

GIVING A VOICE TO THE DISABLED

Self-advocacy group hopes to open doors with conference

Christina Scott

For the Sun Times

Sitting at home with the blinds drawn, consumed by the latest TV show or video game, is a common pastime for today's youth. While this scenario may seem attractive to some, it's the furthest thing from Ben Rowley's mind. As someone who is always on the go, Rowley likes to make the most of his time, whether volunteering with different organizations or showing support at community events. As chairperson of a local advocacy group, Rowley busies himself with what is perhaps his most important activity: providing a voice for people with disabilities.

Rowley is the chairperson of the South Region Self-Advocacy Network (SRSAN), a group of people who advocate on behalf of themselves and others. The group is a sample of the 1,100 individuals in the south region who are supported by Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD). This region extends from the U.S. border to Nanton and from B.C. to Saskatchewan. Formed in 2001, the group meets five times a year in Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Brooks, Taber or the Crownest Pass to discuss advocacy issues, projects and goals. To date, SRSAN has 120 members, although membership is not always required. Rowley has been part of the group since 2007, acting as treasurer and vice-chair. He was voted into his current role by the membership last November.

"I like to be involved to share my knowledge of self-advocacy with the group," says Rowley, who has a learning disability. As chair, Rowley has written letters to different levels of government about the budget and changes to PDD, hoping to make a difference on a larger scale.

"Just because I can live on what AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) gives me, or PDD (is) good to me, doesn't mean it's good for everyone," he says. "I like to be able to advocate for bigger groups."

SRSAN is primarily supported by the Southern Alberta Individualized Planning Association (SAIPA). SAIPA is funded by PDD to provide supports to people with developmental disabilities through training, resources and advocacy. This could involve workshops, providing information on individual rights or anything to do with an advocacy issue. The organization acts as a community resource; membership is not required.

"Anybody can come to us: guardians, families, individuals with disabilities," says Sharon Rempel, SAIPA's executive director. "We'll pass on resources, supports, training (and) anything we have."



SUNTIMES PHOTO BY DAVID ROSSITER

Anna Olson and Ben Rowley are preparing for the SAIPA's upcoming ninth Self-Advocacy Conference.

Rempel says a large part of the organization's mandate is to support SRSAN in its mission by facilitating meetings and helping the group to plan and organize.

"We support SRSAN to teach their communities about the contributions people with disabilities make, to develop workshops (and) to get out there in a different way than traditional service providers do," says Rempel.

She adds that because of this, she feels that SAIPA has the power to influence the community's attitudes toward those with developmental disabilities.

"I think out of all the organizations that are out there, we have the biggest ability to impact those beliefs," says Rempel. "We're not necessarily looking to help people find volunteer placements; we're looking to help people have a voice in city council meetings, to have a voice in committees."

SRSAN's teaching community committee is just one of six that meet monthly to tackle various issues. Members of the committee make presentations to various groups explaining what SRSAN is, the meaning of self-advocacy and why it's important.

"Although attitudes are a barrier, we are in position where we can really make an impact on those attitudes and help people see the amazing contributions of (others)," says Rempel.

Rempel adds SAIPA tries to let the individuals it supports be as independent as possible; the goal is to simply help them make connections within the community.

"We supported someone to speak at Pink Shirt Day and join the committee, and they don't need us to be there," she says.

"We're just helping make those connections and letting people do what they're good at."

Seven members of SRSAN have done just that, as part of a committee to plan and organize the ninth annual self-advocacy conference titled Opening Doors in Community. Taking place April 25 and 26 at the Sandman Hotel, the two-day conference will feature several breakout sessions with guest speakers discussing topics including sex, finances, dance, healthy lifestyles and more.

Rowley feels the conference will give individuals with disabilities the confidence to be a greater part of the community.

"I think it's going to help people connect with other people, network (and) help them see they can be out in the community more," he says.

Rempel says topics were chosen based on what people were interested in learning.

"A lot of the sessions that are happening are issues that get brought up repeatedly through self-advocacy, through families (and) through individuals with disabilities," she says. "It's gathering the information we've heard over the past several years. . . and finding the people who could come speak to those things."

Rempel and Rowley say many of the local speakers were happy to be involved. Securing the conference's keynote speaker, Valerie Cade, took a little extra effort.

"I had seen her speak at the Alberta Council of Disability Services," says Rowley.

"(I was also aware that she) spoke at a self-advocacy event in Red Deer, so she was on people's radar."

Based out of Calgary, Cade is a

world-renowned speaker and the author of *Bully Free At Work*, distributed in more than 100 countries. Cade's lecture, titled "There's a Hero in You," will discuss how to draw out people's inner hero to maximize potential and make a difference.

Rowley says this topic is perfect for a conference of this nature.

"A lot of people with disabilities have always been told, 'You can't do that' so finding your inner hero means you can do whatever you want," he says. "It's important to not sell yourself short."

Rempel agrees, adding a lecture like this could also be beneficial to the community at large.

"It's most important that people with disabilities believe that themselves, but there's also community members, board members, staff members, people who just have an interest in some of our speakers coming to this conference. . . who can see the value of people with disabilities," she says. "It's spreading that message that these people are valued, participating, contributing members of our community."

Coun. Jeff Coffman will also make his voice heard at the conference, speaking about *Advocating for One and for All*. Coffman has firsthand knowledge in the importance of advocacy: his eight-year-old son was born with cerebral palsy and is unable to speak. Coffman regularly acts as his advocate when in the community.

"(It involves) communicating as much as I can with him first to make certain that I am representing his values, his needs, his expectations," he says. "Making sure that I properly translate that to the doctor, to the

store clerk, to whomever we're interacting with."

He says having a personal connection to someone with a disability has increased his awareness and understanding.

"You have a very quick understanding that everybody operates at a different speed," he says. "I've always had a passion for people and a patience with people, but this has really helped me take it to a completely different level to . . . really concentrate and focus on the other person to help me understand where they're coming from."

At the conference, Coffman will touch on personal experience, but will also discuss advocacy as it relates to his role on council.

"A citizen may have a concern, and they're just having a problem navigating the networks and hallways of city hall," he notes.

"It's my job as their advocate to help them through that process, to understand what it is that they're looking for so that they can access the appropriate person, department or outcome. I'm very up front with people that I may not support what (they're) doing, but it's my role to help (them) get treated fairly, to have equal and equitable access to information (and) to be able to accomplish what (their) goals are."

Coffman says he is eager to share his expertise, and feels we all have the potential to make a difference.

"I think that we all have the ability to be advocates," he says. "To me, being an advocate is not about being better than another person or more articulate, it's about recognizing our own vulnerabilities, our own weaknesses, our own conditions and trying to share that connection of vulnerability with somebody else."

When Rempel considers the potential outcomes of the conference, she feels success has already been achieved.

"I think the fact that seven adults with disabilities have planned a conference within our city with all of these amazing guest speakers, what an amazing opportunity for anybody to take part in," she says.

"I hope that people see that they are valuable, they do have potential, and that they can take this learning and use it."

One of Rowley's goals is to return to college to become a special needs educational assistant. He admits he has issues with self-doubt and because of this, hasn't been able to pursue his goal. However, he feels his involvement with SRSAN may help him conquer his fears one day.

"I hope that (the conference) gives Ben the confidence to move on to college and say, 'I did this adult learning activity and I was very successful and I can move on to the next one because I know I can be successful in an adult learning environment,'" says Rempel.

To find out more about SAIPA or SRSAN, call 403-320-1515 or visit www.saipa.info.