

PROGRAMMED FOR SUCCESS: Introducing Sarah Dougald, Chapter Manager - Autism Ontario York Region.

BY CRYSTAL TANCREDI

With the addition of the Chapter Manager position, a new chapter has begun at Autism Ontario York Region's AOK Camp/AOA. And it all begins with Sarah Dougald.

"It was time for me to pursue a new opportunity in my career and the Autism Ontario posting came up. I had been investigating different opportunities working with individuals on the Autism Spectrum, and had done some additional education in this field. I was excited to see this opportunity, and the rest is history."

Hitting the ground running, Sarah met her first major project with characteristic enthusiasm, the calm at the centre of this year's successful AOK Camp/AOA summer camp season.

Still, some things don't change: On her watch, the original, essential AOK Camp philosophy - inspired brainchild of a handful of devoted

parents more than 20 years ago - remains front and centre. "All year long at school, our participants work hard. So at Camp, we just want them to have FUN!!"

Sarah comes by her interest in those with special needs naturally: She grew up with it. "In my personal life, my Dad was my biggest mentor. He always treated people fairly and found joy in the little things. He never needed a lot and was always teaching me how to live a simpler life.

He also inspired me to work with individuals with special needs. He was a teacher and had a class of students with special needs - what was likely a community class now.

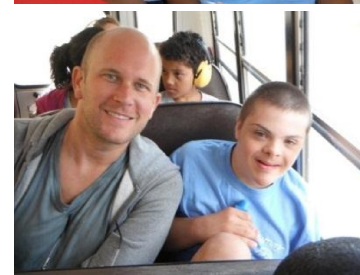
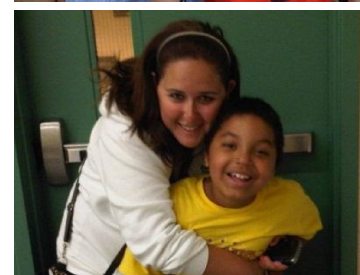
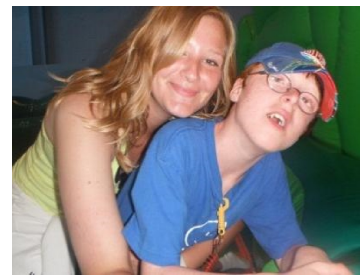
At dinner he would tell us the stories of his students, and the amazing accomplishments of the day. I remember his eyes tearing up when he would talk about a student getting to school by

himself on the TTC, one who had made a special friend who invited him to a birthday party, or the little girl who made change for a dollar for the first time and was very proud of herself.

It was his heart and passion for these kids that led me to volunteer in his class, and start to fall in love with all of our individuals who are special."

For Sarah, camp has long been a great source of both satisfaction and special memories. "Camp is a breeding ground of fun and funny stories! They are too numerous to mention, but one of my favourites is two campers, aged nine. Both on the Spectrum. Both learning how to ride a bicycle - without training wheels - on the same day. And both running to tell me what they had just accomplished. They were so proud of themselves, and their whole group was supportive. The entire camp knew what had

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About Autism Ontario

Originally incorporated in 1973 as *The Ontario Society for Autistic Children*, we later became *Autism Society Ontario*, and, in 2006, *Autism Ontario*.

*Our Vision:
Acceptance and opportunities for all individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders.*

*Our Mission:
To ensure that each individual with ASD is provided the means to achieve quality of life as a respected member of society.*

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happened in a matter of hours. The self-confidence that was nurtured in both of those boys on that day was measurable, an outstanding day to be a Camp Director!"

To her, camp is a very special place. "I believe in the benefits of camp for every child. Camp is a special place where new accomplishments are achieved, new friends are made, a new independence level is reached.

Campers can grow so much at camp because they are in a supportive and nurturing environment. There are no teachers telling you what's right and wrong; your friends are all participating in the activities together, so no one is there to tell you it's 'not cool'; and the wilder and crazier you are, the cooler you are at camp.

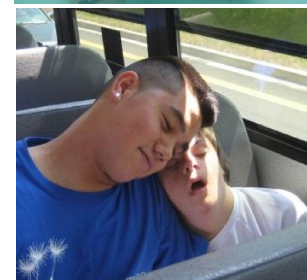
I love watching the campers grow up, and I love watching

the staff blossom into the adults that they will one day become.

Camp is a tremendous experience for anyone who participates. It is my wish that everyone can benefit from it at least once in their lifetime."

With her first AOK Camp/AOA season now firmly under her belt, Sarah is already looking forward to next year. "I have had strong parent and camper relationships at my previous job, and I hope to build those with Autism Ontario as well. I take pride in nurturing staff relationships as a mentor and role model as well, and hope to continue to do so with the staff at AOK Camp/AOA."

The AOK Camp/AOA families can hardly wait for summer to come around again. See you soon, Sarah. ♥



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