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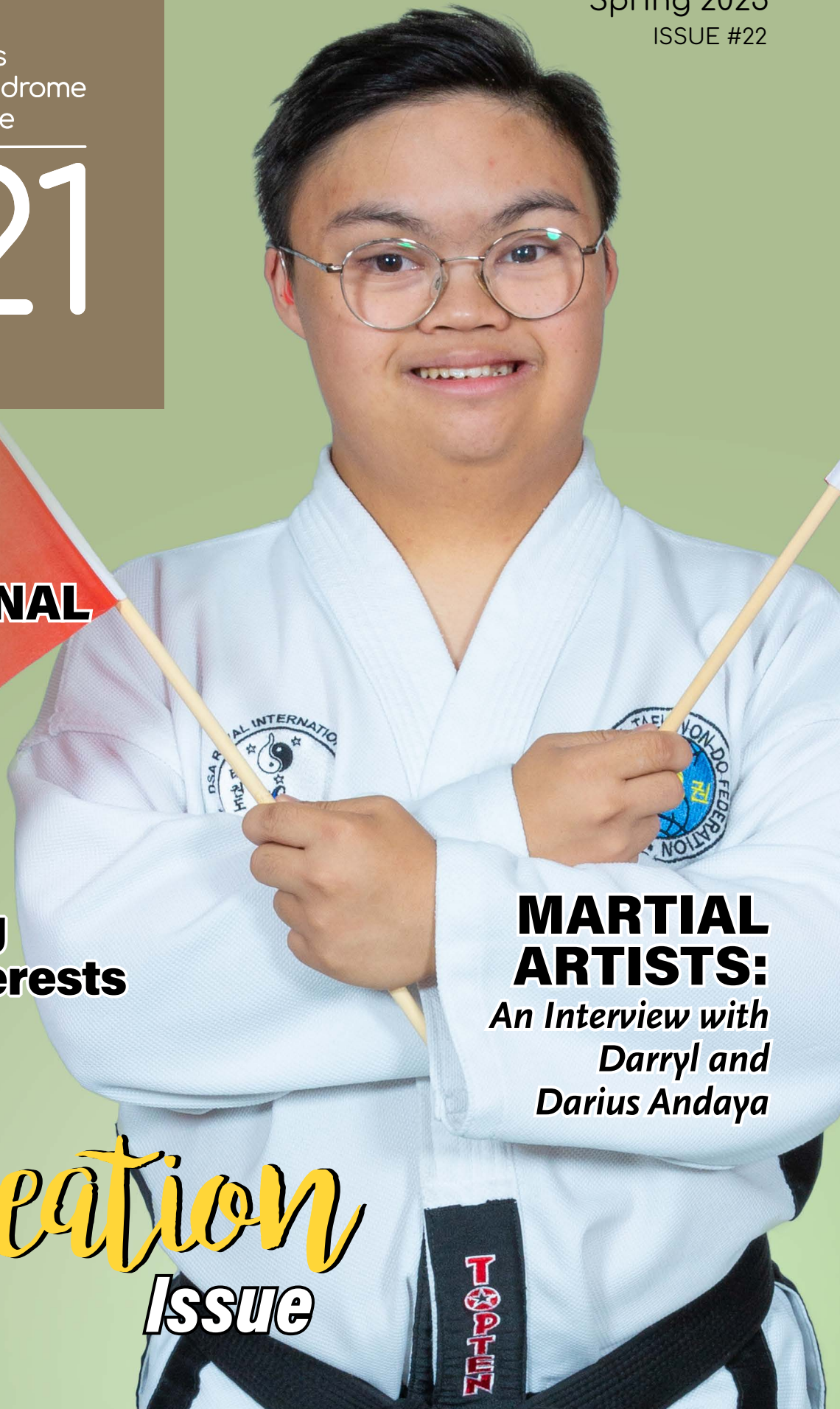
## **BUILDING INCLUSIVE RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS**

## **The Hidden Benefits of Encouraging Creative Interests**

# *The Recreation Issue*

## **MARTIAL ARTISTS:**

*An Interview with  
Darryl and  
Darius Andaya*



*Plus: Fun for everyone at DSRF, and self-advocates share their recreational pursuits*

Recreational activities are an excellent way for youth and adults with Down syndrome to explore their passions, but there is more to it than that.

It's what we do after work and school that brings us joy, connects us, encourages our creativity, and builds our confidence.

In this Recreation Issue of 3.21 Magazine, self-advocates share how they became involved in a variety of recreational activities from Taekwondo to starting a book club, and the unforeseen benefits they experienced.

You'll also hear first-hand from organizations that are actively running inclusive recreation programs in Canada and what makes them so successful. They'll be sharing their best advice on accommodations other organizations can implement to make their programs inclusive for children with developmental disabilities.

We hope this issue informs and motivates you and your family as you pursue new passions and interests this year.

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**4 12 20**

**4** Fun For Everyone:  
*DSRF's Recreational Programs*

**12** Martial Artists:  
*An Interview with Darryl and Darius Andaya*

**16** Building Inclusive Recreational Programs

**20** The Hidden Benefits of Encouraging Creative Interests

**24** Self-Advocate Q&A

**28** DSRF Corner

**30** CDSS Spotlight

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# Fun For Everyone: DSRF's Recreational Programs

Fun comes in countless flavours. Some love the arts, some love sports – and some love both of these and more!

At the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation, we recognize the learning potential of all sorts of leisure activities. Over time, we have developed a full suite of recreational programs for teens and adults with Down syndrome: the artsy ones, the sporty ones, and everyone in between.

Below is an overview of some of these programs and the benefits of each activity for people with Down syndrome. If a similar program isn't available in your area, perhaps you can be the one to get the ball rolling!

## Improv

Many people with Down syndrome are born performers. At DSRF's Let's InterACT: An Integrated Improv Ensemble, they get the chance to be in the spotlight – generally with

hilarious results. Program creator, speech therapist Liv Meriano, tells us why she started this program.

Being an improviser myself, I found it beneficial for me as a disabled person, to feel confident in my own skin and accepted. It was incredibly important for me in my youth to have a safe and supportive outlet for expressing myself and it was rewarding that some of the traits I had – impulsiveness, creativity, attending to everything - were seen as strengths in that arena. That's huge to a kid who isn't made to feel confident in their abilities outside of the stage. I was instantly hooked!

I also saw my older sister go through the system, with few to no programs offered once she and her friends entered adulthood. It made me think, what could I do? What could I offer adults with disabilities? And it hit me – IMPROV!

I got all my improv friends to come out and reached out to Community Living where I lived. We met every week in the hockey arena and “jammed.” That's when we created “The Improv All Stars” – an inclusive improv troop. That was in 2011, and I've facilitated variations of this program ever since.

I saw great impact in those who participated. Families would often share with us, “I don't even recognize them!” or, “Wow, I've never heard them make a joke before!” or, “This has allowed them to come out of their shell!” So much so, that I went on to study the benefits of improv in my undergraduate and master's research.

The first step in adapting activities for people with Down syndrome is believing and knowing that everything can in fact be adapted or modified to meet the needs of your participants. In my improv classes, we use a lot of visuals – written words on a board, gestures, props, and pictures to supplement understanding and support memory. We break things down into steps as participants are learning new games and class expectations.

We also get to know the participants. We think about their strengths and put them in roles or play games that will make those skills shine. We learn about

each other's interests and incorporate those into our rehearsals and scene work. The constant question in my head is, “How can everyone best participate?” and “What can I do to support them?”

Improv provides many benefits to people with Down syndrome. First off, you get to be your authentic self. Improv is built on the idea of acceptance. The #1 rule is to always say “yes!” This type of “yes and” attitude encourages people to share, listen to one another, and build on each other's ideas, and creates an atmosphere of collaboration and teamwork.

Something we always say at improv is, “There are no mistakes!” Creating this feeling of safety and trust from the beginning encourages people to take risks and try new things, knowing that we're all in this together.

I believe these types of exercises and player guidelines help people in and outside of improv – in their interactions with others and how they approach things they inevitably can't predict. But I think the strongest benefit of all is the instant feedback from your peers. There's nothing like making people laugh! It's inherently rewarding and one of my favourite parts of improv is seeing people connect with their inner child, making themselves laugh, making others laugh and finding the time to “play” as adults again. We don't do that enough!

Christopher Weber never passes up the opportunity to take centre stage. He tells us his favourite things about improv are “having fun, playing brain games, and using my imagination.” He loves pretending to be other people, and his favourite game is Captain's Orders. Asked what he's learned through improv, Christopher says, “Listening, taking turns, working with others, using my imagination, and new theatre games.”

## Photography

People with Down syndrome have a unique perspective on the world. What better way to showcase it than through the art of photography?

At DSRF, teens and adults hone their skills at the Sharpshooters Photography Club, run by occupational



I realized early on that it is important to let students use whichever equipment they feel most comfortable with – whether it's a digital camera, point and shoot, iPhone or iPad. Letting them select their equipment increases the chances that they will use it independently.

We use a lot of visual examples of photography, working on basic skills and reviewing them every session. I encourage students to offer up ideas and focus on taking photos of things that interest them the most. For example, for World Down Syndrome Day 2024, the students came up with the concept of highlighting the “lucky few” symbol on their hands coupled with self-portraits, and we created a whole exhibit around that. They really shine when they are provided with creative freedom.

Tiana Kirkegaard is one of the Sharpshooters, and we asked her to share her thoughts on the program.

I enjoy so many things at the Sharpshooters Photography Club! I love the lessons as a student photographer who wants to get better at my photography skills. It has become one of my favorite hobbies because I make memories when I take a picture, and I treasure the photos I take.

It's fun to explore angles, and different lighting. I also love making new friends because we get to know each other in the classes.

I really loved the photo shoot like the portraits we did. And I love to show and share my photos in the exhibit which was displayed at DSRF and the Luppolo brewery. It was fun to invite family and friends and to see my fellow photographers' hard work.

I've learned so many things. First, I learned about the camera and about taking pictures. I practiced the skill of holding a camera very still and steady so I can focus and then go from one thing to another. I also learned about moving my body to zoom in and out. I learned so much about doing different kinds of angles when I take pictures.

I also learned about taking pictures in different lighting and doing portraits. I learned I had to take

therapist Hina Mahmood – who also has a side business as a talented photographer. Below, Hina shares her approach to teaching students with Down syndrome and the benefits they accrue through this rewarding hobby.

I am an avid photographer with a small photography business, and I love to share my passion with others. I was given an opportunity to run a summer photography camp during the DSRF Summer Program and had so much interest from students that a monthly meet up group to practice our skills was the next step.

The aim of Sharpshooters is to learn and develop digital photography skills in a fun and creative environment, and to empower individuals with Down syndrome to express themselves and tell their stories through photography. As students with Down syndrome are strong visual learners and tend to gravitate towards the visual media arts, photography is a great way for them to communicate their feelings, vision, and thoughts through a medium that is an absolute strength.

# Let's Talk Parent-to-Parent

Parents and caregivers in our free **Multilingual Caregiver Network** are ready to answer your questions about raising a child with Down syndrome! Join the network to be connected with a caregiver in our community today.



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responsibility to get consent/permission first before taking a picture of someone. I learned to look at the surroundings around me and to be aware of the people I take pictures of.

## Strength + Conditioning Training

In the summer of 2024, DSRF ran a 1-week strength and conditioning training program for the first time. It was such a hit, we turned it into a year-round program. Each week, young adults with Down syndrome gather together to flex their muscles and work out with Team Rambo, led by Tony Gallo. Here's Tony to pump you up.

Team Rambo wants to fill people's hearts with our love for fitness. My cousin Fred had Down syndrome, and we played a lot together growing up, creating memories that are in my heart forever. Though we hadn't stayed in close touch through the years, Fred was my inspiration to start this class. And then one day, Fred and his family were looking at the DSRF website; they saw my name and our program and signed up! So, we actually reconnected through this program.

Exercise is the most important medication there is. Team Rambo's program consists of a full body strength workout along with cardio and core flexibility – all backed by fun music and supportive coaching. We start as friends and become family – that is team Rambo's motto.

Teaching people with Down syndrome is just like any fitness class: it's about learning each individual's mental and physical strengths. If it's the first class with new people, I slightly modify the class, so no one ever feels left out. If some are a little more advanced than others, that's no problem. I've got Rambo Jr. with me, so one of us can get the more advanced students going while the other spends time individually with those who need more assistance and positive motivation.

For people with Down syndrome, exercise can help to improve physical health and fitness. Exercise can help to increase strength, flexibility, and endurance, and it can also help to reduce the risk of developing chronic conditions such as obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.

In addition to its physical benefits, exercise can positively impact cognitive functioning in people with Down syndrome. Physical activity has been shown to increase blood flow to the brain, improving cognitive performance and enhancing learning and memory. Exercise can also help reduce stress and improve mood, which can be beneficial for people with Down syndrome who may be prone to anxiety and mood disturbances.

Another important benefit of exercise for people with Down syndrome is that it can promote social interactions and confidence. Many people with Down syndrome struggle with social interactions and may have difficulty engaging in activities with others. Exercise can provide a fun and engaging way for people with Down syndrome to interact with others and develop social skills.

Exercise can also provide a sense of accomplishment and boost self-esteem in people with Down syndrome. By setting goals and achieving them through regular physical activity, people feel a sense of pride and accomplishment.

David Shuttleworth has been an enthusiastic participant since DSRF's strength and conditioning program began – so much so that he now works out regularly with Tony at his studio. He tells us:

I enjoy the strength training program because I like my instructor Tony Gallo. I think he is cool and we have fun together. Tony has taught me how to use new equipment and to do the exercises properly. My favourite exercises are biking, core, lifting weights and squats.

## Yoga

Sometimes, we all just need to chill out. Yoga has become increasingly popular among the general population, and people with Down syndrome are no different. In fact, it's such a popular activity that DSRF now hosts not just one class, but two. Virginia Paquette shares her philosophy in working with teens and adults who have Down syndrome.



When I learned that people with Down syndrome often live with pain, I thought that a gentle yoga practice may provide some relief.

I am a believer in gentle teaching approach to yoga, cultivating compassionate awareness of what is happening in one's own body in the moment, and offering choices in everything we do in class. Also, safety and inclusivity is important and always considered.

People with Down syndrome receive the same benefits from yoga that others do. This includes developing body awareness, improving balance and coordination, and developing concentration and memory. Yoga can provide temporary pain relief, and it helps reduce anxiety. It also helps to develop discipline and improve self-esteem.

When leading people with Down syndrome, I allow more time for transition between postures. I use clear cuing language, along with physical demonstration of each posture. I cue body awareness and ask questions like, "How does this posture feel in your body?"



Props such as yoga blocks and chairs are helpful. Students can take breaks anytime during class; most choose the back play area or laying down on their mat. But the best part is a dance break halfway through the class. Students get a turn choosing the song we use for our little dance party.

### Music

Music is a common passion among many people with Down syndrome – so much so that it’s often incorporated into non-music programs at DSRF, as Virginia mentioned. Dance breaks are also a daily occurrence in our math and reading classes, among others!

So, it was only natural to start some programs to cater to this love of music and movement. Enter Lizzie Carolan, a speech therapist and gifted musician. Under her leadership, DSRF now offers three different music programs at various times of the year: Rock Camp, Songwriters Studio, and Karaoke Club. Lizzie shares more about these programs and the benefits of music for people with Down syndrome.

I was inspired after seeing the passion and talent so many students at DSRF have for music! I saw an opportunity to share my love for music, while providing a space for students to showcase their musical abilities, build on their skills, and form meaningful social connections through music.

Our musical programs are all designed with individuals with Down syndrome in mind. First, I send out a social story with details about the program at least a week in advance to ensure that everyone feels prepared. I use visual schedules that I review at the beginning of each session and reference throughout, helping students know what to expect and reducing uncertainty. These strategies help everyone feel supported and engaged right from the start. I also make sure to include a performance element at the end of each program, as I find so many students love to showcase their work this way. I am always amazed at how students learn or write songs and then perform them, all in just a few days. There is a lot of musical talent in the Down syndrome community!

I see students’ self-confidence blossom as they go through the process of learning or creating something new and then proudly sharing it with others. I also see students’ problem-solving and perspective-taking skills develop as we talk about sharing instruments, taking turns, and making sure everyone feels good in a group together. But, my favorite part of these programs are the meaningful social connections that come from experiencing music together, allowing students to bond in a way that transcends language. I hope these programs also show other musicians and educators out there that individuals with Down syndrome can learn music and are equally deserving of access to music education and recreational programs.

Multi-time rock camper Becca Hoos looks forward all year to the summer program. Her favourite part is rock star day, when she can let loose with her most outlandish styles. She also loves the end-of-camp concert performance and showing off the video to everyone who visits her family’s home.



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# Martial Artists:



## An Interview with Darryl and Darius Andaya

*This article is adapted from Season 9, Episode 9 of The LowDOWN: A Down Syndrome Podcast. Click [here](#) to listen to the full conversation.*

*Darius Andaya is an International Instructor of Taekwondo with 6th Dan certification. He is a Pan American and North American and Caribbean Champion, and a longtime advocate for the Adapted/Special Needs/Inclusive Taekwondo program. His son Darryl, who has Down syndrome, is a 2nd degree black belt, Special Needs Taekwondo World Champion, and an assistant instructor for the Adapted Taekwondo program at the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation.*

**3.21:** Darius, can you tell us a little bit about how you got started in Taekwondo?

**DARIUS:** I started when I was 12, so it's been over 40 years now. My dad brought me to the Taekwondo school in the Philippines, which was a two-hour drive from where we lived. Every time I trained, it involved a four-hour round trip – not a small commitment!

The training over there is very serious – old school teaching. I got up to second degree black belt in the Philippines. Then we moved to Canada and I stopped for about 10 years. But once I was a father, my kids asked me if I could start teaching them. So I restarted training myself, and began teaching the kids in the backyard. Then some of their classmates came and it grew from there. In 2008 we became a proper school; today, DSA Taekwondo has about 70 students.

**3.21:** One of your children is Darryl, who we know very well at the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation. Like you, Darryl is also an international Taekwondo champion. When did you realize that Darryl could not only participate in Taekwondo, but could excel at a world level?

**DARIUS:** When he was a lot younger, while we were teaching classes, Darryl would be in the back doing all the moves. He would just mimic what everyone else was doing. At around nine-years-old, he started formal training. By that point, we had three other black belts in the family, and we all helped him out every day. He takes everything in. Darryl doesn't quit. Each time we critique him, he just processes it and practices more.

**3.21:** For as long as we can remember, Darryl has practiced his moves here at DSRF, while waiting for his therapy appointments to start. In the parking lot, in the lobby - wherever. Darryl, you were really committed to it even as quite a young child. What do you like about Taekwondo?

**DARRYL:** I actually enjoy working. And I like breaking a board in half, and traveling to places like New Zealand.

**3.21:** So you like the physical part of it where you can really use your strength, right? And you went to New Zealand for the world championships. Can you tell us about your medals?



**DARRYL:** I have two gold medals, silver, and several bronzes. Me and my dad fought on the stage.

**DARIUS:** It's part of the competition. We pair up, one person with a disability and one person without a disability. And Darryl really leveled up the standards!

**3.21:** You do a lot of demonstrations, like at the annual Run Up for Down Syndrome. And every time you're doing a demonstration, we can see little kids watching with stars in their eyes, wishing they could do that. Darryl, do you like doing those demonstrations for other people?

**DARRYL:** It is exciting to do it. I'm not nervous.

**3.21:** Darius, you run an adapted Taekwondo for Beginners class here at DSRF. How did that begin, and what is your philosophy around martial arts for people with disabilities?

**DARIUS:** Several years ago, we were invited to do a one-week camp as part of DSRF's summer program. Coming out of that, a number of people were interested in taking it further, so we decided to make it a regular thing and turned it into a weekly class.

Right now, there's no formal adapted program within our federation, so I've developed it on my own and I've

encouraged other schools to use my program. It's helpful to have a standard approach that's the same for everyone, so that when we meet at competition, everybody knows the same things and is at the same level.

It's all about adapting the typical program to the abilities of your students. Taekwondo includes both intellectual and physical practices, so the specific adaptations depend upon the nature of the disabilities, whether they are intellectual or physical. We don't focus on what they can't do; we adapt it to showcase what they can do. If you have a student in a wheelchair, they can't do the jumps, so we focus on the arm movements instead.



The main thing for me is that everyone gets to try it. Some parents have fears about their kids getting hurt, but I encourage everyone to just give it a try. It's good for them physically, and it also gives them self-confidence when they achieve something. Taekwondo has lots of competitions that allow them to show off what they can do. So many parents who were hesitant at first come back later and say, "You were right!"

**3.21:** And Darryl, you help lead this program too. What's your role in the class?

**DARRYL:** It is my job to help the students. I show them how to stretch. And I set up the mats.

**3.21:** It must feel really good to have younger students looking up to you and learning from you. You're a role model!

**DARRYL:** Yeah. It feels good.

**3.21:** In 2023, you led several students to participate in the Canadian Taekwondo Championships in Vernon, BC. The level of excitement around here was off the charts! What was it like to take so many students to that event?

**DARIUS:** That was very exciting, because it was the first time our students had the opportunity to participate in a national event. The masters and grandmasters were there, and everyone who watched our students perform was very inspired. I had a lot of parents come to me and say they didn't know that people with disabilities can do Taekwondo. And now we are actually talking about having an adapted committee, so we can further develop it in Canada. That's a great long-term goal.

**3.21:** What is your big dream for this program?

**DARIUS:** I want to go international. There's already an international committee, but so far it hasn't come to Canada yet; they're mainly focusing on Europe. When Darryl competed in New Zealand, that competition wasn't part of our federation, but they made an exception for him because he's the only second-degree black belt in Canada and there was nowhere else he could compete. We want this opportunity to be available for all our students.

**3.21:** Do you have any advice for parents who are thinking about putting their child in martial arts but don't have any experience themselves? What should they look for in a program?

**DARIUS:** The first thing they have to do is find an instructor who has empathy for their students; someone who understands the challenges they face. Patience is a big factor. You have to let them go through it on their own time, at their own pace. You can't force them to follow your timetable.

**3.21:** Darryl, what would you say to kids who want to do Taekwondo?

**DARRYL:** Start with the little dragon (the small kids). Start young.

## World Champion

Darryl Andaya is no stranger to extraordinary accomplishments. Through nine years of intense dedication and hard work at his family's studio in Burnaby, he earned his black belt in Taekwondo – a lofty achievement made even more impressive by the fact that Darryl has Down syndrome.

Darryl's excellence in the martial arts propelled him all the way to New Zealand, where he represented Canada in 2019 at the inaugural International Special Needs Taekwon-do Games. There, he made history by becoming one of the first ever Special Needs Taekwon-do World Champions, winning two gold medals, one silver, and one bronze. As the one-man Canadian team, Darryl placed fourth among all nations and quickly became a fan favourite.

"Canada was well-loved and other countries chanted 'Canada!' every time Darryl went on the mats," says his father Darius. "Darryl made lots of new friends from other countries."

Darryl, a longtime student of the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation, has completed years of speech therapy at DSRF, and has participated in many of DSRF's adult education programs. Through his hard work, Darryl began to speak more and became better able to vocalize his thoughts. He has become more confident and increasingly independent, making his own decisions and learning how to use the transit system.

Darryl's growing communication abilities, social skills, decision making, and athleticism have helped him in his transition to adulthood and in his development as a martial artist. From an early age, his perseverance and strong spirit have been clear, and have enabled him to achieve things that other people never thought he could do. The sky is the limit for this world champion.





# Building Inclusive Recreational Programs

By Catherine Francis, YMCA of Simcoe/Muskoka

Inclusivity enriches our lives, strengthens our communities, and ensures every individual feels valued and empowered to thrive. Recreational programs play a significant role in fostering inclusivity, and at the YMCA of Simcoe/Muskoka, we have seen firsthand the power of designing programs that welcome children and youth of all abilities, including those with neurodevelopmental differences.

The insights shared in this article provide practical guidance, draw from our experiences, and highlight examples to help recreational program organizers and volunteers design more inclusive activities. With small, deliberate adjustments, you can create meaningful and lasting impacts on participants, their families, and the broader community.



## The Importance of Inclusive Recreation Programs

When children and youth with disabilities can participate in camps, sports, and events, they feel a stronger sense of belonging, build confidence, and develop crucial social and physical skills. For their peers without disabilities, these shared experiences create opportunities to foster empathy, understanding, and form meaningful friendships.

The benefits don't stop at the individual level. Social connectedness, as highlighted by BC Healthy Communities [1], leads to healthier, happier communities. Inclusive programs also make a statement—one that welcomes diversity, eliminates barriers, and celebrates the contributions of every person. This approach strengthens a community's ability to support all its members, especially those often marginalized.

## Ideas to Foster Inclusion in Recreational Programs

At the YMCA, inclusion is more than a value; it's integrated into all our initiatives. Drawing from our experiences, we suggest these ideas for designing inclusive recreational programs:

- **Use Inclusive Language** – Consider starting with communication. Review marketing materials, program descriptions, and guidelines to ensure they use accessible and inclusive language. Aim to emphasize participation and belonging while being mindful of how neurodevelopmental differences are addressed.
- **Incorporate Visual Supports** – For children and youth with neurodevelopmental differences, communication barriers can be addressed by integrating visual aids like picture schedules, instructions, or icons. These tools can help participants navigate the programs more effectively.
- **Provide Staff and Volunteer Training** – Consider educating staff and volunteers on inclusive practices. Training could cover

understanding neurodevelopmental differences, fostering patience, and adapting activities to ensure everyone feels welcome and supported.

- **Adapt Activities for Flexibility** – Explore designing programming that incorporates multi-sensory activities and allows for modifications. For example, flexible options like crafts, sports, and games can accommodate different ability levels. Offering low-sensory swim time, with dimmed lights and a quieter pool deck, might also create a more calming environment for individuals sensitive to bright lights and loud noises.
- **Create Quiet Spaces** – Think about designing quiet spaces where participants can take breaks from stimulating environments. These spaces can offer a simple and effective way for individuals to rest and recharge as needed.
- **Engage Families** – Families can offer valuable insights into a child's specific needs. Consider collaborating with parents or guardians to gather feedback and ensure your program aligns with the child's specific requirements.



[1] <https://bchealthycommunities.ca/take-action/inclusive-communities/>



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## Ready to Make a Difference?

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- **Encourage Peer Support** – Explore implementing buddy or mentor systems to promote inclusion. Peers can help bridge understanding and foster friendships. For example, pairing participants during team-building exercises can help create natural bonds and strengthen the sense of belonging.

### Opportunities to Grow and Strengthen Communities

Creating inclusive programs offers a meaningful way to connect communities and foster belonging. While the journey may involve addressing practical considerations like resources, awareness, and initial hesitancy, these moments present opportunities to innovate and grow.

For example, funding opportunities are widely available through grants that support inclusion and accessibility initiatives. Partnering with local organizations or charities can also provide additional resources, such as equipment or specialized training.

Raising awareness is a powerful way to engage communities. Hosting workshops, open houses, and events that highlight the importance and benefits of inclusivity can deepen understanding and inspire participation.

Building trust with families is another key step. By sharing success stories, showcasing your commitment to inclusion, and maintaining open and transparent communication, you can create an environment where everyone feels valued and supported.

### The Ripple Effect of Inclusive Communities

When we prioritize inclusivity in recreational programs, the impact extends far beyond the participants. Families develop greater confidence in their communities, mentors find purpose in meaningful volunteer opportunities, and organizations earn trust as champions of equity and diversity. At the YMCA, we believe that inclusivity is essential for creating a healthy, thriving community. When children and youth with neurodevelopmental differences feel valued, they gain the confidence to contribute in ways that enrich their lives—and ours.

To every organization and volunteer working to make their recreational programs inclusive, the message is clear: even small changes can make a meaningful difference. Simple actions – like adapting an activity, choosing thoughtful language, or creating a quiet space – can show a genuine commitment to valuing diversity and ensuring everyone feels welcome and supported.



Download Your 2025 Toolkit at  
[CDSS.ca/World-Down-Syndrome-Day](https://CDSS.ca/World-Down-Syndrome-Day)

# The Hidden Benefits of Encouraging Creative Interests

By Courtney Cassel

Evie, Founder of Kindred Spirits Book Club

Every child and adult should be encouraged to explore their tugging curiosity to create. Following your passion for artistic pursuits like writing, painting, photography, and acting is not just about recreational fun. Developing creative skills as a child can lay the foundation for a potential future career and strengthen a myriad of other skills people with Down syndrome often find challenging.

Artistic expression has been shown to improve confidence, communication skills, cognitive abilities, self-expression, fine motor skills, the ability to regulate anxiety and stress, and social skills in individuals with Down syndrome.<sup>1</sup> Activities like book clubs and writing circles are also great opportunities to expand your social network, another known challenge for our adult community members.

We spoke with four self-advocates who followed their own creative passions and found new careers, skills, and friendships along the way.

[1] Benefits for Art Therapy for Children with Developmental Disabilities, March 2023, Integrity Inc. <https://www.integrityinc.org/benefits-of-art-therapy-for-children-with-developmental-disabilities/#~:text=Improved%20Communication%20and%20Self-Expression,their%20self-esteem%20and%20confidence>

## KINDRED SPIRITS BOOK CLUB

with Evie and Rachael

Reading has always been a fundamental part of Evie's daily routine. On any given morning, you will find her exploring the pages of a new book or rereading one of her old favourites, like Anne of Green Gables.

*"If she goes to the cottage or on a trip, she always has to bring books with her. Often 20 books is the maximum – if there wasn't a number, she would fill the whole car with books!" - Rachael, Evie's Support Worker*

As Evie and people in her circle of support worked to create her microboard, she came up with the idea of starting a book club. Accurately named Kindred Spirits as a nod to her favourite novel, Rachael and Evie invited friends, family, and connections from her network to join.

Each month the group picks a new theme instead of a specific book to accommodate different reading levels and interests. Some of their favourite themes so far have been Mary Poppins, Robert Munsch, Dr. Seuss, Winnie the Pooh, poetry, and books about friendship.

Through the book club, Evie has been able to share her interests and help build a great sense of community. Recently, Evie has taken it even further and found new ways to meet people by making frequent visits to the library. She even created a new social event called "Snack and Chat" where once a month people can bring a snack and a book to discuss together.

## CREATIVE WRITING WITH BRI

With Brianna and Bibi

*"I have been writing since I was a little girl. I used to write scripts for my favourite movies and tv shows, and cooking shows too, and I write lots of recipes. In March 2020, I started to write every morning with my sister and mom at home. I love thinking of a prompt to write about. We asked my friends and people from our Down syndrome group to join us and write every week." - Brianna*

In June 2020, Brianna graduated from high school and writing every morning helped to give her new routine structure. Brianna loved coming up with writing prompts so much that in September of that year, she and her mother

Bibi started her own business running virtual creative writing classes. Beyond Writing (now called Creative Writing with Bri) runs three sessions a year in the Fall, Winter, and Spring for youth and adults with Down syndrome.

*"I help my mom prepare the prompts every Sunday morning. Everyone writes about the prompts in their own time. Our groups are mostly for young adults who have graduated from high school." - Brianna*



Brianna, Owner of Creative Writing with Bri

Coming up with imaginative scenarios can be challenging for some participants; food and music prompts tend to be the most popular, like writing about Taylor Swift Era's Tour.

*"Typically we will also have a procedural prompt, like mom is not at home and you get home a half hour early and you hear a knock on the door, what do you do? How do you get in the house? It helps to encourage independence and safety." - Bibi, Brianna's Mother*

By pursuing her passion for writing, Brianna has learned how to run a business, how to facilitate a group, how to take turns, and what it means to be an active listener. She



Lindsey, DramaWay Performer



also uses writing as a way to regulate her emotions when she is feeling upset.

This past year, their writing classes expanded to include other adults with disabilities, and it has been a great way to build a community of writers and make new friends. Any adult who loves writing is welcome!

## ACTING AND SINGING WITH DRAMAWAY

### With Lindsey

When Lindsey says she is a fan of musicals, she means it! Starting with Momma Mia as a little girl, Lindsey has seen over 113 musicals and even starred in a few productions herself. From Lady MacBeth to playing the heel as Ms. Hannigan, Lindsey performs in both plays and musicals through DramaWay, an organization that offers arts programs for people of all abilities.

With both of her parents being music teachers, Lindsey has received no shortage of encouragement to follow her theatrical dreams. She has been performing since a

young child, with 17 years of dance and 11 years of theatre experience.

Memorizing lines is the hardest part for Lindsey, who finds it much easier to memorize dance moves. But with some help running lines with her parents, she has given amazing performances in leading roles like Danny Zuko in Grease.

Friends are a really important part of Lindsey's life on and off the stage. She has made many friends through acting and dance, including her best friend Joey who is a DJ who loves to dance. Her other best friend Ben is a fellow performer, and they give each other confidence and encouragement to overcome any stage fright.

Lindsey also had the chance to explore teaching her own class at DramaWay, building her leadership and public speaking skills. She also got to try something new – break dancing! It was fun to challenge herself to do something unfamiliar.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AND MUSIC

### With Taylor Ann

Taylor loves taking photos of everything, but people are her favourite. Capturing their personality and the story behind each person is the most interesting part.

*"What I love about photographing people is their eyes. When you get right in, you see all the details. I love colours, I love eyes – that's the first thing that I look at when I meet a new person."* - Taylor Ann

Although most of her work to date has been portraits, it's Taylor's dream to combine her love of music and photography and do a band cover photoshoot.

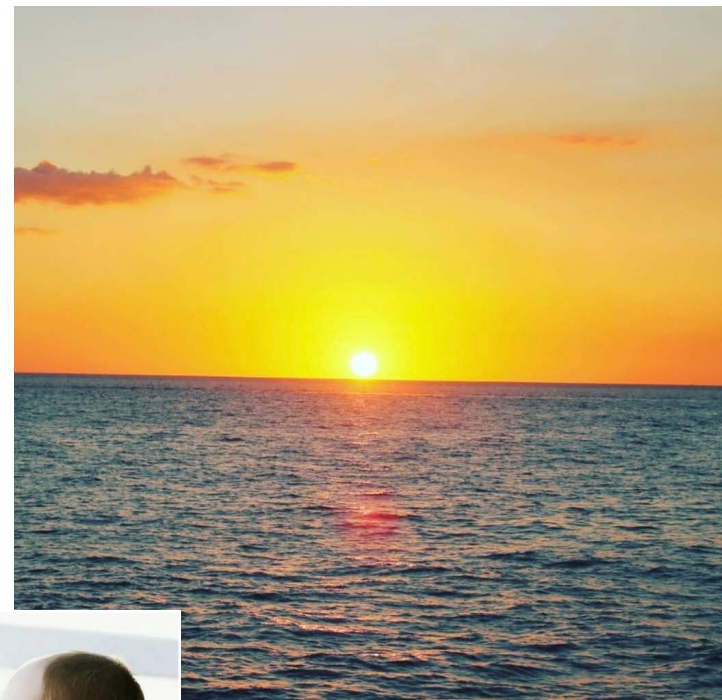
*"I want to do more work with bands and concerts, but everything is so competitive! It can be hard."*

Taking pictures of strangers can be nerve-wracking at times, but Taylor's experience as the former lead singer of a band has helped her develop confidence and public speaking skills.

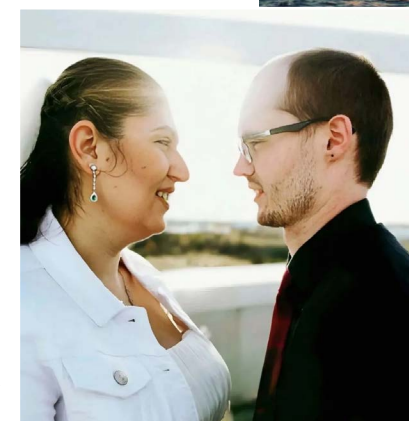
*"I love meeting people! I love other people's energy, it gets me pumped up. I have always loved music and singing, photography came later on. Listening to music always makes me feel ten times better."*

Taylor has made many new connections through her work in music and photography, expanding her network of friends and clients. It can be intimidating to put yourself out there creatively, but Taylor has some advice for those who want to try:

*"I get it, it is a little bit scary, but you can overcome that by having great support from family and friends. If you want to do it, go for it. You have to push your fears aside. For anyone, with or without a disability, people are going to get afraid. Even I get afraid sometimes. If it gets hard, you have family and friends to help you. Anything you choose is going to be hard, sometimes you have to take chances."*



Taylor, Owner of Taylor Ann Photography



# Self-Advocate

# Q&A

## Do you play any sports?

Yes, I play baseball, basketball, bocce, swimming and track and field (athletics).

## Do you have a favourite book?

I Am Me by Susan Verde

## Have you ever gone camping? Where and what did you do?

Yes, I went camping with my Girl Guide Group. We were near Orangeville at Camp Ma Kee Wa. We did crafts, we played games and did some puzzles. We went for a nature hike and into the fairy garden. We roasted marshmallows and made s'mores and sang camp songs by the fire.

**BROOKLYNN**  
Bolton, Ontario



**Pip**  
Kingston, Ontario

## What is your favourite activity to do in the summer?

Swimming – in a pool, lake, ocean, or any water and I love jumping in!

## Do you like art? What do you like to do - painting, drawing, making crafts?

I love acting and was recently in my first movie, Out Of My Mind. And I love colouring with my mom and drawing with my Boppa.

## Have you ever been to a concert? Do you have a favourite band or singer?

I am a die-hard-Swiftie and sang word-for-word at her Eras Tour concert!

## What is your favourite activity to do during March break?

I love skiing during March break.

## Do you play any sports?

I love gymnastics and skiing.

## Do you like art? What do you like to do - painting, drawing, making crafts?

I like to make art like colouring and making crafts.

## Do you like to write? What kind of things do you like to write about?

I love to write stories at school.

**JORDAN GRACE**  
Edmonton, Alberta



## What is your favourite activity to do during March break?

This spring break I am going skiing with my mom's parents and cousins at Silver Star. I'm learning to ski, I took 6 lessons. We are also going to chill and go to the hot tub.

## What is your favourite activity to do in the summer?

I like coming to summer camps at DSRF, RCT camp in Richmond (a long time ago) and in Vancouver. Richmond has day programs. I like sports too, my dad is a basketball coach, and he sometimes plays catch with me.

## Do you like art? What do you like to do - painting, drawing, making crafts?

I like art. I like drawing, art skills and techniques. I like to do them with my mom, and I had an art class and ceramics in high school. I still do it sometimes in zoom pottery classes. I also like painting, but sometimes I get stuck, and my head gets confused, I'm trying to learn.

**JASON LEE**  
Richmond, BC



I also like photography, my cousin is a professional photographer, he has a website, and he is the same age as me. I like to use photoshop and info tech, I also learned in high school. I like nature pictures, sky pictures, or anything. I like to take videos too and edit them. I'm trying to do my own business with my photos, in the future.

## What is your favourite activity to do in the summer?

My brother's wedding was in August. In 2021 I had my first date with my girlfriend Rae, in July.

## Do you play any sports?

I play Challengers baseball, and back in 2015 I played soccer, I was a little kid. I also do swimming, basketball, and me and Darryl do Taekwondo. I am yellow and green stripes, but I am aiming for the green belt.

**AARON WADDINGHAM**  
Burnaby, BC

## Have you ever been to a concert? Do you have a favourite band or singer?

When I was a little kid I saw Justin Bieber, Drake, Katie Perry, Ariana Grande, Post Malone (this is my favourite), Mumford and Sons. I like concerts because they are fun and entertaining, people show up to be a part of the event. A lot of people do get drunk, that is not a good part of concerts.





**HAROLD YEO**  
Burnaby, BC

**What is your favourite activity to do in the summer?**

I like to hang out with my girlfriend. Talk to my friends on FaceTime, drink beer, summer camp at DSRF, hip hop dance.

**Do you play any sports?**

I like to watch hockey upstairs. I play basketball on Tuesdays, and work out with Tony at DSRF.

**Have you ever gone camping? Where and what did you do?**

Yes, to Golden Ears campground. Eat dinner, sleep in a tent, firepit. I go with my dad and my mom.



**BENTZY STEIN**  
BC

**What is your favourite activity to do in the summer?**

Hang out with my friends, go out and have fun.

**Have you ever been to a concert? Do you have a favourite band or singer?**

Yes. I like getting country T-shirts at concerts, I've got 38! Concerts are lots of fun, dancing and listening to all the country artists. I always go with my mom.



**LINDSAY KOE**  
Burnaby, BC

**Do you like art? What do you like to do - painting, drawing, making crafts?**

Yes, I love art. I like to draw famous people, I like to draw One Direction, because they are my favourite band ever, I like to colour them. I like to draw their hair and their clothes. It is a little bit hard to draw the lines, I'm still learning.

**Do you like to write? What kind of things do you like to write about?**

Yes, I love writing stories. That's my favourite thing to do. I write all kinds of stories. Every Friday I put them on my whiteboard, and I act them out.



**ZAMAAN JIVRAJ**  
North Vancouver, BC

**Do you play any sports?**

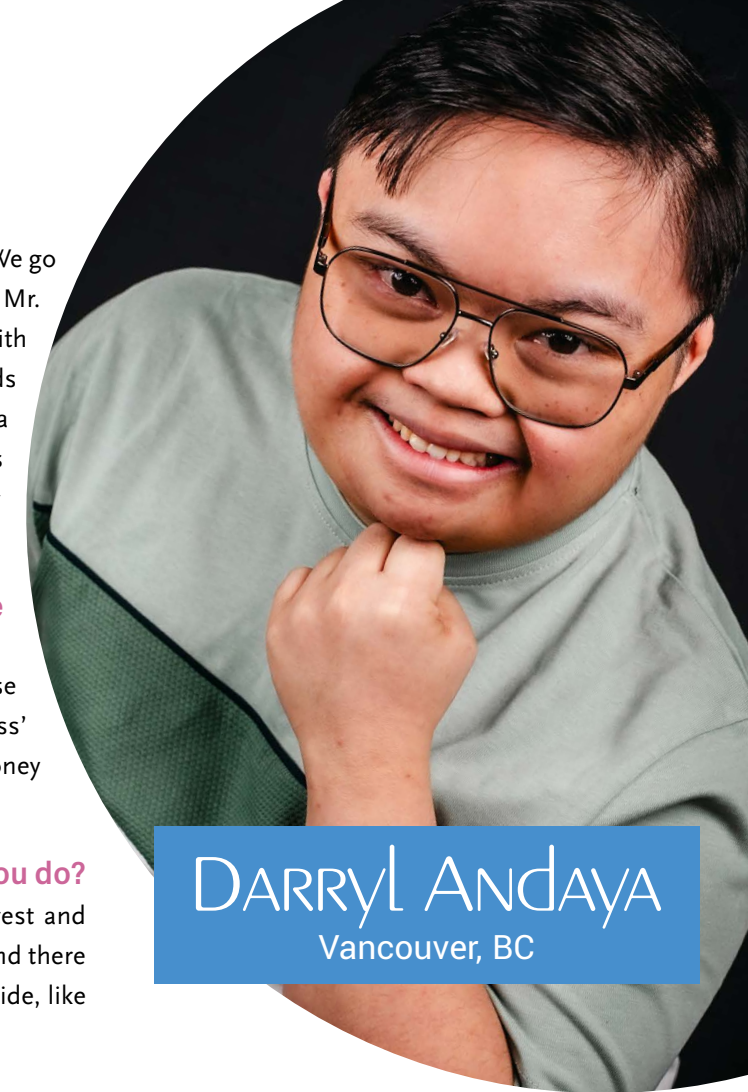
My family, we have a volleyball team, we go outside and have fun. We go to a championship every week. I also do Taekwondo. I teach with Mr. Andaya (my dad) at Little Dragon and at DSRF, with my friends with Down syndrome like Aaron. I also play basketball with my friends Aaron and Edgar. I do parkour and do different challenges like in a trampoline park. I create my own challenges, and I post the videos on my YouTube channel. Sometimes I help friends make their videos.

**Do you like to write? What kind of things do you like to write about?**

I go to the library to use the computers, and do adult work, because it's who I am. I'm writing a book about my family and our business' story. I am going to print it and give it to my friends. I'll get money from this book and help pay for groceries and be an adult.

**Have you ever gone camping? Where and what did you do?**

Me and my family went for a weekend in the summer to the forest and played board games like Jumanji. My mom told me a long story, and there was a boat. It was fun! Me and my family played a Nerf game outside, like a Nerf party.



**DARRYL ANDAYA**  
Vancouver, BC

**Do you play any sports?**

I play golf and basketball, track and field. I play in Special Olympics BC sometimes: Basketball on Sundays, Golf on Monday and track and field on Sunday and Tuesdays. I have a basketball team, and I play golf with my family, sometimes I play with a team. I like sports because I like to exercise and be healthy, I also eat healthy food.

**Have you ever been to a concert? Do you have a favourite band or singer?**

I saw Drake, The Weekend, we were going to see Usher, but it got cancelled. I wanted to go to Taylor Swift, but I didn't. Drake is my favorite singer. I even named my dog after him! I also like the Weekend and Taylor Swift.

**Have you ever gone camping? Where and what did you do?**

I went to Golden Ears Provincial Park with my family. We made some good food, like chicken and fries. We went to the lake to fish, my brother caught a fish! We also hiked. We sometimes camp in the forest, where my dog Drake likes to sniff trees and rocks.

## DSRF Turns 30

For 30 years, the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation has provided exceptional service to the Down syndrome community. In that time, we have helped thousands of people with Down syndrome step into the future with the confidence and skills needed to achieve success, however they define it.

Through the years, DSRF has grown in exciting and often unexpected ways. However, from our humble beginnings in 1995 as a research-oriented institute housed in a trailer on the grounds of Sunnyhill Health Centre through our evolution into a world-class service provider, one thing has never changed: we do what we do so that people with Down syndrome can flourish, and their families can face the future with hope.

Today, DSRF provides leading-edge educational programs, health services, and information resources for the Down syndrome community. We offer a level of Down syndrome expertise and understanding unmatched in Canada. DSRF is a one-stop-shop for Down syndrome, or as one parent put it: “DSRF is a boutique of supporting our son for success.”

The best way to honour the legacy of the past 30 years is to build on it. In 2025, DSRF is ready to step into our own future as an organization to support even more families, more effectively. Thanks to our well-established reputation for excellence and our innovation in finding creative ways to serve families in more remote parts of British Columbia, demand for our services is rapidly increasing. Your support is essential to help us meet this need. Please visit [DSRF.org/30](https://DSRF.org/30) to help us Build for the Future.



DSRF Founder Jo Mills at the entrance to the trailer that was our first home

## Gender and Sexuality for Everyone (GASE)

Individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD) tend to face barriers when it comes to learning about gender and sexuality. This can lead to negative attitudes toward the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, poor mental health including low self-esteem, and engaging in risky online and social behaviour. In some cases, lack of information can increase the risk of sexual abuse. Individuals with I/DD also tend to have fewer opportunities to connect with peers.

This past year, Andrea Lee (Comprehensive Sexual Health Educator) and Lizzie Carolan (Speech-Language Pathologist), started a support group for teens and young adults with Down syndrome called Gender and Sexuality for Everyone (GASE). The goal of GASE is to provide opportunities and access for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth with I/DD to meet supportive and like-minded peers. In the group, members learn about and celebrate

topics related to gender and sexuality. GASE meets once a month online, and last summer, there was an in-person meet up over ice cream!

GASE has also allowed Andrea and Lizzie to connect with other self-advocates and group facilitators in the US, UK, and Australia through the Rainbow Support Group Advisors network. This network is led by Pauline Bosma, an award-winning self-advocate and leader for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals with I/DD, and is supported by Dr. Oscar Hughes. Pauline has created the Rainbow Guidebook, a resource for individuals with I/DD, educators, caregivers, and supporters. In it, self-advocates share their experiences and provide suggestions around best practices for inclusive sexual health education.

If you have any questions about this group, please feel free to email [andrea@dsrf.org](mailto:andrea@dsrf.org) or [lizzie@dsrf.org](mailto:lizzie@dsrf.org).

## Baskets of Love



Having a baby should be one of the happiest times in your life. Having your baby diagnosed with Down syndrome can be scary, and often overshadows the joy of becoming a parent to this new life.

After her son Conor was born with Down syndrome, Danielle Gibbons gratefully received support and guidance from other moms who were further down the road in their Down syndrome journey. Having experienced firsthand the value of this personal support, Danielle established Baskets of Love to welcome other families into the Down syndrome community with the gift of a beautiful baby welcome basket. Through the years, Danielle distributed baskets to hundreds of families throughout British Columbia.

The Down Syndrome Resource Foundation is very proud to continue the wonderful legacy established by Danielle and the Baskets of Love Down Syndrome Support Society.

Through Baskets of Love, we provide comfort, support, and resources to new parents as they celebrate the arrival of their precious child. The contents of the gift basket are especially chosen for babies with Down syndrome. Each Basket of Love includes information about local and national resources that can help a new family transition more easily and more positively into life with Down syndrome. The baskets also include books about Down syndrome and an assortment of baby items and gifts.

Baskets can be delivered to any hospital, pediatrician, public health nurse, midwife or family in British Columbia by mail or in-person, depending on location. Visit [DSRF.org/Baskets](https://DSRF.org/Baskets) to request a basket.



## FRIENDS OF DSRF

DSRF received an incredible Christmas gift from the Canucks for Kids Foundation in the form of a \$200,000 grant in support of services for children with Down syndrome. This is the largest one-time grant in the history of the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation. We are deeply grateful to the Canucks for Kids, and Vancouver Canucks alumnus Darcy Rota, who championed our application. We are all Canucks – Go Canucks Go!

Thank you to all who generously donated to the 2024 Flourish for Life campaign. Over \$61,000 was raised to help children with Down syndrome thrive in school and flourish for life.

The City of Burnaby has granted DSRF \$10,000 towards our inclusive social programming. We are grateful to be located in a city that values and supports its citizens with disabilities.

Thank you to the John Hardie Mitchell Family Foundation for granting DSRF \$3,000 for programs and services for children with Down syndrome.

The Hamber Foundation granted DSRF \$2,000 towards our programs and services. We are grateful for their ongoing support.

## UPCOMING AT DSRF

- World Down Syndrome Day: *Mar 21, 2025*
- DSRF 30th Anniversary Party: *Apr. 13, 2025*
- Down Syndrome in the Era of Climate Change (webinar): *Apr 22, 2025*
- Down Syndrome Film Festival: *May 17, 2025*
- Run Up for Down Syndrome: *Jun 1, 2025*

## FIND US / TAG US

@DSRFCanada on all our platforms



DSRF.org



# CDSS SPOTLIGHT

## It Was Never Okay Join The Call to Improve Our Supports!

Join the nationwide call for our federal government to Improve Our Supports this World Down Syndrome Day. People with Down syndrome and their families have waited for too long for pressing issues to be addressed – adequate funding through the Canada Disability Benefit, reduced wait times for support programs, and proper support for overburdened caregivers. Lack of funding, support, and inclusive practices for the disability community was never okay, and it is not a trend we will allow to return. Sign our petition if you agree and find out how else you can make a difference this World Down Syndrome Day: [CDSS.ca/World-Down-Syndrome-Day](https://CDSS.ca/World-Down-Syndrome-Day)



## Register Your Team for the Down Syndrome Walk 2025!

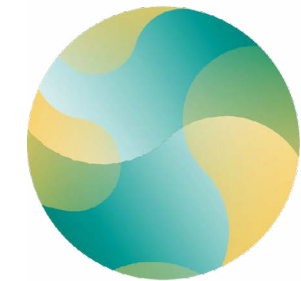
Join our Ambassadors and hundreds of community members across the country for the Down Syndrome Walk on Saturday, June 14th! Register individually or as a Team with our new event website and be part of a nationwide

effort to raise essential funds and awareness for Canadians with Down syndrome and their families.

**Join Us! Register Today at [DownSyndromeWalk.ca](https://DownSyndromeWalk.ca)**



## Important Dates for 2025



# World Down Syndrome Day

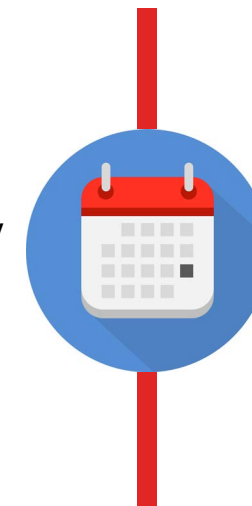
**World Down Syndrome Day**  
March 21st

**Caregiver Awareness Month**  
May 2025

**National AccessAbility Week NAAW**  
May 26th – June 1st

**Down Syndrome Walk**  
June 14th

**Canadian Down Syndrome Week**  
October 19th – 25th



## INTRODUCING “CAREGIVER CONVERSATIONS”



In our recent Community Learning Webinar Survey, you told us the most important topics you wanted to learn about this year. We've used your feedback to create an educational series specifically for the caregivers in our community, Caregiver Conversations. In this four-part education series, you will hear from both experts and caregivers on topics such as health issues for an aging person with Down syndrome, how to prepare a secondary caregiver to take over primary caregiver responsibilities, and advocating in our community. The series will be pre-recorded so you can listen and learn when it works for you and available in May 2025.

Already registered for our Community Learning Webinar Series? No need to register again!

**If you have not registered yet, please visit [CDSS.ca/Community-Learning](https://CDSS.ca/Community-Learning)**

## JOIN OUR COMMUNITY

### FIND US / TAG US

@CdnDownSyndrome on all our platforms



[CDSS.ca](https://CDSS.ca)



Canadian Down Syndrome Society

Société canadienne de la trisomie 21



THE DOWN SYNDROME RESOURCE FOUNDATION PRESENTS

# Kindred Spirits

Chronicles of Down Syndrome Friendship



## FEATURING

Rae Blanchette  
Eric Bruneau  
Cassidy Fraser  
Andrew Gordon  
Zamaan Jivraj  
Jason Konowalchuk

Sid Lalwani  
Nicholas Libera  
Rebecca Reich  
Chris Sayer  
Sarah Shishido  
Harold Yeo

Plus: DSRF's Lizzie Carolan + Andrea Lee

PRODUCED BY GLEN HOOS | DIRECTED BY MATTHEW HOOS | VISUAL EFFECTS BY JOSEPH WOLOSHYN

NOW PLAYING  
AT DSRF.ORG

Down  
Syndrome  
Resource Foundation

