

Celebrating achievements

Orléans residents recognized for personal accomplishments

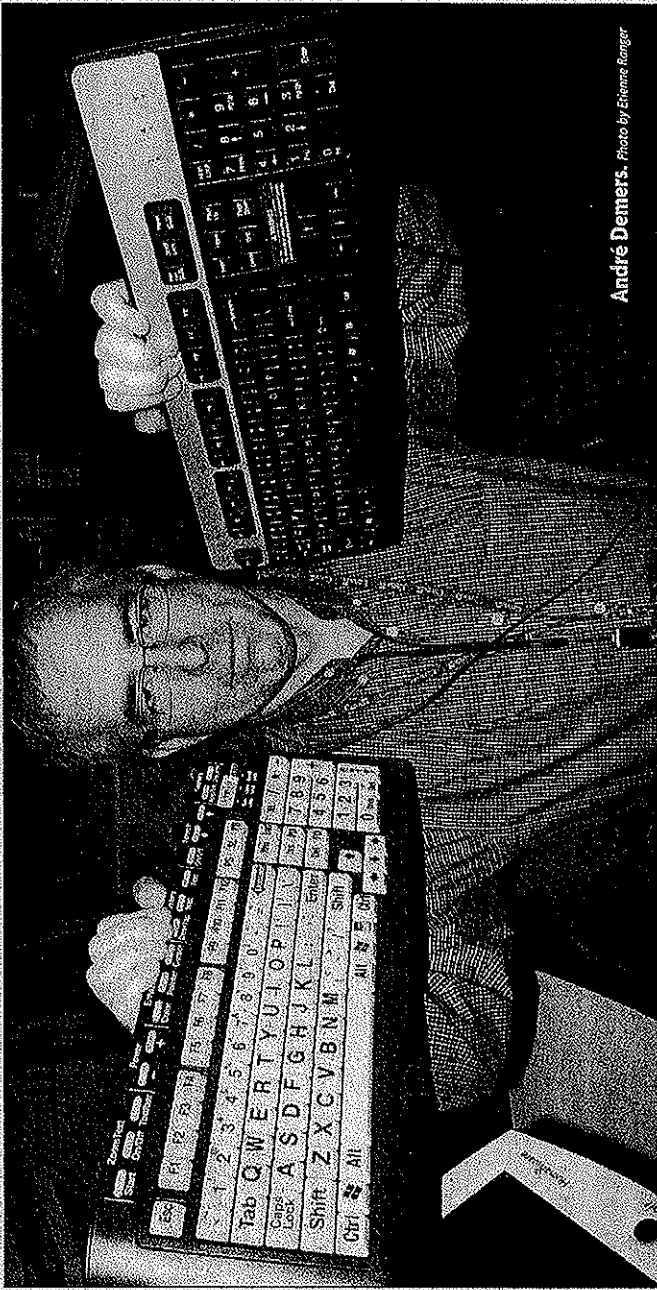
> **Laura Cummings**
Though André Demers was recently recognized for professional excellence and recognition in his field, the Orléans resident describes finding his current career as "a bit of an accident, to be honest."

Working for a private IT consulting firm until 1992, "I suddenly found myself without any work" and was eventually offered a position with Environment Canada in their Adaptive Computer Technology (ACT) Centre later that year, he recounts.

"It was very interesting to get technology to do things it wasn't normally designed to do ... to bridge the gap between functional limitations and accomplishing a task," Demers explains. "Back then we really had to blaze some new trails." Now, after helping Human Resources and Social Development Canada develop its ACT Centre in 1998, Demers manages the facility — and was recognized earlier this month for his work by Celebration of People, an annual awards ceremony that honours approximately a dozen individuals, companies and groups who have made "a lasting and positive impact" on local people with disabilities.

Assistive or adaptive technology is available "to compensate for some kind of sensory deprivation" and changes the way information is inputted into a computer, or outputted to a user, he continues, and can include items like screen-reading technology for people with a visual impairment.

"If it weren't for that technology, a lot of people with disabilities wouldn't be able to work," Demers explains, adding that the industry has developed in leaps and bounds over the past decade. "We wouldn't be able to have an inclusive soci-



André Demers. Photo by Estienne Berger

ty. It really levels the playing field."

When Demers received word of his Celebration of People nomination, he says it was "pretty much a surprise. It's a good thing, I was sitting down."

To win — at the ceremony held on Dec. 3, the UN-designated International Day of Persons with Disabilities — "was amazing," he continues. "It was like an out-of-body experience. It was quite an honour."

Another Orléans resident, Kathleen Forestell, was also honoured by Celebration of People this year, receiving the Sport Award for her achievements on the Ski Hawks Alpine Ski Club for blind and visually impaired skiers and the Canadian National Paralympic team, as well as the competitive circuit.

Brian Tardif, executive director of Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa — creators of the Celebration of People awards, and an organization that matches individuals with people with disabilities to offer friendship, support and assistance — says the event was initially spun off a dinner held for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities in 2000.

After the event was "so well-received," Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa decided to set up the awards to recognize community members with disabilities making a difference, he recounts, and launched their first-ever edition — along with partner organizations — the following year.

"So often people have a false perception that people with disabilities are people who are takers," he explains. "We wanted to show that people with disabilities have significant gifts and make significant contributions to the community."

In following years, the Celebration of People awards has expanded to include other individuals, companies and organizations who offer help to people with disabilities, even though not possessing one themselves, Tardif adds.

Showcasing the diverse array of achievements by the awards' finalists and recipients provides "a great opportunity to be recognized" as well as "great motivation for others," he continues. "It can be very inspirational. The average person doesn't see (people with disabilities) as being able to make a contribution — in fact, it's the opposite."