



# Advocacy in Action:

## Local group champions community conference

By Christina Scott

Leaving the safety of the world you know is an important step into adulthood. The time has come to make your mark and forge the mosaic of experiences that will define the rest of your life. But, as we all know, the game of life doesn't come with instructions. Plotting the journey while navigating its ups and downs are a challenge for the best of us.

Thanks to an upcoming community conference featuring inspiring speakers and stories, you can learn what it takes to successfully weave your own path.

Occurring May 29 and 30 at the Sandman Hotel, the conference is being organized by the South Region Self-Advocacy Network (SRSAN). SRSAN is network of 120 people across Alberta's south region, from the U.S. border to Nanton and from British Columbia to Saskatchewan. Its mission is to be a united voice for people with different abilities that brings inspiration and opportunity to achieve.

Made of people with and without disabilities, the group meets five times a year. Discussions can focus on advocacy issues across the province, learning opportunities, community involvement and much more. The largest self-advocacy group in Alberta, membership is open to anyone at an annual fee of \$10.

SRSAN is supported by the Southern Alberta Individualized Planning Association (SAIPA), a non-profit whose mission is to inspire people with disabilities to become engaged and empowered citizens. Support to SRSAN achieves a large part of this mandate.

"SRSAN is a safe space for literally anyone to share their ideas and learn," says Anna Olson, SAIPA's advocacy co-ordinator. "Not often are people given the opportunity to build skills when you really don't know what you're doing."

Advocacy Co-ordinator Anna Olson (centre), with self-advocates Nathan Crazy Bull (left) and Ben Rowley (right).



**SRSAN's 11<sup>th</sup> Self-Advocacy Conference will take place in Lethbridge May 29 and 30 in Lethbridge.**

Past conference themes included Advocating For Your Choices, Opening Doors in Community and Dealing with Everyday Life.

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SRSAN was created in 2001 after 38 self-advocates enrolled in a course from the Leadership Today Society of Alberta. The course taught people what self-advocacy involves, what it means to be a leader and how to delegate responsibilities. Advocates enjoyed the course immensely and realized their newfound skills could make a real difference. The group decided they would meet regularly to better themselves and to share the power of self-advocacy with others.

SRSAN decided to focus on building connections through conferences and community development. As advocacy co-ordinator, it is Olson's role to ensure SRSAN's vision continues moving forward, while encouraging the group to work towards independence.

"I love seeing the growth in the advocates," says Olson. "Where they once were and where they are now is incredible to me. I've seen advocates once afraid to live on their own now living successfully in their own apartment. I've seen people speaking up, sharing their concerns with service providers and now they're receiving better support."

Ben Rowley and Nathan Crazy Bull say being a part of SRSAN has boosted their confidence.

"It's given me a lot of leadership skills that I didn't have before," says Crazy Bull, who joined the group last year.

"In self-advocacy, you need the people who are strong to help the people who aren't," adds Rowley, who has been part of the group for more than a decade and loves teaching people to speak up.

"It's [about] encouraging people to have a voice in things they might not realize they can do."

Rowley and Crazy Bull are part of an eight-member sub-committee tasked with planning the upcoming conference. Crazy Bull is the committee chair.

Since 2002, SRSAN has organized and hosted 10 conferences, each with a different theme based on topics advocates want to learn about. They felt holding a conference showed the community what they believed in and provided the same learning opportunities as anyone else.



SRSAN member Kelly Tower.



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Over the years, the conference’s structure has changed to meet growing interest and demand: originally a one-day conference planned in partnership with another organization, in 2013, SRSAN took full ownership of the event, expanding from one day to two. Close to 150 people attended the group’s 2013 and 2015 conferences.

The focus of this year’s conference is Weaving Your Own Path, a topic important to SRSAN members.

“For most self-advocates, weaving your own path is important because [people with disabilities] often don’t get to make decisions,” says Rowley. “A lot of people with disabilities are sheltered so it’s hard to learn and grow. Sometimes, getting from point A to point B is a struggle, let alone seeing 10 years down the road. This is about showing people that they can achieve their dreams, even though it might take a little longer to get there.”

For Crazy Bull, weaving his own path meant finding meaningful employment, a goal which took 10 years to achieve.

“When I got it, I thought I had it made,” he says. “Having the job meant that I had somewhere to go and a purpose to my day.” Although important to people with disabilities, the group stresses the conference is open to the entire community, and the learning is applicable to anyone.

“There is something for everyone, from the sharing of stories of growth, strength, and what it takes to overcome adversity, to sharing stories about life in general and skill development,” says Olson.

Conference registration will be \$20 for SRSAN members and \$100 for non-members. Several speakers will be showcased on a local, provincial and national level.

One speaker will share the story of her journey to get married and gain meaningful employment, despite being told it was something she would never achieve. Another will share the story of building and maintaining his own successful photo business.

The conference’s keynote speaker will be renowned author and disability consultant, Dave Hingsburger. Based in Toronto, Dave has worked in the disability field for more than 40 years and is considered the leading Canadian expert on sexuality and adults with disabilities.

“Those opinions come from people who do sexuality training on a regular basis,” says Olson. “The Calgary Sexual Health Centre raves so



SRSAN member  
Sandy Layton.

much about Dave that they want to come to our conference. It’s really exciting.”

Known for his no-nonsense approach to disability and inclusion, Hingsburger’s address will explore personal power and the importance of telling your own truth. He will also facilitate one of several breakout sessions for participants.

Attendees will also enjoy a gala dinner, dance and a closing session featuring Cara Milne. As the owner of M-Powered Planning, Milne has promoted positive, valuable roles for people with disabilities for 14 years. Milne will share what it means to belong and practical tips to build community.

“I’m looking forward to hearing the positive feedback we’ll get,” says Crazy Bull. “It’s fun to create something that you know people are going to enjoy and get something out of.”

Rowley adds that planning an event of this magnitude provides important insight into the behind-the-scenes work it takes to make it successful.

Overall, the pair say they hope the conference will eliminate perceptions around people with disabilities.

“We are all people. We want to show people who we really are, not how they label us.”

**For more information,  
contact SAIPA at 403-320-1515  
or visit [www.saipa.info](http://www.saipa.info)**

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