

OPINION

The Okanagan Sunday, April 18, 2010



Submitted photos

enn Dungate and Meaghan Atkinson-Smith run the Music in the Round program at Parkinson Rec Centre in Kelowna.

VOLUNTEERING

Better to give than receive

participated in Special Olympics there for years



ALLISON MCNEILL

Whose Challenge Is It Anyway?



Ben Volk volunteers with dances at Parkinson Rec Centre.

They say it is better to give than receive. They also say that charity starts at home. Whoever "they are," they may be right!

Although our family has always loved our choice of 29 years in making the Central Okanagan our nest, one more piece of reason solidified that this April.

We have always felt this community to be very welcoming and enjoyed living, working, playing and volunteering here.

Since my husband's death Dec. 24, the outpouring of support and love from friends, neighbours and family has been (and continues to be) nothing short of outstanding.

From folks dropping off food to helping drive our children to activities, words of encouragement and invitations to a meal or dog walk, folks shovelling our drive way in the winter and walking our dogs while we have been away, we think we now have proof that Kelowna must hold an all time record for kindness.

Just when we thought that nothing nicer could happen, one more amazing thing happened week.

Through the co-ordination of Doreen Hayward of the Kelowna Garden Club, master gardeners and fellow volunteers descended on our garden for hours of clipping, trimming and cleaning out the beds.

Although we have been trying to adjust to our new normal, for the first time since my husband's death, when I arrived home after work yesterday, I felt true happiness due to their incredible kindness. The volunteers could have chosen many other projects, but they picked helping us in our time of need. They even brought home-made muffins.

Big thanks to Doreen, Suzanne, Lois and the rest of the gang!

I am no stranger to volunteering. I was brought up believing that it is the right thing to do.

To take your skills and share them with a group, neighbour, friend or stranger is a gift in itself. I believe that so strongly that when I was selected as Kelowna's 2009 Woman of the Year, I dedicated it to my husband, Jack Acres, at the awards ceremony.

The reason was that I felt I already had been given my "gift" by being able to share my time with a large array of deserving organizations.

Volunteers can't provide a donation of time without having, in my case, a partner and

family who are willing to pick up the slack.

I am sure that this year's Woman of the Year, Mohini Singh, Man of the Year, Vern Nielson, and all the others who were recognized have experienced the commitment their families make to allow them to be able to donate their time through volunteering. Congratulations to all the civic award winners on giving back unselfishly to our great community.

Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting with three individuals who also have the volunteer bug.

Although there are hundreds of great volunteers in the community, what makes these three special is the enthusiasm they all possess, donating their time to Parkinson Recreation Centre programs.

Wendy Serko, Heather Crawford and Caroline Ivey, with the recreation and culture access to recreation office, introduced me to Meaghan Atkinson-Smith and re-introduced me to Andrea Patterson and Ben Volk.

Andrea loves children and was able to land a volunteer role at PRC after some training and work experience. She loves to help out with her nephew and had some experience doing so prior to volunteering. She helps out on a weekly basis and hopes to one day be able to make a career out of it through early childhood education training.

As with most volunteers, she had to go through a criminal record check and a few other hoops before being able to helping out in the daycare. She has also worked as the "shaker sign" gal at Little Caesars for the past two years.

Andrea is a good example of enthusiasm in the gift of giving and is completely empowered by being able to help. She lives near the rec centre with her husband so can walk there easily and just happens to have a developmental disability.

It was a pleasure to re-meet Ben Volk, who donates his skills to the Friday night social dances at Parkinson.

His reason for volunteering is: "I love going to the dances, so helping out by setting up and in the concession is great!"

Ben knows the crowd at PRC as he has par-

ticipated in Special Olympics there for years as well as attended the dances. He also has a job at Larry's Bike Shop and loves working with the group there as well.

Ben also volunteers with his brother, who a teacher at Rutland Secondary School, and hopes to do more of that work in the future.

With only so much time in a day, he says he is proud to donate his time and feels he is a reliable, honest and happy volunteer.

Ben is another shining example of the gift giving and happens to have Down syndrome.

Instead of seeing a disability, Ben and Andrea's employers and those they help see their great ability.

Meaghan Atkinson-Smith has lived in Kelowna for the past six years and is excited to volunteer in the PRC music program.

Her piano teacher recognized her talent for singing years ago.

Meaghan had the chance to take singing lessons over the years and heard about a great program run by Kenn Dungeat called Music in the Round. She met Kenn while participating in his class and found they both really enjoyed helping others as well as the music.

Kenn asked if she would like to formally volunteer with the class and noted Meaghan caught the high notes and is a great musician.

She enthusiastically said "Yes please!"

Meaghan reads Braille and uses it in music class as well as singing and leading the class. She also spends time at Sunshine Farms, has completed courses at Okanagan College and donates her time to other organizations.

Her advice: "If you have a disability, think of the skills and abilities you have that you can share with others and apply that to what you volunteer for. I like singing and helping out in the community, so it made sense for me to donate my time to Music in the Round."

There are so many ways to help.

I hope that through these examples it encourages you to do what you can to make the Central Okanagan a loving, caring place.

Upcoming events

The Variety club, Central Okanagan Boys and Girls Club and Kelowna Yacht Club hold their annual Boat For Hope for families who have a child with a disability on June 19. It consists of a fun day of pirate adventures on land and the wild seas of Kelowna featuring pirate ships to explore and booty to steal. For more information, call Mariam King at 250-762-3989.

The Kelowna Self Advocates monthly meeting is at Parkinson Rec Centre May 11, from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Email: info@misscommunications.com.

A community workshop of RDSP takes place May 12 at the B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities office. Email: sam@bddpd.bc.ca.

The Spring Fling Dance family fundraiser for Self Advocates is moved until the fall.

Allison McNeill is mum to four children and step-mum to two, one of whom has a developmental disability. She is proprietor of McNeill communications.

Email: info@misscommunications.com