

For most, the arrival of summer means picnics, outdoor sports, boat rides and other outings.

For the severely physically and mentally challenged in the Anglo community, however, it often is just a continuation of days of isolation and boredom.

Westmount resident Gwen Norsworthy has found a solution to those lonely days at the Action Centre, a multi-purpose activity centre offering leisure activities, training and social interaction to people living with a cognitive or physical challenge.

Every Wednesday, Norsworthy gets up looking forward to the afternoon where she will have an opportunity to be part of an interesting activity such as t-shirt painting, and will have an opportunity to visit with friends. "I really look forward to Wednesday afternoons," she says. "It is a nice break from sitting alone at home with my cat."

Norsworthy worked as an operating room aide at the Montreal Neurological Hospital until her epilepsy, which has plagued her since she was a young child, became unmanageable. She has been participating in programmes at the Action Centre since it was opened in February 1999. The Action Centre is the only centre for physically and cognitively challenged individuals on the island of Montreal that caters to the Anglophone population by offering all services in both official languages.

For many like Norsworthy, however, it is the only weekly outing they get to participate in where they get to talk to real people other than the ones they see on their televisions. For some, it has been the first social interaction since the onset of their challenge. The Centre is member driven, using focus groups to determine the schedule of activities that include social events such as outings and sports, learning activities such as computers and crafts and information sessions about issues such as 'knowing your rights'. This spring activities have included outings to a sugar shack, wood burning courses, and movie and bowling nights.

This summer the members have asked for a lot of outdoor activities that will include picnics, a boat ride at the Old Port, and sports. One of the more popular sports is boccia, a ball game more adaptable to people in their wheelchairs. Two weeks ago, Centre member Sylvie Maheu took home the gold medal in the 'Défi Sportif', an annual Olympic quality special games event held in Montreal and participated in by physically and cognitively challenged contenders from 18 countries.

"Sylvie was so happy when she won," said Manon Brideau, one of the Centre's coordinators. "She was beaming. One of the important aspects of the centre that we try to achieve is to build self-esteem and that did it for Sylvie. She is still beaming."

Unfortunately, the funds for the centre are running low and by the end of the summer, the bank account will be empty. Former Westmount city councillor Sally Aitken has been very involved with the centre and is working to create some fund-raising opportunities to get the community of Montreal involved in saving the centre.

Those interested in visiting the Action Centre, located at 1260 Richmond Street in Point St. Charles, can call 931-0404 for details.