

East End Kids Embrace the Disabled

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So far, only East End students have had the opportunity to meet members of Centre Action, an activity centre for people with physical or cognitive disabilities, and they say the experience has changed the way they perceive others.

“They told us what they do at Centre Action. I was moved by the talk because they’re in wheelchairs, and I never thought about it before—just because you’re different, it doesn’t stop you from doing what you want to do,” said Amanda Russo, a 14-year-old student from John Paul I High School.

Rocco Speranza, spiritual and guidance animator for four East End schools of the English Montreal School Board, is behind the Centre Action initiative.

“I invited them to come in and speak to the students to help sensitize them to the issues of discrimination, acceptance, togetherness, unity, caring and kindness,” Speranza said, adding that students are so moved by the guests, they ask how they can volunteer at Centre Action. “I really want to visit them,” said Michael Scalera, 13. “Maybe some of them have no family, and they would have company if I went.”

Daniel Jarry, Centre Action’s public relations director, was healthy before he suffered a stroke in 1987. Today, his mobility is impaired. Jarry volunteers at Centre Action. “Centre Action was the only place to meet people like me and be able to talk to people like me,” Jarry said.

Centre Action is a bilingual, non-profit organization that holds activities for disabled people, such as arts and crafts, painting, exercise and cooking. An average of 40 people attends the centre, located in LaSalle, everyday. Centre Action, which has five employees, receives 90 percent of its funding from private donations. The other 10 percent comes from government programs or fund-raisers.

Jarry visited about 50 Dante Elementary students in St. Leonard on Tuesday, and he says the message he shares with kids is an important one. “We tell them we are normal [and] we need to be treated like normal people,” said Jarry. “Just because we are in a wheelchair, we’re no different than they are.”

Celina Hasbun, the director of Centre Action, says the school visits have been very fulfilling: “The kids really listen. They take it to heart and they are much more receptive than we think they are.”