

Williams student's summer company aims to make local businesses accessible for all



Company founder Ben Williamson, right, is pictured with Tyler Barker, Chair of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee, at a recent fundraiser.

By Brock Weir

Ben Williamson has been becoming increasingly frustrated over the lack of accessibility within the Province of Ontario but, thanks to a grant from the Province, he has set out to do something about it.

The Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary Student put his concerns into action founding the company Accessibility 4 Ontario last month with support from the Province of Ontario's My Summer Company program, as well as mentorship from the York Small Business Enterprise Centre.

Accessibility 4 Ontario is an 'accessibility-solving company that helps local businesses interacting with people with disabilities to become handicapped accessible,' explains Ben, noting the Province of Ontario will require all businesses to be compatible with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) by 2025. That act in itself, however, needs work, he says.

'My idea was to start a business so that other businesses can be improved and I can help them become accessible,' he says. 'The AODA in its current form is a very low bar for accessibility and what I offer is unique in that I know the standards for the AODA but I also have the lived experience to be able to tell businesses that the AODA may say you need to train your staff to become 'disability-friendly' as they say, and that may include learning how to be receptive to customers who have various needs, but there is so much more to accessibility than just putting a ramp in.

'Ultimately, I think the definition of accessibility should mean everyone has the same opportunities, whether or not they are able-bodied or they have a different race than the next person. Every person should have the same opportunity as the next and that's what 'accessibility' should mean.'

Putting a ramp in a restaurant is one thing, but if the counter is not of the right height to allow Ben, who lives with cerebral palsy, to go up and place his order, then it is not accessible.

With mandatory compliance to the AODA nine years away, one of the biggest roadblocks Ben says he has encountered in making his business viable is businesses asking the question, 'Why should we care?' if the deadline is so far away. There is no incentive

from the Ontario Government to make businesses accessible, he added, noting he often gets a strong reaction from businesses when he suggests otherwise.

But this, in the end, is counterintuitive.

“You have to make sure that clientele want to come back to your business, otherwise you're going to lose business,” he said. “In the end, not only is it the right and moral thing to do, but it can benefit your businesses in the long run because not only are you nine years ahead of every other business in Ontario, you will start to generate a name as an accessible business in the community, and that will generate business.”

The need will only get more apparent in the next few years due to Ontario's aging population, he adds.

In addition to his business providing advice to businesses on how to make their businesses compatible and accessible, it also connects them with local contractors to make it possible. Mr. Williamson also offers his services as a public speaker to raise awareness of disabilities and engage youth.

“A year from now I would like to be a reputable name in the community with a stable clientele,” he says. “I would like to be able to say I have helped multiple businesses throughout York Region and the GTA become more disability-friendly. I would like to eventually hire some additional staff and my goal is all of my staff will be disabled.”

For more on Ben Williamson and his business, visit www.accessibility4ontario.ca.