



Community Living Leaders

Building inclusive communities

‘On Our Own Together’ and loving it

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Warren Murphy is on his own, and he’s having a blast. Warren is among a group of young adults with disabilities who have left home for a month to experience life in a new setting. They’ve moved in to a residence building at Carleton University, and, along with support from 10 volunteer facilitators, they’re opening their eyes to new possibilities.

“I’ve been teasing my mom – I’ve been telling her I’m never coming home,” Warren says with a laugh.

Called ‘On Our Own Together,’ the project is an initiative of LiveWorkPlay, an organization that supports people with developmental disabilities.

Keenan Wellar, co-founder and CEO of LiveWorkPlay, describes the experience as “an important personal journey” for the participants. Most participants are around age 24, and one is 35, says Keenan.

The idea to move into the residence came about in the fall, when the participants, who are all associated with LiveWorkPlay, discussed various housing models.

“Home, apartment, group home – we talked about the advantages and disadvantages of each,” explains Keenan. “Then we discussed what ideal housing solution would look like, and they came up with a home that allows a combination of private and public space, with housemates of their choosing.”

The participants liked the idea of having their own room, plus common space such as a kitchen and living room. This model allows for companionship and privacy, says Keenan.

The ‘On Our Own Together’ project is the outcome of those discussions. “We realized that just talking about it wasn’t the same as actually trying it out. This is a way to take some of the guessing out of it. We wanted real-life experience to see if it really works.”

Upon moving in on June 21, the participants were divided into “suites.” Two suites have four bedrooms each, and one suite has two bedrooms. Each suite has its own common kitchen and living room. Also, all the participants can gather in a larger lounge room in the residence.

During the day, participants keep to their normal schedule of working, volunteering, and going to programs. Normally by 4 p.m. most have returned to the residence.

“This is where it becomes a whole new adventure for them,” says Keenan. In their regular homes, “most of them are quite isolated – they don’t have their friends around during the evenings.”

Now that they do, they’re making the best of it, continues Keenan.

“They’ve been swimming at the university pool, having dinner together, playing bocce, going for walks, playing soccer, and watching TV together. Some want to be constantly doing things, and others enjoy chilling out.”

“It’s been awesome,” says Warren, the excitement evident in his voice. “I’ve been going on walks in the evening. I’m not sure what else I’m going to do, but it’s all fun. I’ll take it day by day.”

As Keenan explains, Warren lives at home with his parents and brother. He has a large finished basement all to himself, which is great, says Keenan, but “so far, he seems to prefer this. He like the idea of having people around to spend time with.”

So far, all the participants seem to be settling in just as well as Warren, says Keenan.

“Actually, I’m kind of shocked. Everyone is adjusting extremely well. I thought there’d be more tears and late-night talks, especially during the first few days. But everything is working out just fine – making meals, handling money, new bus routes – that kind of thing,” says Keenan. “But perhaps this is the honeymoon period. We’ll see how it goes after more time has passed.”

After the one-month stay is over, the participants will return to their regular homes. But that doesn't mean they'll give up on their dream to make this kind of housing model a reality. In fact, says Keenan, they will most likely get serious about finding the resources to put shovels in the ground.

“Assuming the rest of the month goes well, we're going to move ahead into that process. We'll be looking at land, CMHC (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation) involvement, and finding a way to create this ourselves. Nothing like this exists,” says Keenan. “This group has capabilities and are capable of a high degree of independence, and it makes no sense for them to be in a completely staff-directed group home setting. They can do this; they can make it work.”

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