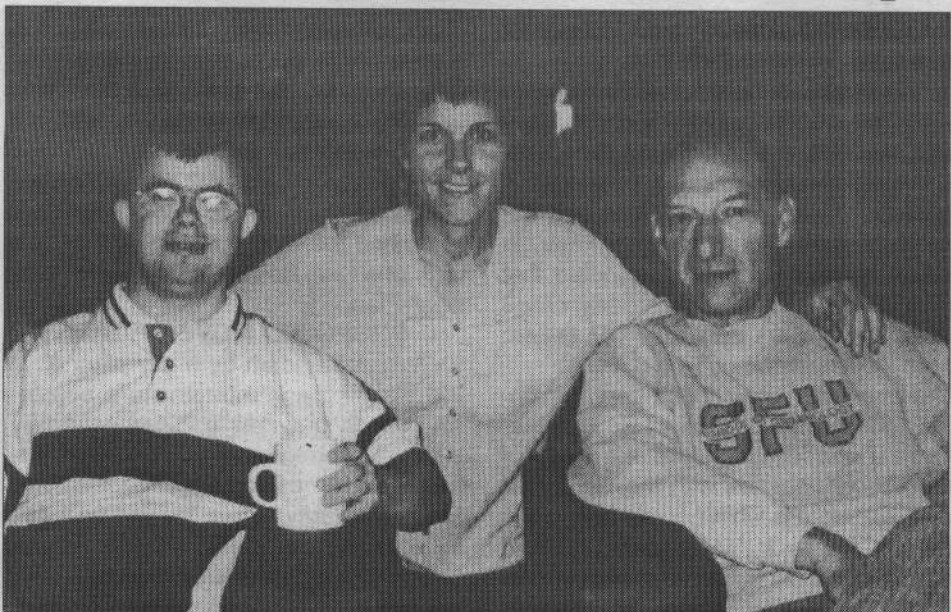


A very special friendship



ALLYSON WIDDIS

Joe, Robin and Charlie met three years ago through peer-matching organization Citizen Advocacy, and have been close friends ever since. **Bottom photo:** Joe loves to cook and sometimes tests his culinary mastery on Robin and Charlie.

By HEATHER BADENOCH

Charlie Singer and Robin Fitzgerald share activities they each enjoy with Joe, who has Down's Syndrome. Over the past three years they have shared many evenings of movies, dinners and laughs.

Charlie and Robin moved to Ottawa from Vancouver six years ago and live on McLeod Street. Robin is a justice research analyst with Statistics Canada and Charlie is a research consultant for social justice. After a few years in Ottawa, Robin started thinking about volunteering one-on-one.

"I wanted to make a one-to-one connection with someone who would need the help more than others," she says.

Robin then responded to a plea for volunteers during the 1998 CBC Radio One Volunteer-A-Thon broadcast, and was referred to Citizen Advocacy, a United Way agency that matches a volunteer one-on-one to a person who is isolated or vulnerable because of age or disability. Charlie had previously been involved with non-profit agencies primarily as a board member. They decided to volunteer with Citizen Advocacy together.

Charlie and Robin were introduced to Joe at Citizen Advocacy's annual Christmas party. Joe is 27 and lives only two streets away from Charlie and Robin in Centretown.

"Joe is open and loving and makes friends easily," says Charlie.

Joe works at the Loeb Centre for vocational training on Donald Street, which helps people who have a developmental disability to work in our community. He washes dishes, empties the dishwasher and puts dishes away.

"I take the number 14 bus," Joe says, to tell us how he gets to work.

Since the age of 5, Joe has lived with foster parents that Robin and Charlie describe as nothing short of "wonderful".

Joe is a movie and TV buff. He assigns a movie or TV character name to new peo-

ple he meets. At one time he cast Drew Barrymore in the role of his girlfriend, but that relationship lasted only until she married Ottawa's own Tom Green. When they use the computer together, Joe, Charlie and Robin search for movie sites and write love letters to his 'girlfriends'.

"Joe lives a lot in a fantasy, but makes interesting observations", says Robin. "He has far greater abilities than you might think."

"I'm smart," says Joe, grinning.

Joe isn't able to put into words how being matched to Charlie and Robin has enriched his life, but can easily list off all the activities they do together. The three of them get together weekly, usually on Fridays, to rent a video, go to a movie, go out for dinner, cook together, go bowling or lift weights. Joe flexes his bicep for effect. "We go skating," Joe says with a hopeful smile.

"Nope. Nice try," replies Charlie, "but we do go walking on the canal to see the ice sculptures."

Charlie and Joe have been looking into the Special Olympics and a training program for Joe. The Jack Purcell Community Centre on Elgin Street offers a program for people with disabilities, and assists with the development of a personalized weight and swim program.

"I think we've gotten more out of this match than Joe has," says Robin. "He's unique and fun to be around. We enjoy the friendship and regular get-togethers. It's interesting to see things through his eyes."

Charlie agrees. "It's a different kind of social get-together. I have a much better understanding of the situation that someone like Joe is in. It's interesting to understand how he sees things versus how we do."

There are twelve Centretown residents on Citizen Advocacy's waiting list for a volunteer. To find out more, call 761-9522 or visit www.citizenadvocacy.org