

THE MOMENT

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ON THE WEB



INSIDE

WALK IN THE WILD

Fundraiser brings in \$200,000 for special camp

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Having experienced the negative effects of stigmatization, labels and prejudice, Henri Audet knows full well the obstacles facing children with learning disabilities. It's that knowledge that prompted him to start up Camp Kirk, which was the beneficiary of more than \$200,000 at a fundraiser held at Bishop Strachan School last weekend.

The casual event brought together sponsors and members of the community for an evening that featured an auction, refreshments and snacks, and a slide show of photos of kids at Camp Kirk.

"It was really a great event and it shows that people do want to help provide options for kids with learning disabilities," Audet said.

Audet grew up with dyscalculia, a disability that affects an individual's ability to work with numbers. Often teased by other children or made to feel incompetent by teachers,

he finally found a sanctuary of his own in a camp.

"It really saved my life in many respects," he said. "School for me was horrendous. After going to camp, I felt that I was someone for what was, I think, the first time in my life."

Knowing the impact that camp had on his life, Audet founded Camp Kirk just outside of Kirkfield, Ont., in 1993. Camp Kirk offers a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere for 36 children with attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. Many of the kids have difficulty interacting socially, due either to their learning disability or to the stigmas they have faced throughout their lives.

The key to the camp, Audet said, was to be inclusive without being pushy.

"Our general philosophy is one of challenge by choice," he said. "Kids challenge themselves as much as

they want to and at their own pace. We don't have sit-down sessions with them or anything."

Camp activities are similar to those at typical summer camps, with swimming, rock climbing, archery and more all taking place in a safe, accommodating setting.

For children whose biggest fear is often taking risks in a social setting, the family-like atmosphere at Camp Kirk offers participants a chance to come out of their shells, led by camp director Audet and the counsellors, who often work with the campers one-on-one.

Tom (who declined to give his last name) has been on both sides of Camp Kirk, both as a camper and as a counsellor. He said that last weekend's camp fundraiser would provide much-needed funding for children who are in need of such a space. Like Audet, he was one of the many children whose futures were brightened immeasurably by attending camp.

"The message I had from school

and from my friends and at home to a certain extent was that I was stupid and had no future apart from flipping hamburgers," he said. "When I got to camp, I realized that I'm actually a pretty smart person."

Tom managed to channel his newfound self-confidence into an honours degree in philosophy and he is currently pursuing a Masters degree in political science.

"I didn't do well in school early on in life because I thought I couldn't," he said. "Had it not been for Camp Kirk, I wouldn't have done as much as I've done."

Kate Lloyd of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario said the camp provides a much-needed way for children with learning disabilities to flex their social muscles, which often get overlooked when those children are ostracized.

"The counsellors exercise patience, acceptance and support," she said. "All of a sudden, (campers) aren't their learning disability

anymore."

Money from the Camp Kirk fundraiser will go toward subsidizing children who will benefit from Camp Kirk's various programs.

For more information on the camp, to register a child, or to make a donation, visit www.campkirk.com.

Details

- Learning disabilities don't only affect academics; they also affect organization, focus and socialization;
- One in 10 (or three million) Canadians has a learning disability;
- Up to 70 per cent of young offenders and inmates have experienced learning problems;
- Adults with learning disabilities hold jobs for an average of three months;
- Almost 50 per cent of adolescent suicide victims were previously diagnosed as having a learning disability.