

## In this volunteer role, friendship comes first

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Will Eros and Mark Gosselin are obviously exulting in each other's company.

Sitting on his friend's living room sofa, Mr. Eros, 22, recalls how dead a pool-room opponent his friend proved in their first encounters.

"Mark looked like a real professional, sporting his own pool cue -- and I tried my best, but he whupped me and whupped me for a long time."

It was an impressive performance because Mr. Gosselin, who at 23 still deals with disabilities following a bout of meningitis 11 years ago, had to rise from a wheelchair to wield the cue. "But he did, and that told me a lot I didn't know about disability," Mr. Eros recalls. "And now we're real friends -- friends for life, I'd say, even if some day we don't live in the same city."

His friend concurs. "Will is someone I can really count on," Mr. Gosselin says. "He makes a difference in my life in lots of ways -- but the friendship's the biggest thing."

The meningitis left Mr. Gosselin with some loss of mobility and less acute vision and hearing than he had before. His intelligence, though, is unimpaired.

After that pool game in an Algonquin College tournament three years ago, the pair didn't see each other for 18 months. Then Mr. Eros, at the time a student in the college's police foundations program, offered his time to Citizen Advocacy, an agency that matches volunteers to people with disabilities who seek companionship and perhaps some help in getting around the city.

Mr. Gosselin had already been on the organization's placement list for three years.

Social workers at the agency did their screening. Mr. Gosselin wanted an intelligent volunteer who had a car and liked to enjoy the city. "But I'm shy in big crowds -- so I said, no party animal."

Mr. Eros's eyebrows shoot up. "No party animal? Well, you've had great fun at parties at my place." And they laugh complicitly.



Jean Levac, the Ottawa Citizen

Mark Gosselin, left, has nothing but praise for his relationship with Will Eros, a volunteer with Citizen Advocacy. The agency matches people with disabilities with suitable companions.

It was just by chance that they were placed together, but the connections they've since woven run both ways. Mr. Eros, a Belleville native, has got to know his friend's family. "Really, they're like another family -- I go to family functions, and I know I could take any problems to them."

Mr. Gosselin has had the same access to his helper's life. He has become friends with Mr. Eros's four roommates, his girlfriend and his sister. The pair go to restaurants and movies most weeks. They've gone fishing. And Mr. Gosselin has been welcomed at the Eros family cottage and at the home in Belleville.

Citizen Advocacy asks that volunteers see their matches at least three times a month, but this duo is together a couple of times most weeks.

"Oh, I'd say in any week we're together a good 10 or 15 hours," Mr. Eros says. And even when he moved briefly back to Belleville, he made the 2 1/2-hour drive each weekend to see his friend.

Mr. Eros's first taste of volunteering came during one of his semesters in police foundations studies. To meet the required 40 hours, he helped out in soup kitchens, rode along with paramedics, and helped instruct girls' youth hockey. "And I liked it all," he recalls. "It helped build my life experience and maybe even improved the kind of person I was.

"So I wanted to volunteer for its own sake, but also to develop a meaningful relationship with someone."

Citizen Advocacy, he says, gives him that. He particularly likes the fact that the agency leaves volunteers and clients complete discretion on how and when they meet. "It's not like you have to be someplace Sunday morning from 9 to 12," he says. "If Mark's not feeling well, we don't meet that day. If something comes up for me, we can reschedule. It's not an issue. We're friends."

That contact continues, even though Mr. Eros is now working with a security firm, while scouting around for police work. Mr. Gosselin remains an Algonquin student, now enrolled in a course in small- and medium-enterprise management.

Citizen Advocacy, a United Way agency celebrating three decades of service, supports people with a wide range of disabilities, including physical limitations, developmental delays, mental illness, and age-related disabilities. They ask volunteers to commit to staying with a match for 12 months, but most last more than five years and some have lasted more than 20.

The agency currently has 191 matches across the city. Another 141 people are still waiting for matches.

This match is bounding along nicely. "Citizen Advocacy has just been a catalyst to friendship," Mr. Eros says. "I don't even tell people I'm Mark's volunteer. I just say what's more essential, that we're friends."

And besides, Mr. Eros reports, that pool game rivalry is still lopsided. "But not for long -- I'm getting better."

At the end of the sofa, the cue master grins. "It's been great luck finding a friend like Will."

## The Spirit of Giving

To volunteer is to give: attention, time, energy.

As the Christmas season draws to a close, the Citizen is telling the stories of some dedicated citizens whose lives are about giving, year-round.