



Self advocates learn to better express themselves

'Conversation group' stirs interest in municipal politics

Friday December 12, 2003 Natalie Miller

As a result of a conversation group, Moira Fuenzalida learned she has a strong opinion about pesticide use and an interest in community safety issues.

Prior to getting together with her peers, she had more difficulty in participating in day-to-day conversations, particularly when it came to political issues. Moira, who has an intellectual disability, took part in a conversation group organized by LiveWorkPlay, an Ottawa-based organization that supports people with disabilities.

The conversation groups began in September, after people the organization supports expressed interest in improving their dialogue skills, says Keenan Wellar, co-founder and CEO of LiveWorkPlay.

This is something they identified as important because they had all experienced serious challenges with not being included in such conversations, and/or making factual errors or 'inappropriate' comments that caused them difficulty in work or social situations," explains Keenan.

Three groups of five to six people were formed and "as a group we sat down and talked about general goals." Self advocates wanted to learn to "talk confidently about the complicated issues out there," says Keenan. They identified key issues including, war, crime and the two elections going on in the province.

The focus shifted towards the elections and they discussed who the key players were and highlighted the main issues at each level of government. Participants in the group got involved locally by asking questions of the municipal politicians.

Moira discovered she was passionate about banning pesticides and safety issues in her community.

She had the opportunity to ask "what (politicians) think about" pesticide use, as Ottawa was considering a full ban on residential use of pesticides. Moira is "for the ban because it ruins the environment and animals," she says.

Aside from providing her with political poise, the conversation group has assisted in her interactions with others, she notes. "It's a little easier," she says.

Keenan agrees the group has been "empowering" already for the participants. For example, everyone voted and went to the polls with the knowledge of who the leaders were, who they were voting for and why. "That's pretty awesome," says Keenan. "They got a lot of confidence and ownership out of that." He notes the overall voter turnout for Ottawa's municipal election was just 32 per cent.

The election captured the spotlight during the first series of conversation groups and there's still a host of topics of interest to self advocates. For Moira personally, she would like to learn more about "living on my own and how you start it."

Others have expressed interest in learning to talk about themselves and intellectual disabilities. They are currently working on a presentation about intellectual disabilities for Ottawa's 20 councillors. "It's not stopping now," Keenan says.

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