



inclusion ⁶⁵ YEARS WINNIPEG

For People with Intellectual Disabilities

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FIFTY YEARS ON THE FAIRWAY: VIPOND CLASSIC STILL SWINGING FOR INCLUSION

The annual Vipond Golf Classic celebrates its 50th anniversary in Winnipeg this summer. Marking half a century of sporting tradition, the tournament stands as a profound statement of support for the intellectual disability community.

In 1969, the Pine Valley Golf Course in Woodbridge, Ontario started a golf tournament to aid children and families living with disabilities, raising just over \$800 that year.

Other golf clubs followed suit, with Winnipeg joining the network of tournaments in 1975. As the event spread across western Canada it adopted the name of Jim Vipond, a celebrated Globe & Mail sports journalist and passionate supporter of the cause.

Today, the Vipond Golf Classic at St. Charles Country Club stands as a pillar of community engagement. The local tournament's partnership with Inclusion Winnipeg is central to its mission, raising approximately \$1.9 million over the years.

An enduring commitment

The tournament's current hardworking committee – including dedicated members Tom Derrett, Blair Eaton, Colin MacLean, Andrea Lochhead and Jon Kilfoyle – has seen fundraising efforts soar in recent years, reflecting both the generosity of donors and club members and the urgency of the community's needs.

For Jon Kilfoyle, the cause is deeply personal. Since his son George was diagnosed with autism, his involvement has grown from casual participant to passionate advocate. Kilfoyle says this year's ambitious fundraising goal is set to break all previous records at \$250,000.



Presenting the tournament's 2024 donation to Inclusion Winnipeg are Vipond Golf Classic Committee members Colin MacLean, Lindsey Cooke, Blair Eaton, Jon Kilfoyle and Tom Derrett.

From childhood to employment

The committee's fundraising efforts are strategically aimed at making a difference with Inclusion Winnipeg in three critical areas of our community: early intervention for children awaiting diagnosis, communication devices for children with communication challenges, and education and employment advocacy for youth and adults.

In Winnipeg, a growing number of children—currently 1,200— are waiting for autism diagnoses, with waitlist times stretching over two years. Without a diagnosis, families can't access resources and support so critical to their child's development. Because time is of the essence, Kilfoyle says the committee has urged Inclusion Winnipeg to direct seed funding towards a program called Social ABCs that intends to provide parents with training, resources and strategies for helping their children develop social and communication skills during this crucial waiting period.

More than 400 Winnipeg children with severe communication challenges are on a two-year waitlist for a symbols-based voice generating device. Last year, with the tournament's contribution, Inclusion Winnipeg via Winnipeg's Open Access Resource Center gave 40 children one of these life-changing devices and the support needed to use them effectively

Less than 20% of people with intellectual disabilities in Winnipeg are employed, notes Kilfoyle, who says: "It's nice to get quick wins, but if you also don't support ongoing advocacy to make the necessary changes in the system, then you're just putting band-aids on the problems."

Kilfoyle's hope is for a future where inclusion is the norm and every individual's potential is recognized. "I want us all to be thinking that people with intellectual disabilities can contribute and that neuro-diversity is additive to our communities and workplaces."

As the Vipond Golf Classic marks its golden anniversary, we'd like to send a huge thank you to all the committee members (past & present) as well as the generous staff, donors and golfers at St. Charles, for your long tradition of giving back to Winnipeg's inclusion community.



Finally, tournament proceeds also help support Inclusion Winnipeg's advocacy efforts on behalf of inclusive education and meaningful employment opportunities, aiming to change perceptions and open doors for neurodiverse youth and adults.

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HELPING CHILDREN SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

The nonprofit Open Access Resource Center (OARC) began more than 30 years ago as a modest pilot project developed by Inclusion Winnipeg. It's now transforming the lives of Manitoba's children and youth with severe communication challenges by providing access to cutting-edge augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technology.

Serving individuals up to age 21 (and beyond), OARC's mission is to ensure that children who are non-verbal or have speech challenges are not left behind in advocacy, relationship-building, or participation in daily life.

AAC technology most often comes in the form of iPads running a symbols-based language application with voice generation, creating a vital communication bridge for these children.

"It's really not just an iPad with an app on it," explains executive director Mary-Alex Willer. "We customize each device, configure it for the child's needs, and train their families and support system on how to use it." This comprehensive approach ensures that children, their families, and educators have what's needed to integrate the technology into as many aspects of life as possible, from home to school and beyond.

A cornerstone of OARC's work is the strategy known as language "modeling," where adults will speak the AAC language or use the AAC device themselves to demonstrate its use. "It's like learning any language — you have to be immersed in it and see others using it to know how to use it yourself," says Willer. The organization



Open Access Resource Centre offers workshops, an annual conference, and a summer camp to foster community and skill-building among AAC users.

encourages the use of symbol sets such as Symbolstix and PCS symbols, supporting whichever system a child is already familiar with to minimize confusion and maximize learning.

OARC's philosophy is that there are no prerequisites for using AAC. "There's tons of research showing there are zero prerequisites," Willer emphasizes. "As soon as we know someone has difficulty with communication, we start modeling AAC for them."

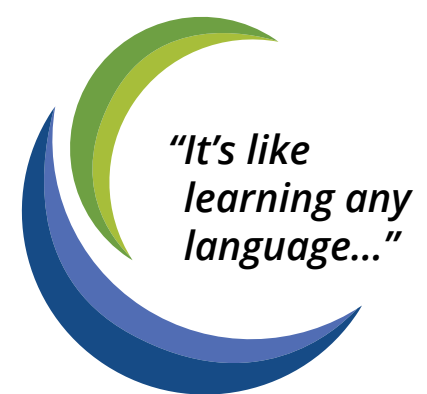
One of the few barriers to using an AAC device is when physical issues limit a child's ability able to

touch a button on the screen. Here, OARC offers additional support by providing switches to control the screen. Other devices might be upgraded to use eye-gaze technology; the user is actually using their eyes like a screen cursor.

With their ability to help limited only by their funding, demand for OARC's services has surged dramatically over the years. Since Willer joined the team in 2019, the waitlist has grown from 25 to around 450 children in Manitoba, perhaps reflecting increased awareness, recognition of neurodevelopmental communication challenges, etc..

Happily, says Willer, a generous donation from the Annual Vipond Classic golf tournament made a noticeable dent in OARC's number of children waiting last year: "We took 40 children off our list from the one donation, which is tremendous!"

Despite the long list and funding constraints, Willer says OARC remains committed to supporting every child in need, ensuring that no voice will go unheard.



ASSISTED DECISION-MAKING: IT'S A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

A multi-year, multi-partner project aimed at upgrading the practice of assisted decision-making in Manitoba is winding down this September. The Community Based Assisted Decision-Making (CBADM) pilot project began with several goals, but all recognized the need to improve the way Manitobans view and support neurodivergent people's right to make choices affecting their lives.



Assisted decision-making is a process for putting in place a support network for a person living with an intellectual disability, made up

of family, friends, and/or trusted supporters. Together, they work to help that person better understand their options and make informed decisions on matters affecting their lives.

With funding from the province's Department of Families, CBADM was carried out by the 120 Maryland Group, made up of Continuity Care, Innovative Life Options, Family Advocacy Network of Manitoba, Community Living Manitoba, and Inclusion Winnipeg.

Specific objectives included increasing the use of peer support networks for families, increasing capacity for the use of support networks, motivating the increased use of community-based assisted decision-makers and assisted decision-making, and reviewing relevant legislation across Canada for potential use in Manitoba.

The practice is recognized in provincial legislation (also in the United Nations Convention on the Rights

of Persons with Disabilities) and is in stark contrast to substitute decision-making, which removes a person's right to decide by having decisions made for them by public trustees or over-loaded case managers.

Inclusion's Janet Forbes points to the case where a man's request to buy much-needed winter clothing was nearly denied by a CLDS case manager's harsh interpretation of the rules, highlighting a major shortcoming of substitute decision-making systems

"For many people with intellectual disabilities, the opportunity to make their own decisions, especially those with legal implications, is rare," Forbes explains. "They often grow up not being expected to make decisions, and institutions like banks or hospitals may even deny their legal capacity."

Forbes says CBADM's final report will be handed over to government in September.

It won't end there, though. Thanks to our generous donors, Inclusion Winnipeg and our 120 Maryland Group partners will continue supporting and advocating for this basic human right of assisted decision-making.



Inclusion's Janet Forbes is optimistic about the project's research, promotion and subsequent recommendations having a tangible impact

ADVOCATING FOR GREATER INCLUSION

While she's only been the director of the Community Inclusion Advocacy Program since it began last November, Amy Shawcross has participated in or led projects for Inclusion Winnipeg since 2009. Her perspective on the newly-created position is that it begins with listening, empowering, and walking alongside people as they navigate challenges.

Amy Shawcross's commitment to the inclusion community runs deep. Since 2009, she's contributed as a facilitator, resource developer, and advocate, always with a focus on empowerment, safety, and proactive support. Her experience spans projects from women's empowerment groups to developing online resources and supporting self-advocates, giving her a layered understanding of the challenges facing our community.

The new Community Inclusion Advocacy Program, says Shawcross, is both broad-based and focused. "We have our Family Engagement Coordinator, Lois Brothers, who's working with families to support them in engaging and coming together. We also have our Youth Inclusion Facilitator, Megan Scott,

who's working with youth in those transition years to help facilitate an everyday life for people."

Her own position, as the title suggests, has Shawcross offering the team direction when needed, but it also has her diving into the deeper, systems-based advocacy work she knows so well.



"It's more often where I focus, whether that's the school systems, the medical systems, or adult systems like Community Living Disability Services," says Shawcross. "A lot of the people I've worked with are adults who either are struggling with the systems they have in place or struggling to get the right systems put in place," she says.

She tells the story of a man living with an intellectual disability who, after struggling on his own, asked

for help applying for Employment Income Assistance.

At the EIA office, they waited four hours before being called up to the counter. "Within the first two minutes his answer to the EIA agent's question had her saying 'Oh, well, if you don't have that you're gonna have to leave and start over,'" Shawcross remembers.

After helping reframe his answer with the agent, three more similar clarifications followed. For each step of the process, Shawcross was able to highlight more specifically what he was talking about to better fit in with the agent's line of questioning.

Balancing her drive to help with a disciplined, methodical approach, Shawcross says most meaningful changes happen through focused, sustainable relationship-building and by knowing where the organization can have the most impact.

A hallmark of Shawcross's outlook is recognizing the intersectionality of the work her team is doing and building partnerships beyond the disability sector. "It's always really important that we don't silo ourselves or the organization," she notes, emphasizing the importance of community-wide collaboration to



Advocacy Director Amy Shawcross believes most meaningful changes happen through focused, sustainable relationship-building.

untangle and address the complex issues people experience.

And thanks to our many generous donors, Amy Shawcross and the Community Inclusion Advocacy Program will continue listening, empowering, and walking alongside the people in our community as we work toward inclusion, dignity, and human rights recognition and realization for all.



South Winnipeg Red River Co-Op's Isabella Toms says the store's neurodivergent workers are highly motivated to succeed.

RED RIVER CO-OP: ACTIVATING INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

Red River Co-op's Isabella Toms, the south Winnipeg location's grocery manager says, she's hired several employees living with intellectual disabilities over the past few years and the results have been overwhelmingly positive for staff, customers, and the business.

Toms oversees hiring at the St. Vital store, and says her partnership with Ready, Willing & Able's (RW&A) Sergio Sousa, labour market facilitator, has been beneficial for both.

Sousa is the labour market facilitator for RW&A in Manitoba, acting as a bridge between employment agency partners and their neurodivergent clients, and employers. He begins by proactively contacting employers for a conversation about inclusive hiring, including the range of employer supports RWA offers, the employment agencies he partners with and the nature of the job seekers they assist.

With their agreement, Sousa then monitors their job postings, looking for matches with any of his partnering agencies' clients. When he spots a likely match, he'll forward the client's profile to hiring managers like Toms.

The whole process is highly collaborative and supportive, says Toms. "The agencies and their support workers are there right from the beginning interview process all the way through training. They're a huge help."

Their hands-on support ensures that both the new workers and the store team are set up for success. Serge adds that "The value-add that RWA does, and which awakens employers, is activate the realization that our community can work in any capacity in any industry, and it's based upon skills, education, experience, and availability. That's the bottom line."

Nearly half-a-dozen neurodivergent workers have been hired at Toms' location in recent years, mostly as courtesy clerks – the entry-level position responsible for bagging, cart retrieval, and customer service.

"And generally, what I've found with people that are supported by these employment agencies is that they want a job, they want to work, and they want to be successful," says Toms. "So if you work with them and you give them a little bit of extra time, you'll usually have a really, really strong employee that wants to be here every day and has a great attitude."

The impact is felt beyond the bottom line. Customers frequently compliment the courtesy clerks on their friendliness and work ethic, and the store's team culture has benefited. Toms says she's even improved training materials and task lists for all staff, drawing inspiration from the clarity and structure that helps her new hires succeed.

Red River Co-op's experience demonstrates that inclusive hiring isn't just the right thing to do – it's good for business, team morale, and the community.

HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE TRANSITION TOWARD A MORE CONFIDENT FUTURE

Parents watching their young person transition from high school to adulthood know how bumpy that road can be. For parents of a young person living with an intellectual disability, that bumpy road can include a few twists.

The Youth Transition Series, a partnership between Inclusion Winnipeg and the River East School Division, was created to help families with neurodivergent children navigate this complex period with a little more confidence and support.

Inclusion Winnipeg's Youth Inclusion Facilitator, Megan Scott, explains that the program's core motivation is to start important conversations as early as possible so that families and youth can begin envisioning and preparing for life beyond high school.

Scott emphasizes that the Youth Transition Series is built on person-

centered planning. Rather than imposing goals, the program encourages youth to express their own strengths, interests, and aspirations. Scott says her role, along with co-facilitator Mary LaPage Leclerc, is to support youth in breaking down big dreams into manageable steps.

The series' nine sessions are held monthly, each with a different theme relevant to families with neurodivergent children. These sessions are designed to be accessible and welcoming, with both parents and youth participating in discussions and activities.

The overarching goal, Scott says, is for families to feel heard and less alone, and for youth to work on self-advocacy skills, confidence, and their sense of identity as they move toward a more self-determined life.

The program also acts as a bridge to community resources, helping families explore options for employ-

ment, well-being, volunteering, and social connection after high school.

For Sandra and her neurodivergent son Brody, the Youth Transition Series has been transformative. 17-year-old Brody is in grade 12, and plans to enter another Inclusion-sponsored course called Project Life next fall.

Sandra says her son had been full of anxiety about graduating: "He's been wondering about his friendships and how he'll see his friends when there's no more school, where he would live, those sorts of things. And he was thinking he'd have to do it all alone."

Attending the sessions together has been helping Sandra and Brody break down the transition process into a series of realistic, bite-sized goals. She appreciates the practical information and strategies provided, as well as the chance to connect with



other families facing similar challenges. The series is also giving Brody a platform for exploring and expressing his own interests and goals.

Most importantly, says Sandra, the sessions are giving Brody a new sense of optimism about his future.

"He's learning that there is a place for him after high school," she says. "It's helped alleviate a lot of his anxiety, knowing that there are resources for him and places he can access, because he knows that he's different and he knows that he needs extra help."

MORE CHOICES IN THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS



Executive Director Patti Chiappetta says programs like ICOF empower people living with intellectual disabilities while making stronger, more respectful communities.

In the early 90's, Inclusion's executive director David Wetherow and our staff and supporters were wrestling with one of the intellectual disability community's toughest questions: what other option was there to living at home, in a group home, or in an institution?

Our response was to start up a pilot project in 1993 called In the Company of Friends (ICOF). It's yet another Inclusion Winnipeg project that grew to take on a life of its own.

The ICOF project was truly unique: an individualized, direct funding model that allowed neurodivergent participants to self-direct their lives in the most meaningful of ways. They would be called 'employers', which meant hiring their own staff, managing their own budget, and making decisions about their living arrangements and activities – all with the advice and support of their own handpicked network of family and friends.

Over the next few years, ICOF employers and their individual networks of supporters quickly became passionate about the independence and meaningful relationships the project brought them.

In 2000, the project became a major driver in establishing a nonprofit organization – Innovative LIFE Options – that would provide the grow-

ing number of participants with expertise, resources and supports. And with that, ICOF had become a self-sustaining program.

"For me," says LIFE's executive director Patti Chiappetta, "the uniqueness is how flexible and personal the program is; how it really empowers the individual with the intellectual disability."

In group homes, she notes, people often have to do what the agency staff say or what everybody else in the home want to do. As an ICOF employer, each sets their own schedule.

Patti's quick to point out that many people thrive in the more communal setting of a group home, but for those seeking greater independence, there's ICOF. "And when we have a lot of choice in our lives and we make decisions for ourselves, I strongly believe we're making ourselves a little more powerful every day."

It's LIFE's 25th anniversary this year, and its nine staff members currently

support 70 ICOF employers living in houses, side-by-sides, condominiums and apartments in cities and towns all across the province.

Some have jobs, some volunteer and pursue various interests, but all are leading lives of their own choosing. Patti uses the example of Dan, who announced to his family on his 18th birthday that he didn't want to live his adult life with his family.

Respecting his wishes, his family found ICOF, helped him establish his support network and plan for living independently, and moved him into his own home. His supporters say their instructions to Dan's staff were simple and direct: "Dan is going to live an ordinary life, and your job is to help him do that."

Says Patti, "I strongly believe that when you just accept people for who they are and you provide them with opportunities and supports – like ICOF does – you're actually making a stronger, more respectful community."

