

## LIGHTS Newsletter - February 2014

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When the concept of LIGHTS was launched in January of 2010, we had a vision of partnerships and creativity that would improve the lives of people who have an intellectual disability.

The housing options for these young men and women are limited to the point of being in crisis, both in Toronto and across Ontario. In Toronto, approximately 2,500 people are waiting for residential supports—some have been waiting for decades. That's right: decades.

We knew that to be successful, we had to do at least two things differently. We had to *combine the resources of families, agencies, donors and government* in a new, more efficient approach; and *we had to empower people who have intellectual disabilities, so they can participate fully in their own futures.*

We have done that. Today, 88 families have joined LIGHTS on their journey towards independence. No fewer than 24 young men and women with intellectual disabilities have completed the process, and are living independently with LIGHTS support.

Alex is one of them. He moved into his own home last summer. He's 30 years old; loves music, dancing, and bowling; plays the guitar; rides horses; and works four days a week in two Coffee Sheds, one at Surrey Place Centre and one at George Brown College.

When he opens the door of his apartment to me, his beaming smile lights up the hallway. He invites me in, takes my coat, introduces me to his brother Jamie, and then, with great pride, shows me his new home—the kitchen, the living room, and the amazing view from his bedroom. (He lives on one of the top floors in his building.)

Alex is a thoroughly engaging young man and host. With occasional support from his brother, Alex explains that their mother died four years ago. His father has serious health problems, and his sister and brother have both moved out of the family home. Now it was his turn to set out on his own.

The prospect frightened Alex. He needed time to prepare, and he needed money. But as 2013 rolled around, Alex had made up his mind. He wanted to find a job he liked, which he has since done, and he wanted to move into his own place.

By then his family had heard about LIGHTS. With support from Community Living Toronto, they began to work on a plan and a budget. His dad worried about all of it, but Alex's brother and sister were confident in the plan and completely supportive. Laura, our LIGHTS facilitator, helped Alex and his family finalize their personal plan and budget. Alex was ready to go!

As soon as the apartment Alex lives in became available, his sister Mariam took him to see it. Alex walked through the door, and—well, we can't print what he next told me. But, he says, "My eyes were as big as saucers!"



Where choices change the lives  
of people with an intellectual disability

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*Donations are what makes LIGHTS possible.*

Please make all cheques payable to: **Community Living Toronto re: LIGHTS fund**

20 Spadina Road Toronto, ON M5R 2S7  
P. 416.968.0650 F. 416.968.7320 E. LIGHTS@cltoronto.ca  
Charitable Registration # (BN) 10769 4143 RR0001  
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I ask him why he wanted to live on his own. He answers that he wanted more independence, and to be his own person. His brother and sister had moved out, and he wanted to develop his own friendships.

The plan was for Alex to spend two days a week in his new home at first, then four, and finally five days a week, going to his dad's every weekend. Alex moved in last summer. He hasn't felt the need to spend a night at his dad's ever since! He loves his new home and his independence.

What about cooking, and food, I ask. Alex has his answer all ready: he does his own cooking (by remembering his mum's great techniques and recipes), connecting to Jamie on Facetime if he has a problem. An agency caseworker helps him with meal planning, and he does most of his own food shopping, too.

When he isn't out dancing or bowling or taking guitar lessons—the man has an active social life!—Alex has dinner a few nights a week with friends who live in his building. Many of his friends still live with their parents. Now Alex wants to teach these friends the skills *he* has learned so that they can live on *their* own, with LIGHTS and family support, as Alex does.

“What do you think those skills are?” I ask Alex.

He has a ready answer, as usual. “A location to live, use of the TTC, math skills, cooking skills, and being comfortable living on your own.” Alex has it figured out. Would he consider speaking at a LIGHTS workshop for other families considering this journey? Again, his answer is instantaneous. “I would be honoured to speak to other families about me!”

It has been an honour to spend the evening with Alex in his place, in the home he calls his own, and treats as his own. When I ask him what his favourite song is, and if he can play it on his guitar, he strums through High and Dry, by Gordon Lightfoot, with Lightfoot accompaniment in the background. A perfect ending to a magical evening!

Before I can leave, however, Alex has a question of his own for me and Jamie. Can he stay in his home after five years are up? (LIGHTS hopes that, over a five year stretch, families will be able to find alternate funding going forward, so that new families can be supported.) Jamie has seen the enormous changes in Alex, and he reassures his brother that he will find a way.

“I have the answer”, Alex replies. “I will work hard and save all my money!” And with his huge grin, he thanks me for coming and says good-bye.

Alex's family's approach to the future is similar to that of most of our LIGHTS families. They are very concerned about the five year financial limit for LIGHTS funding, but they live with hope. That hope, and the engagement of the entire family in the planning process, is the main reason, in our experience, that a family succeeds.

But no one can do it without investment by our donors. To that end, we're really excited to tell you that the Li Ka-shing Foundation has donated \$1 million to LIGHTS. In Mr. Li's words, “This unique community-based program helping intellectually disabled family members to achieve independent living builds social capacity and empowers the whole family to thrive.”

Once again, we thank each of you for your partnership with LIGHTS, and for supporting this growing and immensely effective program. Together, we are indeed changing the world for Alex and other young adults in our city!

Warm regards,

Mary Pat Armstrong and the team at LIGHTS

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