

## Election gives disabled valuable lessons

A program for a group of high-functioning disabled people is producing some very well-educated voters, David Reevely writes.

**David Reevely**  
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Jennifer Harris and Cooper Gage will be two of the best-informed voters in Ottawa tomorrow, despite their mental disabilities.

"My big issue right now is OC Transpo," Mr. Gage says. He's 25 and has attention-deficit disorder, plus a generalized mental disability.

"We're on a fixed income here. Well, I'm not, I have two jobs. But a lot of disabled people are, and we're going to take the bus all our lives. We take the bus every day."

He said he would like to get an EcoPass, OC Transpo's program that allows workers to get bus passes cheaply through payroll deduction, but his employers are not enrolled in the program.

He works part-time as a cleaner for Valiquette Sports and in warehouse maintenance for ServiceMaster, commuting from his home in the south end.

Ms. Harris's main concern is affordable housing.

"I'm 25 and I live with my parents and I'm not sure how to move from that," she says. She speaks haltingly and occasionally seems to lose the thread, but her grammar is better than average. "I want to be on my own but I can't afford it and I don't have options."

She works part-time at MBNA Canada and as a volunteer at the OC Transpo lost-and-found. She lives in Stittsville.

Both are participants in a program called LiveWorkPlay, run out of Heartwood House on Chapel Street, just north of Sandy Hill. For the last month, they've been learning what the City of Ottawa does, and about the candidates for office in tomorrow's election, the result of a brainstorm that struck LiveWorkPlay's chief executive, Keenan Wellar.

"We have groups of four or five individuals who meet once a week and one of the goals is to learn to talk competently about issues," Mr. Wellar says.

"They learn that when you don't quite have the facts right, that causes problems for other people. It can also get in the way at work where, if you're saying something that isn't quite right, it can make people think you can't do the job."



CREDIT: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen

Cooper Gage, 25, left, and Jennifer Harris 25, right, have been working with LiveWorkPlay's Keenan Wellar, centre, to learn about tomorrow's municipal election. Mr. Gage has been focusing on public transit issues while Ms. Harris is concerned about affordable housing.

Before last month's provincial election, he says, the idea struck him: "Wait a minute. Here's a really practical way to go at this."

They started talking about the election and what the parties and candidates stood for. Many of the participants, who Mr. Wellar describes as "high-functioning," live nearly at the mercy of governments and their programs, from OC Transpo to the core funding for LiveWorkPlay itself.

"We discussed the system -- federal, provincial, municipal, mayor, councillors, trustees, all of it -- and we got into the issues that they said mattered to them," Mr. Wellar says. He boasts that among the 16 LiveWorkPlay members who are in the communication groups, voter turnout was 100 per cent on Oct. 2. "We had some momentum and we wanted to keep it going."

For the municipal election, they've had a visit from Rideau-Vanier council candidate Angela Rickman, he says, and from acclaimed Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume, who has promised to set up a meeting with OC Transpo to see about getting EcoPasses.

Mr. Wellar says mentally disabled people easily fall through the cracks: there's lots of support until they leave high school, and then the system often abandons them to isolation and depression.

Many could live independently with only a little support, but there are few options besides living with their parents (very stifling), group homes (much more help than they need), and regular affordable housing (lonely because it's rarely available in their own neighbourhoods).

And then there are the small things, such as the fact that people in wheelchairs can ride OC Transpo for free (at least partly to take pressure off Para Transpo) but the mentally disabled pay full price.

"They're a pretty hidden group," Mr. Wellar says. "But we're going to see what we can do about that ... It's a real change from the usual organizational model, where the CEO goes down to City Hall and gets a meeting with the staff and on it goes. They've learned that if you're a little patient, you can call your councillor up and go down to the office and talk to him or her yourself."

Mr. Gage says he wants to talk to his councillor -- he thinks Diane Deans will be re-elected in Gloucester-Southgate -- about getting a red-light camera at the corner of Johnston and Conroy roads.

"There are kids everywhere there and drivers are going really, really fast," he says. "Somebody's going to get hurt."

He likes Bob Chiarelli for mayor, he says, "but I haven't seen him much lately."

Ms. Harris, however, hasn't made up her mind. "I know what I'm spending Sunday afternoon doing," she says.

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