

New camp serves Autistic and Special Needs campers

By Brock Weir

Shawn Kendal knows all too well the struggle parents face finding a place tailor-made to suit the needs of their children if they are special needs or on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

As the father of a 21-year-old daughter who is on the severe end of the ASD spectrum, it's a frustration he and countless parents have faced, but now he's teaming up with educator Shawna Ackerman to spread some good Karma.

Karma Country Camp, which will be located at the Aurora Preparatory Academy on Industrial Parkway North, is gearing up for its inaugural summer this year.

Its goal, according to Ms. Ackerman, is to "address the increase of loneliness and mental health challenges that are linked to teens who do not fit into our typical world."

Ms. Ackerman is a special needs teacher with 15 years of service in the York Region District School Board. She brings her professional expertise to the table, while Mr. Kendal brings not only his personal experience with his daughter, but also his business acumen.

"This really is a passion project for Shawna and myself," he says. "I have gone through the trials and tribulations of raising a child, struggling with different programs and what do you do after high school? That is one of the main reasons (we founded this camp) because of our experience. Because we realise there is a bigger gap for teenagers, we decided to focus the camp on the 12-plus, that way we can support teens and young adults. From a camp perspective, there are a lot of really good integrated camps; that's fine for six or eight-year-old autistic kids, but when you get into your teenage years and are 12 or 14, that doesn't work out so well."

In his daughter's case, there just weren't a lot of options out there for her, particularly as she transitions out of high school "as is the case with most special needs students. While she goes to the Reena program, which is "great," says Shawn, so many of these programs are run indoors with little opportunity for participants to get outside.

"We're trying very much for it to be like a typical camp experience," says Shawn. "We will have groups of cabins and the kids will be grouped based on levels of needs and skills, not so much age. It is 9 to 14 and every morning we will have a big

energy rally at the beginning and then the different groups will go to different activities. Some of the activities are indoor, some are outdoor. When the weather is nice, we will be more focused on outdoors, but we're doing field sports, we're doing water and sensory play. We have a huge activity area. We're also doing music and drama therapy. We just hired an amazing staff who is going to be doing drama as well as music. If we can do a bit of a play or performance, we will.

?We also have all our senior counsellors are specialists in the field and are working either in the board or somewhere else, and one of our big focuses is on social development. That seems to be the big theme with a lot of our campers. The parents really want them to work on their social skills, social etiquette, social appropriateness. We're going to weave that into the programming, like playing sports, taking turns waiting, team building ? all the things kids will be learning while having fun.

?Indoors, we'll have a quiet Snoezelen space, puzzles, robotics, and arts and crafts. On a typical day, each group would go from one activity to the next, but we also know that some kids' attention is either shorter or longer than others, so we'll allow for flexibility. If a child needs a quiet room because he is done with soccer, he'll have that opportunity.?

One of the challenges with integrated camps, he adds, is the camps work so hard at integration but kids often still feel isolation. They struggle to feel a part of their group or a part of their cabin; when they play soccer and baseball, sometimes they can't keep up.

?What we're doing is we're very much focused on the individual camper,? he says. ?We go to everyone's house when they enrol, we spend about an hour to get to know the kids, get to know the family, understand what are some of the things those parents and families want us to work on. Again, it is knowing that camper's specific needs and really catering around it. We're also going into the community, located almost right at Yonge and Wellington, so we'll take the kids into the community to practice shopping, buying things and ordering in restaurants. We're going to set up a mock store at camp in one of our classrooms so kids can really gain some life skills ? just being able to go to Tim Hortons and pay with a debit is big.?

Ahead of their inaugural season, Mr. Kendal says, at this point, one of the key measures of Karma's success will be if kids go home happy and tired at the end of the day.

?A lot of these kids, if they weren't at camp, will be spending a lot of the summer in their basement playing video games alone,? he says. ?For us, we're trying to build a community, give these kids friends, and build this social circle. For us, camp

is really the beginning. We would love to evolve into a full-time activity centre or drop in centre where campers can come, especially when they are finished high school, and even ones who aren't can come in and hang at night.

?It's about trying to create that social community because loneliness and depression is a big problem with this community because these kids don't have a lot of friends. They are high functioning, verbal, but they are socially awkward and it is hard for them. If we can create this community where kids are going home and they have been able to make some friends, they sleep well, to me that is success.?

For more on Karma, visit karmacountrycamp.com.