Youth Employment Partnership & Inclusive Post-Secondary Education: Ryan Jehn’s Pathway to Success
The 2017 Inclusion Alberta Family Conference in Review

The 2017 Inclusion Alberta Family Conference, held at the Fantasyland Hotel in Edmonton April 7-8, was a tremendous success, bringing together individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, educators, those working in the field of developmental disabilities and many others who share a passion for inclusion for a weekend of learning and connecting. The conference was one of the largest to date, with over 800 attendees.

Many families and professionals took part in Friday’s two full-day workshops with either Beth Mount or Shelley Moore.

Participants in Beth’s “The Art of Personal Futures Planning: Making Space for Person-Centered Planning” had a very collaborative and interactive day discussing transitions to adulthood, creating homes and moving away from system-centered to person-centered planning.

Shelley Moore lived up to her reputation as a dynamic presenter with her workshop “Inclusive Education: Curriculum and Meaningful Learning for All”. Participants left inspired and focused on advancing inclusive education in their schools and communities.

The National Inclusive Education Awards, provided jointly by the Canadian Association for Community Living and Inclusion Alberta, were handed out by the students and families who nominated their schools as their commitment to inclusive education was exemplary and deserving of recognition. Also on hand to acknowledge this year’s award winners were Robin Acton,
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Inclusion Alberta President, Doreen Shaw, Vice-President, Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) and David Woloshyn, Director, Alberta Education. This year’s recipients were:

• St. Paul Regional High School, St. Paul Education Regional Division
• Dr. Morris Gibbons School, Foothills School Division
• Bishop Lloyd Middle School, Lloydminster Public School District
• Michael Strembitsky School, Edmonton Public Schools

A conference truly supportive of families allowed parents to attend sessions stress-free knowing their children were well taken care of in the on-site, top-notch Kids Club/Teen Club childcare centre. Over 150 children and teens enjoyed the multi-room centre which included a western-themed space, sensory activities, face painting, crafts, healthy snacks and even video games and karaoke for the teens. Thanks to Triple 555 Corporation many were able to enjoy West Edmonton Mall’s Galaxyland and Sea Lion Show!

Friday evening saw over 360 attendees return to take part in the President’s Reception in the hotel’s Ballroom, where guests were treated to a program honouring individuals and organizations across Alberta for their outstanding efforts in creating more inclusive opportunities in Alberta, whose daily actions result in children or adults with developmental disabilities having increased opportunities to be included in community life.

• AltaGas
• Kevin Hood and the Department of Public Safety & Justice Studies, MacEwan University
• McKernan Baptist Church
• Watts Projects
• Castle Downs Family YMCA Child Care Services
• Mike Ellis, MLA for Calgary-West & Natalie Bach, Constituency Office Manager

Colonel Eric W. and Dr. Barbara V. Cormack Memorial Award Recipient:

Given to an Alberta resident who has made an outstanding, long-term voluntary contribution to serving the interests of people with developmental disabilities and their families.

• Bonnie Pacaud

Inclusion Alberta Leadership Award Recipients:

Given to an individual or organization who truly demonstrates exemplary leadership in advancing the full inclusion of individuals with developmental disabilities, and whose efforts have made an invaluable and lasting difference to Albertans.

• The King’s University
• WestJet

Saturday started off with... belly dancing! Keynote speaker Shelley Moore began the day’s opening plenary with an example of universal design for learning through teaching the room belly dancing. By the end, most everyone had learned something new, with the added benefit of getting their blood pumping for the day.

Conference-goers then split off into their chosen morning and afternoon sessions, choosing from topics such as family-managed supports, supporting individuals with complex needs, inclusive education, having a home of your own, person-centered planning, planning for when parents are no longer here, career development and employment and an overview of trends and opportunities with Inclusion Alberta CEO Bruce Uditsky.

The Youth Forum saw over 30 youth aged 16-22 come together Saturday for a day of learning to take action on social justice and inclusion. Madison Dewar, a visual artist, led the group through a hands-on workshop on visual journaling, and award winning Edmonton poet Ahmed Knowmadic shared an important message about celebrating individuality and using one’s voice for change.

The day’s closing plenary treated everyone to an emotional overview of 30 years of inclusive post-secondary education in Alberta before attendees broke for the afternoon, many returning for that evening’s much anticipated Family Dance Celebration.

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The Status Quo as an Urgent Call for Action

After more than 45 years in the field of developmental disabilities and nearing the end of my tenure as Inclusion Alberta’s CEO after 25 years of one the most amazing experiences of my life, I find myself trying to understand why so many other social justice movements have made more progress, garnered more public support, acceptance, understanding and even engagement than the movement to see individuals with intellectual disabilities as fully and equally human with their full inclusion in every aspect of life as a moral and societal necessity to the benefit of all.

It’s not that gender inequality or domestic violence have been eliminated, racial discrimination eradicated or environmental sustainability achieved but progress, the raised consciousness and commensurate efforts in these areas are noteworthy. Broad segments of society can comment on what has changed relative to these issues. Even in acknowledging what has not changed, this reflects an understanding progress is still needed. For example, there is greater universal understanding in the Canadian context of past wrongs relative to Indigenous peoples resulting from systemic prejudice and the immense work still needed to achieve cultural change and equality. Further, most of these movements have captured the idealism and activism of youth, who in a number of instances (e.g., environmental causes, equal rights and full acceptance regardless of gender or sexual identity) have made more progress in advancing change than established organizations. And while the movements that continue to struggle to achieve social justice on these fronts are themselves often fractured and factious, they are nevertheless sufficiently cohesive to be recognized as representative and active movements with a sufficient degree of commonality that advancement remains both hopeful and expected.

These above movements, or at least organized efforts, are fueled by the understanding that not only is the status quo unacceptable but that committed and sustained action is urgently required. The status quo itself constitutes an unacceptable state of social injustice, as: women and girls continue to experience sexual and domestic violence; racial discrimination sustains hate crimes; and environmental challenges remain. From this perspective, the status quo is not viewed as a passive state with few negative implications but an active state that invites and sustains harm. The very concept of a social justice movement is rooted in the understanding injustice is socially created, maintained by the status quo and only radical and sustained activism (e.g., getting at the roots of the injustice) will alter the current reality. For any social justice movement, the status quo is a reflection of continued and unacceptable injustice.

In contrast, the world of children and adults with developmental disabilities inclusive of families, self-advocates and staff, seems far more complacent relative to the status quo, than other movements committed to societal change and life improvement. It is as if the status quo is a passive and acceptable state for children and adults with developmental disabilities. The fact the status quo sustains the marginalization of children and adults with developmental disabilities thus contributing to impoverished lives and worse, does not appear to be a sufficient motivator for urgent participatory social action.

The evidence of an inclusive life in terms of fulfillment and opportunity is well established. Children with developmental disabilities who have an inclusive education, learn more and at a
greater rate than children who have a segregated education, in which they might actually lose skills and knowledge over the course of time. Students without disabilities benefit in terms of their learning as well. As the state of inclusive education in Alberta has not significantly advanced in some time, while access to an inclusive education remains almost entirely dependent from year to year on whether there is an accepting teacher, principal or school district. Where there is not a determined parent with the time, resources and energy to be prepared to continually advocate for and safeguard their child’s inclusive education, then having an inclusive education is largely a question of whether a child is lucky enough to live within a neighbourhood where there are welcoming teachers, principals, schools and school districts.

The status quo means poorer life outcomes on every dimension. Individuals with developmental disabilities continue to experience higher rates of abuse and sexual assault than those without disabilities, particularly girls and women. Between 70-80% of adults with developmental disabilities can be employed, at least part-time but Alberta and all of Canada have continued unemployment rates of 70-80%; the opposite of what is possible. Most of the lives of adults with developmental disabilities remain characterized by congregated and segregated activities and living arrangements that are highly staff dependent and thus growing in cost without any substantial gain in meaningful life outcomes. More meaningful lives with better cost-benefit relationships can be achieved by engaging community and capitalizing on its capacity. With progress on this front the limited staff resources and funding available to any society would be better allocated and utilized.

In the past few years there has been little systemic progress in: inclusive education; access to inclusive post-secondary education; employment; and training, and education and certification and training of staff with commensurate wages. But there have been large scale changes in bureaucracies and human service making little to no difference in life outcomes for those who were to benefit from these changes. It is time to change the agenda and put children and adults with developmental disabilities, their families and those who support them at the forefront of needed action and to measure progress in terms of improved and inclusive lives.

The above are just some of the examples of the limitations imposed on individuals with developmental disabilities. These life pathways and outcomes are not inherent within individuals with developmental disabilities but are imposed by acceptance of the status quo and the belief individuals with developmental disabilities are differently human; not needing the same means to fulfillment through inclusion, education, friends, work, etc. that everyone without a developmental disability believes to be true about themselves and their life. The status quo is thus not an urgent call to action, as it is for other movements, when the assumption exists individuals with developmental disabilities have no right to a better and more inclusive life.

Families, self-advocates, service providers and staff become passionate and effective advocates in large numbers whenever there is a known cut in funding or perceived significant funding challenge (as may occur as the impact of the progressive minimum wage increases are accommodated by service providers in staff Cont’d on page 8
Attending college or university is a life-changing experience. For individuals with developmental disabilities, having an inclusive post-secondary education (which sees students attend regular college and university classes as non-credit/audit students), means an 80% employment rate, versus 20% without. Alberta is the international leader in inclusive post-secondary education with Inclusion Alberta engaged with up to 20 initiatives at colleges and universities around the province, more than any other jurisdiction in the world.

One man who has seen big, positive changes in his life since being accepted at Bow Valley College is 22 year-old Josip Tomic, who is supported by Inclusion Alberta’s inclusive post-secondary initiative at the College. Joe will be entering his third year of Business Administration this fall and has already been included in classes such as business mathematics, accounting, marketing and management. But Joe says he’s gained not only formal knowledge and training, but also a life outside of home, plus confidence and a few new friends.

“I’m doing great,” says Joe. “I’m going out more than I used to, that’s for sure!”

Joe says his college classmates have been incredibly supportive of him, which is quite different from his last educational experience where he felt mostly uninspired in a segregated environment full of students interacting mostly just with their aides. His Bow Valley College experience sees him in regular college courses, with classmates helping each other out when needed.

“With my inclusion in Bow Valley, I feel good,” says Joe. “I’m in a real school, like everyone else, spending time with adults from all walks of life and not just those with developmental disabilities.” He says he goes out more socially than he ever used to, and the dynamic has also changed within his family home. Both he and his mom now get their own time to do their own things, with all parties really enjoying the independence.

With support from Inclusion Alberta, Joe also landed his first job last summer as Summer Intern Student at the office of Mike Ellis, MLA for Calgary-West.

It was a new experimental position for the office, and Joe’s supervisor (and only other colleague in the small office!), Constituency Manager Natalie Bach was glad she was able to bring Joe back once again this summer.

“Having Joe around is great,” says Natalie. “I get a few projects done that I wouldn’t otherwise without him, and he has a fabulous sense of humour so that’s a bonus.” Equipped with an accessible desk provided by the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, Joe helped bring the fairly paper-based constituency office ‘into the 21st century’, digitizing collections of business cards, pamphlets and brochures. He also manages the newsletter databases, and represents the office at community events with Mike and Natalie.

Joe says his summer job at the constituency office has been an excellent experience.

“The best in my life, actually,” he says. Joe has also secured himself another job once his time as a summer student at the constituency office is over this fall in the Archives Department at Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame, which he says is an absolute dream job.

For more information on inclusive post-secondary education and employment opportunities available through Inclusion Alberta, visit inclusionalberta.org

UPDATE: Marie Renaud, MLA for St. Albert has also hired within her Constituency office and other MLAs and MPs are now looking at employment possibilities with their offices.
Clark Builders Gives Generously Toward Building Improvements

Inclusion Alberta has been repeatedly successful in our Facility Enhancement grant applications to Alberta Culture & Tourism and we are deeply appreciative of the funds these grants have provided to enable us to update our building in terms of its accessibility.

Inclusion Alberta has been the recipient of three consecutive Community Facility Enhancement Grants from Alberta Culture & Tourism totaling $226,000, which was then graciously matched and exceeded by our partner Clark Builders and contractors at $315,000.

Inclusion Alberta has been supporting children and adults with developmental disabilities and their families for over 60 years, with our Kingsway building being the hub of our provincial operations for 30 of those years. During that time our staffing complement has grown 10 fold with the Edmonton staff quadrupling and the number of families and individuals needing support growing exponentially.

“We are truly grateful for the generosity of Clark Builders, its contractors and the support from the Alberta government for enabling us to create a more accessible and family friendly setting,” says Inclusion Alberta President Robin Acton. “Parents and individuals with developmental disabilities often meet with us in moments of crisis and distress, and our newly renovated building is now a more welcoming and comforting environment.”


L to R: The Honourable Irfan Sabir, Minister of Community & Social Services; Greg Clark, Leader of the Alberta Party, MLA for Calgary-Elbow; The Honourable Ricardo Miranda, Minister of Culture & Tourism; Ronald Orr (W), MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka; Barb MacIntyre, President of Inclusion Alberta
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reductions unless offset by future government funding). While this advocacy is typically successful, it largely maintains the status quo. And once the status quo is again stabilized, action for actually improving lives is barely visible.

Other movements gained ground when those who were ravaged by racism and sexism were recognized as equally human and no differently human, as a consequence of continued advocacy and action. This understanding creates the urgency for action relative to the status quo. This is as necessary for children and adults with developmental disabilities. But unlike many other movements which have greater capacity for independent action, unless families with their sons and daughters with developmental disabilities lead the way, joined and supported by allies, the status quo will continue to reign and lives that could be far more promising will remain unfulfilled.

Inclusion Alberta represents a movement of over 60 years standing, now international in scale. However, unless that movement is joined and fueled by passionate and urgent opposition to the prevailing status quo, then progress will only be achieved slowly and for a few at a time. One old adage of the civil rights movement in the United States in support of access to post-secondary education drew people to action by stating “a mind was too precious to waste.” I think the life of anyone with a developmental disability is too precious to waste. 

Conference Review
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Over 400 people of all ages packed the Fantasyland Hotel ballroom Saturday night to kick back and relax after a long weekend of passionate and engaged learning on inclusion. Guests enjoyed dancing with a live band, finger foods (including the traditional Family Dance favourite, DinoNuggets) and conversation with friends new and old while kids played, danced and smashed a piñata.

For the latest information on opportunities offered by Inclusion Alberta, including information and announcements about next year’s Family Conference, sign up for our e-newsletter online at inclusionalberta.org, like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter (@InclusionAB) and Instagram (inclusion_ab).
Georgina and TJ Altman, long-time members of the Lloydminster community, are conscious philanthropists who have seen first-hand the benefits of inclusion for individuals with developmental disabilities.

The Altmans are members of Inclusion Alberta’s Dream Maker Society, joining over 125 other individuals and organizations that have made a commitment to donate $1,000 or more per year for five years to Inclusion Alberta.

Georgina, Vice President of Advancement and External Relations at Lakeland College in Lloydminster (where students with developmental disabilities are included and supported by Inclusion Alberta), has vivid memories of inclusion in action in her childhood. She remembers her uncle David, an individual with a developmental disability, working on the family farm and always being a strong and valued part of everyone’s lives.

“Those were the days when kids with disabilities were often sent away to institutions,” says Georgina. “We were always a very naturally inclusive family. That’s just how we lived.”

She also recalls back when Lloydminster had segregated schools, with a friend and neighbour attending the school designated for children with disabilities.

“And I remember the day where she stopped going there and started riding the bus with me to school every day,” she says. “It was very impactful on me as an elementary school kid.” Inclusion Lloydminster led the successful efforts to halt segregation and move to inclusive education.

“If you’ve ever been excluded from something,” explains Georgina’s husband TJ Altman, Division Director with Investors Group, “you know that we all just want a chance to belong.”

The Altmans attend the yearly Inclusion Lloydminster and Alberta Changing Lives, Changing Communities Fundraising Breakfast in Lloydminster, and were moved to make a one-time donation at their first event. The following year they decided to become Dream Makers.

“I saw the difference Inclusion Alberta and Inclusion Lloydminster are making in our community,” says Georgina, adding that as a past Rotarian, she’s seen the positive impact the Rotary Employment Partnership in Lloydminster and across the Province has had in so many lives.

TJ says they also understand the importance of sustainable giving and the ability it gives both organizations to reliably plan for the supports it provides to individuals and families.

“For families supported by Inclusion Alberta and Inclusion Lloydminster,” says TJ, “it’s not usually a ‘once and done’ thing. There’s often a lifetime of support required.”

“If we can help provide that [financial stability] in some small way that’s important to us,” adds Georgina, “Inclusion Lloydminster and Inclusion Alberta can better plan year over year instead of starting from scratch again every year not knowing what they have to work with.”

To learn more about investing in the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families by becoming a Dream Maker, please visit inclusionalberta.org.
High school is a time of transition, when teens find themselves at the centre of a constant swirl of new life experiences as they begin their transition into the real world of adulthood. While some added support might be needed for teens with developmental disabilities, especially those living in Alberta’s smaller communities, the typical experiences are much the same.

Thorsby, Alberta parents Sonja and Darcy Jehn and their 19-year-old son Ryan, who has developmental disabilities, have been connected to Inclusion Alberta on an advocacy level since Ryan was in elementary school. Throughout the years, Inclusion Alberta supported the family when needed to ensure that Ryan’s school experiences were inclusive, rich and meaningful. When Ryan reached high school, he developed the typical teenage desire of wanting a part-time job. While he was busy with school and as a trainer/first aid person for the school basketball and volleyball teams, like most high-schoolers the lure of independence and extra spending money that comes with having a job was strong. However, even though many of his friends had found jobs, the school was struggling to even find a work experience placement for Ryan.

“The school kept coming back saying that it was difficult finding someone who was willing or able to take Ryan on,” says Sonja. “And that just didn’t sound right to me.”

Both Ryan and Sonja admit that neither really had any idea of what Ryan was capable of doing or offering as an employee at the time. Nonetheless, Sonja says she “kicked into high gear as a mom” and began approaching businesses in the small town herself to see if anyone would hire Ryan. She found that in fact many were willing to consider hiring him, but they were mostly also confused as to what he could do and where he could fit as an employee.

“I think a lot of people were having issues with questions like ‘what if it doesn't work out?’ and ‘what if he can't pull his weight?’” says Sonja.
High school is a time of transition, when teens find themselves at the centre of a constant swirl of new life experiences as they begin their transition into the real world of adulthood.

“Well then the employment has to end, just like everyone else! We understood that.”

She says that while it’s great that the community tends to want to be nice and kind to Ryan, giving him ‘too much leeway’ because of his disabilities is not very helpful when he’s trying to gain real world experience and work ethic.

“He has lots of grandparents who will cut him a lot of slack,” she laughs. “He doesn’t need that in his professional life.”

Sonja realized at that point that they would probably have more success if they brought in a third party to help Ryan secure a job. “You just can’t take the mother out of me,” she chuckles. She contacted Inclusion Alberta who put her in touch with one of its Youth Employment Partnership (YEP) Coordinators. The family met with the coordinator to discuss Ryan’s interests and strengths and to give them a list of potential employers in town. The coordinator then set about to meet with businesses to help create a position for Ryan. Ryan decided that the best match was with Guardian Drug Store, who’s manager knew Ryan from preschool.

“In the end,” Sonja points out, “it ended up being one of Ryan’s own personal connections he had made that opened the doors for the job.”

For the past two years, Ryan has been working one day a week at Guardian Drug Store in Thorsby as a Customer Service Representative, and does general jobs around the store from stocking shelves to helping customers. To begin, Ryan was given some on-the-job peer support provided by Inclusion Alberta, but that was quickly phased out when it became clear that the store’s managers were all the support he needed. Ryan says he loves his job, and feels like a valued employee.

“Yeah, I think they’ll keep me around,” he says with a smile. Both he and his mom agree that his level of independence has grown exponentially. Ryan has learned about budgeting and managing his money since beginning to earn a paycheque, has been making his own appointments and often goes for lunch before work with friends. “He’s not as likely to things for him now if he knows it’s something that he’s going to have to do when he moves out,” Sonja says proudly of her son.

As much as Ryan loves his job at Guardian Drug Store, it’s not a ‘forever job’ for him. Ryan has been accepted into the Paramedic/EMT program at NAIT and will begin his inclusive post-secondary studies in the fall. His dream is to work at STARS Air Ambulance in Leduc. Ryan recently started living 3 days a week in Edmonton and spends his days in the city living with a supportive roommate learning the ropes of independent living. He’s excited to experience all that city life has to offer, from taking public transit to shopping to going to Oilers games.

Ryan has reminded his mom that not all of his choices will be the right ones, and Sonja says she’s ok with that. “I’m just trying to make sure Ryan enjoys this next chapter of life which I know is going to lead him in directions that I can’t even imagine right now,” she says. “I just look forward to seeing where this journey takes him.”

For more information on Inclusion Alberta’s Youth Employment Partnership and Inclusive Post-Secondary Education initiatives, please visit our website at inclusionalberta.org.

• Paid employment during high school is one of the most significant factors in ensuring individuals with developmental disabilities gain employment.

• The YEP bridges the gap between youth and adult employment, creating confident youth who are empowered to be more self-sufficient, creating stronger communities for everyone.

• Inclusion Alberta provides, at no cost to the employer, peer mentors to ensure success on the job.
Donate
used clothing
household goods
small appliances
to Inclusion Alberta!

Each year, Inclusion Alberta must raise over a million dollars to provide support to the thousands of families who seek our assistance. When you're cleaning your home, keep Inclusion Alberta in mind and donate your gently used items.

To find a conveniently located drop-off bin near you, visit inclusionalberta.org.

To arrange a free pick up from your home call: 780.452.2121 (Edm) / 403.531.3080 (Cal), email: donations@inclusionalberta.org, or message us at Facebook.com/InclusionAlbertaDonations