

'Mother Bear' recognized by province for breaking down Region-wide barriers



By Brock Weir

After her first child was born with an intellectual disability, Lois Davies increasingly found herself taking on the role of 'Mother Bear', fighting for her son to have the same opportunities as everyone else around him.

A social worker by training, the Aurora resident had a particular passion working with disabled people but, after Carter was born, this passion only intensified. As he grew up, she became increasingly aware of the barriers in front of him, and indeed across the broad spectrum of persons living with disabilities, and Carter became a definite motivating factor in her work.

'I remember an experience at his Grade 8 graduation,' Ms. Davies recalls. 'All these wonderful young people were receiving awards for various things and all the awards were linked to academic marks. As I sat there, I thought my son and his friends in his special education class weren't even in the running for any of those awards, yet they may have worked equally as hard as those students who deserved awards for their academics, but they didn't get the marks.'

'Disturbed' by this inequity, Ms. Davies got on the phone, advocating for these barriers to be removed and recognition programs in the York Region District School Board to be expanded beyond academia. Since then, awareness has increased, she says, and as Carter, now 22, grew up, opportunities increased and doors opened.

Completing his diploma at Georgian College, Carter has struggled to find a full time job, but with the help of Community Living, he has secured a part-time position and that has made all the difference.

'He said to me after he got this position, 'Mum, I feel so proud of myself. I am a citizen now!'' says Ms. Davies. 'In his own way, he was saying he is contributing to society because he is now working.'

Professionally, Ms. Davies has dedicated her life to ensuring everyone can feel like an equal citizen in society and was recognized at Queen's Park last week as one of the inaugural winners of the David C. Onley Awards, a program established by the former Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, to celebrate Ontario's 'Accessibility Champions.'

Ms. Davies was bestowed the Employee Engagement Award for 'creating a positive and accessible work environment in York Region and working to find new opportunities to build more inclusivity.'

Since joining the Region of York over 10 years ago, Ms. Davies has been a driving force within the Region for breaking down

barriers as prescribed by ? and going well beyond ? the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), which was implemented a decade ago.

?It is funny how God prepares you for things,? says Ms. Davies, of her work as a social worker, that was then intensified by her advocacy for her son. ?I could see where the barriers were for him, so it was the combination of my professional activities and my real life expertise that just complemented one another and promoted that passion for me. I am really passionate about the work we do. A lot of people don't have jobs they look forward to going to every day, but I really enjoy the work because of the change it makes in people's lives.

?I have seen the progression that has happened in the Region over the past 10 years since the AODA was proclaimed and when we look back on all the things that have happened, and the cultural change that has taken place in this organization, it is rather heartwarming and I know it has made a difference in people's lives.?

After arriving at the Region from a position at the Province of Ontario, she found the top priorities at the Region were responding to the AODA and creating an accessibility plan identifying barriers across the Region ? including their own programs, organizations, services, and facilities, with an eye for removal.

?It was really exciting to see [the progress] because each year I thought we would get less initiatives and we would get more and more,? she says. ?As the momentum built and people recognized the need for organizational change, and they started embedding accessibility into their work, we started to get more and more initiatives. I think to date we have addressed over 750 initiatives within York Region and the York Regional Police.?

These plans are now being reviewed and updated, and now their work is extending well beyond what is contained in the plan. A one kilometer track, for instance, has become an example of what to do in fostering accessible forest trails. The results were highlighted by the Province of Ontario and, subsequently, the work spearheaded at the Region has often been cited among Best Practices.

Additional initiatives on the horizon include an Accessibility Self-Assessment tool for organizations across Ontario to help them look for ways to increase accessibility in their operations beyond the AODA. They hope this will be launched next month.

?It was quite overwhelming when I was told I had been awarded this because I didn't know I had been nominated,? says Ms. Davies. ?We had a lot of fun with it at the office, but then I realised the importance of this award and I was quite overwhelmed and quite humbled to be chosen. After everyone left my office, I had a little cry; it was a bit much for me. [Then I thought now that I won the award] now we really have to do well!

?I feel like now we have been highlighted, people will be watching us. We have a really good team here and this is teamwork. The people I work with here are top notch. They are innovative, they are creative, and they work hard. We're all in this together and I hope this inspires others.?