareness of the abilities of our clients, they become great role models themselves in the community and often advocate for the rights of people with disabilities – a win-win situation for all involved!" With the proper screening and training, our volunteers are truly "partners along the path to potential".

Annette Urban has an honours degree in English from Loyola University, Chicago. She is a life-time member of its honour society, Alpha Sigma Nu, with the mandate to use "knowledge in the service of others". She also has a certificate in Volunteer Management from Lambton College, Sarnia, Ontario. She has been a very active volunteer with the local chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society for 24 years and received a Certificate of Exceptional Achievement from MS Ontario Division in 2007. She has been the Supervisor of Volunteer Services at Pathways Health Centre for Children for 17 years.