

Stories of Hope and Determination

I have the pleasure of working as a Speech-Language Pathologist at Grandview Children's Centre. Grandview is an outpatient pediatric rehabilitation facility in the Durham Region of Ontario, a suburban community on the eastern edge of the Greater Toronto Area, that provides multidisciplinary services for children and youth with special needs. When Angie D'Aoust, director of communications at CALSPA, first contacted me and my colleagues regarding an article published in a local newspaper titled "Durham families share stories of struggle, triumph at Grandview", I was elated to hear that the efforts of Grandview's *Shining Star Ambassador Program* were already gaining well-deserved attention. The *Shining Star Ambassador Program* is an initiative that the Grandview Children's Foundation launched last year as part of their "Help Our Kids" fundraising campaign that aims to increase awareness of services and raise funds to support access to services and allow the centre to provide critical therapy services urgently needed for over 850 children currently on the waitlist.

Ours is a common government funded tale of a significantly growing region with an insignificantly growing budget. We are bursting at the seams, quite literally, as three trailers and a portable have been erected behind our centre. This was a strategy to help manage our current space issues. Despite challenges such as space, we continue to strive to deliver the services that our community needs and deserves. We are fortunate to have an active, creative foundation that passionately advocates for our financial needs. *The Shining Star Ambassadors* are Grandview clients and their families who courageously share their experiences through photos, videos and by speaking at public events to help our community better understand what we do at Grandview and what it means for families with children and youth with special needs. For many

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of us, it takes great courage to stand in front of a camera for any reason, but it takes a different type of strength and courage of conviction to share personal stories and intimate memories including the pain and fear as well as the hope and triumphs.

I am not surprised by this courage as I see it everyday in the families I work with. From the family with the child with difficulties using pronouns and producing s-blends to another with toddler twins born four months premature with cerebral palsy and hearing and vision impairments, they all have fears and frustrations as well as hopes and dreams for their children.



Ryan talking about his busy summer vacation with his EyeMAX.

Families have to juggle daily life with visual schedules, chewy tubes, vents, trachs and hearing aids. Many have to learn a whole new language with words that their neighbors don't understand such as "Big Macks", "Chewlery" and 'AFOs'. They know that botox injections have nothing to do with wrinkle reduction here and implants tend to be of the cochlear variety. The families we serve each have their own journey. Some are with us for a short time, while others continue to receive services until their child blossoms into a young adult. When a child is born, it should be a joyous celebration but for many of our families, they are told the unimaginable... "your child will never walk or talk". Tears of fear, not joy are followed by shock, anger, and grief. Many families discover their child has special needs down the road and similarly feel their world crumble around them. Daily tasks suddenly become time-consuming effortful endeavors for the caregiver of a child with special needs. Common place activities



such as trips to the grocery store, use of public transit, and finding childcare can present significant challenges for families with children with special needs that most people take for granted in their daily lives. Anger, grief, frustration.... these are emotions that can be witnessed in the beautifully painted hallways and rooms of Grandview. But these are not the only emotions, as tears of joy are frequently shared for small improvements to major accomplishments. As therapists at Grandview, we have the exquisite pleasure of sharing in many firsts with families: first words, first steps in a walker, first attempts at exploring the wonderful world of cheerios, first play date, first trip on a city bus without mom or dad. I witness on a daily basis how our clients are our shining stars. Their determination to achieve their goals is brilliantly fierce and the same can be said for the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents and other caregivers who stand behind them to cheer them on, catch them when they fall and support their every strength and need.

I had the privilege of working with one such inspirational family this past year while working in Campbell Children's School, an in-house school at Grandview to help clients transition to their home school. Ryan, one of Grandview's 2011 Ambassadors, is a bright, goofy seven-year old who loves school, hockey, canoeing and making his friends laugh even when he should be working in class. Ryan uses a variety of Alternative and Augmentative Communication to express himself including a recently prescribed *Dynavox Eyemax*. Ryan's parents have shared their experiences through media to help other families who may be at the start of their journey and to help advocate for support for services here at Grandview. Please listen to their story in the video link. I also had the pleasure of meeting 10 year old Jillian, Ryan's big sister, who started her own fundraising campaign this year to help support Grandview. She decided to make and sell friendship bracelets with very special smile beads. She calls them *Ryan's Smile* to celebrate her brother and his incredible way to light up a room. Ryan's family and many others are inspirations not only for their courage and determination but for their willingness to share and fight for services to help others in the community.

I am profoundly inspired by the families we serve and I am so pleased that our community will get to see how special these families are through the *Ambassador Program*. It is wonderful that each of our ambassadors share their kind words about how Grandview helped their family and how they help spread the word to the community to support our fundraising campaign. It pleases me even more to see the friendly, hopeful faces of "Grandview Kids" more visible in our community. I feel there



Ryan's smile- worth a million!

is still such a need to support our kids' rightful positions as valuable members of our community. These brilliant individuals should not simply be understood but cherished for all they can share and teach us.

As a Speech-Language Pathologist in Grandview's Preschool Program, I look at my clients- kindergarteners, toddlers and infants who are already so determined to follow their own path. They see the world through innocent eyes full of hope and imagination of what is possible. I feel so fortunate to be able to share laughter and learning through even the simplest pleasures of ball bouncing, bubble blowing and beautiful books. These children and their families are my inspiration and remind me that any goal is achievable with heart and determination.

We are bursting at the seams at Grandview with inspiration.

For more information about Grandview Children's Centre visit www.grandviewcc.ca and to find out how you can help our kids, visit www.helpourkids.ca

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