

Enriching life through friendship and good times



Stacey Norris and Dennis Fulford often spend an hour together over coffee, and she's there to listen to his 'cottage' adventures or take him clothes shopping.

SALLY SMITH
KOURIER-STANDARD

Stacey Norris thinks Dennis Fulford would be a great older brother, so she asked her parents to adopt him. She tosses off this bit of information, and barely taking a breath, tells Dennis he has a bit of ice cream on his chin.

Stacey, 30, and Dennis, 49, are sitting at Dairy Queen on Robertson Road; Stacey's drinking just water because she had a large lunch, and Dennis is eating strawberry ice cream with a red spoon, his favorite.

The two belong to

Citizen Advocacy, a charitable organization which matches individuals (protégés) in supportive relationships with volunteers (advocates). Dennis has a head injury, acquired later in life, and has been very much a part of Stacey's life for the past six years. She met him while completing a community placement assignment at Algonquin College. At that time, in January 1996, he was living at 695 Richmond Road and one of his preferred activities was to visit the malls. Stacey's assignment was "to teach someone a skill", so she went to the address

and chose Dennis to help her. Her assignment produced two results — took Dennis out of the malls and started a long-lasting relationship. Dennis' new skill was to learn how to get to Dovern Court Community Centre for a swim. "He had to book Para-Transpo, figure out what to pack to go swimming and pack it, and then go."

Dennis doesn't swim, Stacey grins, but he liked to paddle around in the water and he especially liked going to Harvey's afterwards for coffee. "He called me 'his student' ... never my name." Stacey laughs at the memory. So does Dennis.

After that she saw him a lot. "I'd call him and we'd go for coffee. Sometimes I'd pick him up and sometimes I'd book Para-Transpo to get him to my house." Stacey lives in Glen Cairn with her husband and 12-year-old twin

step-children, a girl and a boy. They've known Dennis half their lives and he's become pretty much a part of the family. "There's a natural interaction between them. Kids ask a lot of questions."

Dennis is so much at home at Stacey's place he's become an expected member of the group at birthdays and holidays.

Stacey and Dennis were not originally paired by Citizen Advocacy — they

paired themselves through Stacey's Algonquin College assignment — but Stacey thought the social activity in the organization would be good for Dennis, so they joined. Each year the Citizen Advocacy community has a picnic, a Christmas dinner and dance, and a Thanks a Bunch celebration. As well as getting out to these, Stacey sees Dennis at least once a week, spending one to three hours each time

with him. She helps him choose clothes, she listens while he talks about his music tapes, he describes his recent visit to the cottage to her and he talks all the time, Stacey says, rolling her eyes, looking sideways at Dennis and laughing. He laughs too, head thrown back, mouth open, enjoying the moment.

Most of the questions he
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answers 'I don't know' to but with prompting from Stacey he knows all the answers. The friendship is comfortable; they like each other.

"He has a wonderful sense of humor ... he's very quick."

Dennis works at Arc Industries on Breezehill Avenue and now lives at Silver Spring Farm; Stacey is starting her MA in Social Work at Carleton University. "But you don't have to be a social worker to be a volunteer," she says quickly. "Anybody can do

it." Her mother's brother was disabled and Stacey grew up absorbing what it was like to live with a disability. She started university in economics and business, was miserable, and realized working with disabled people was her passion.

"It's nice to go out with Dennis ... you get away from your own life and see life through his eyes, see it differently.

"What I do is really nothing spectacular," she shrugs ... and then hesitates, reflecting a bit.

But the others sitting at the table know it is. Dennis

knows it, too. He feels comfortable enough for a big belch, expressing both his pleasure with strawberry ice cream, and his friendship with Stacey.

Citizen Advocacy encourages self-advocacy and self-reliance while recognizing the interdependence of everyone in the community; it advocates for the needs and rights of people living with disabilities; it maintains an efficient, effective and healthy organization to fulfill its mission.

For more information, call Heather Badenoch at 761-9522, ext. 222.

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