

Aurora's Lighthouse aims to prepare young adults with autism for workforce



Michael Brocco is looking ahead to a bright future.

A student at Aurora's Lighthouse Learning Development Centre since its inception 10 years ago, Brocco, who lives with Autism, is now looking forward to college. Lighthouse is a school, he says, that has taught him self-advocacy, boundaries, respect, and so much more ? and, as he looks forward to the future, he's hoping to be a ?beacon? not only for what he learned at Lighthouse but for students with Autism wherever he might be.

Brocco shared his story last week as Lighthouse Learning Development Centre marked both the start of World Autism Awareness Month and its own first decade serving those living with Autism and their families in the community.

Lighthouse too is looking to the future and are marking their milestone anniversary by launching Canada's first adult training program for preparing young adults on the autism spectrum enter the workforce.

The program is divided into two parts ? Luminosity, which helps students build skills, and Career Connections, which helps put those skills into action through job coaching and placements ? and was inspired by Els for Autism in Jupiter, FL.

Now working in partnership with Els, Lighthouse has forged further partnerships with a variety of companies, such as NewRoads Automotive, which has already facilitated placements for two students, as well as Flow Water, Dollar Tree, and Tim Hortons.

?I opened Lighthouse for my son, Daniel,? says Lighthouse Executive Director Serena Thompson, of the school which first opened in a house just off Old Yonge Street. ?Last February, I had to verbalize what I have known for a long time: Daniel will not be independent; that is not his path. His path is going to be something different. I took a minute as a mum, which I needed to do, and I reached out to the Executive Director of The EI? as it is kind of the epitome of what is great in autism intervention around the world. I reached out just more for my own inspiration because there's nothing in Canada and I just really wanted to get an idea. By May, we had a formalized partnership to completely replicate their adult services into Ontario, services that are not offered here at all.

?What we're doing in Canada and Ontario is we have a lot of respite programs, which are wonderful and needed, but what we don't have is continuous learning for adults with Autism. Continuous learning is vital because individuals with autism, if they don't continue to learn, not only will they stop learning but they will lose skills that they would have gained. If we want individuals with autism at some point to be able to have opportunities in the workforce, we need to continue teaching them and that's what these two

programs bring.?

Luminosity is a day program for individuals who might not be ready for the workforce at 21.

?Just because you're not ready at 21, doesn't mean you're not going to be ready at 27 or 31, or 40. It's never too late. We're just going to keep teaching,? says Thompson.

Career Connections, on the other hand, is for those who are ready at 21 and provides on-site job experiences, placements, and a full-time job coach, so the teaching element continues.

?We aren't just expecting employers to teach on site because, in this world, that is not a reality,? says Thompson. ?Employers don't have cash flow to do that. What our program does is it takes these participants out, teaches them real-life job skills, and then we stay involved to help source jobs, do job interviews, and once someone is employed, we stay involved for retention. We're creating these programs to show just how valuable these individuals were in the workforce, in our community, everywhere. They are excited, they are invested, and it's just amazing to see.?

Sharing in that enthusiasm is Antonietta Siciliano, Program Coordinator at Lighthouse.

Individuals with Autism, she says, are ?just so capable of working and they are never given the chance.?

?How do we make them have these chances? You have to start somewhere and [the partners] were more than open to being inclusive and figuring out what they need to do on their end to ensure they are opening their doors for everybody that can come in,? she says. ?It is so heart-filling because this is all you want for these guys: to be seen, be valued, and know their worth because they're very much looked past and always assumed they're not capable and able to reach those milestones, but they can ? with the right supports, the right funding, the right people, the right community. That is how everybody excels to be the person they need to be.?

That's just what Michael says he found at Lighthouse, from a founding student a decade ago to now being ready to head to the next step, eyeing courses in customer and tourism industries, and potentially exploring public speaking and podcast production.

?It has been 10 years after a long journey at the Lighthouse Learning Development Centre and it was the best school I have ever had and I have made so many excellent connections and it was almost like having an own friendship zone that I am surrounded with, with the amazing people who know how to help me through tough times and stressful situations,? he shares. ?It gave me the best character development I could ever ask for and I am grateful to the school for teaching me so many things they have taught me throughout life. I am grateful [to my teachers] for helping me get through the really good life at Lighthouse and for teaching me so many things ? especially with the English courses, the math and sciences, which are my GOATs and it was really excellent.?

He's undecided which colleges he's going to apply for, he's excited to weigh his options, what he excitedly likens to ?a shopping spree.?

?There might not be enough accommodations in college, so I need to stand up and just advocate for myself,? he says.

By Brock Weir