

## LIGHTS Newsletter - February 2015

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Where choices change the lives  
of people with an intellectual disability

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Being the parent of a child with disabilities changes your life forever. It fills it with both challenges and remarkable rewards. And with the help of our LIGHTS program, those challenges and rewards lead to a world of new possibilities.

I recently visited two LIGHTS families in the new LIGHTS-funded home of their daughters, two young women named Kelly and Diana. It's an apartment in the west end of Toronto, and the two young women have been living there with a caregiver for almost a year. Kelly is in her twenties, is visually impaired, and needs a wheelchair to move around. Diana, who is also in her twenties, is largely non-verbal. Both women have an intellectual disability. And now they're also good friends.

I'm greeted by Diana and both girls' parents when I arrive. Kelly is sitting on the floor in her bedroom. From what I heard outside the apartment, I thought I was missing a good party. And I was!! The happiness of both young women is revealed on their faces and in their open body language. Kelly wants to know who I am, and then returns to her world of play with the caregiver. Diana shows me a pair of her "treasures" - a small horse and another little figure - and then settles at her desk with her computer.



*Kelly just hanging out.*

From their parents I learn of the long journey the young women took to reach this new realm of independence – a happy place, at last, for both the parents and their daughters. In the words of one of the dads, "Our daughter had learned all she could from us, and it was time for her to spread her wings and find out how she could grow in her own way."

Both sets of parents had searched many avenues for a housing solution for their daughters. They ran into waitlists and financial demands, but very few answers. The two sets of parents didn't know each other initially, but met through LIGHTS. Their daughters liked each other right away. The parents then developed separate person-directed plans and budgets, and together found the apartment and hired a caregiver. The caregiver lived with each family for two weeks before the girls moved into the apartment.

The girls had been attending the same day program, but didn't know each other before LIGHTS introduced them. Their apartment building has a pool and a gym, and a park nearby, each affording them plenty of opportunity to exercise. The facilities all get used a lot!

A look of genuine pleasure and even pride comes over the faces of these parents when they describe driving down the street and seeing their daughters out for a walk of their own volition. Kelly is always pushing herself in her wheelchair, Diana supportively hanging on to one of the wheelchair's handles. They are accompanied by their wonderful caregiver.

Diana does much more for herself since she has moved into her own home (for instance, she hangs up her coat and puts her boots away), and Kelly has become much more talkative. All the parents have noticed these and other positive changes.

We have been chatting for some time when Kelly comes sliding down the hall with a swimming tube around her middle – a subtle hint that it is time to go swimming! Diana meanwhile is waiting to go horseback riding and shows me the tiny horse she carries with her. Both girls look forward to these activities. This is their life, and thanks in part to LIGHTS, they live as much as they can on their own terms.

Before I leave, the girls' parents express their biggest concern: how do they find sufficient funds to sustain this wonderful home for their daughters after their LIGHTS funding expires? (The LIGHTS model has always operated on the principle that , after five years of bridging the financial gap, families will have been able to find alternate funding, freeing up LIGHTS money so that new families can be welcomed into our program.)

This is always a heart-breaking conversation, and we brainstorm a few ideas. Hope and a passionate family commitment to their daughters' long-term happiness and fulfillment will, we believe, transform these ideas into lasting change.

This is the power of teamwork. These parents, perhaps with some help from LIGHTS, will find a way to sustain their daughters' home. And LIGHTS, with support from government, and you, our donors, will continue to make independent housing a reality for individuals with an intellectual disability, while they wait the long wait for permanent government funding.



*Diana proudly showing her room.*

In fact, the LIGHTS program has become so successful in its short five year history that it is in danger of developing a wait list of its own! We have so many applicants in need of housing that we need another Laura Starret (our staff facilitator) to help the many new families who are knocking at our door.

But make no mistake: in the bigger picture, the province needs a long-term funding stream from the Ministry of Community and Social Services – not just to provide individualized housing supports for our families beyond the five year LIGHTS funding window, but also for all the other families with family members on the 2700 wait list in Toronto. Many families today prefer this option, and are reaching for the positive and almost incalculable results of supported independence. We are in the process of preparing just such a funding proposal for the province's Housing Task Force, and it will be delivered to them by the end of March.

We will deliver that proposal with great confidence. We know the value of independent supported living for our young adults. We have opened up a world of new possibilities and new hope for families who have a son or daughter with an intellectual disability. But to keep helping new families, we need the Ministry to expand its funding partnership with families, and with us. Together with them and with you, our donors, we can keep changing the world for these families. Let's do it!

Warm regards,

Mary Pat Armstrong and the team at LIGHTS

*Donations are what makes LIGHTS possible.*

Please make all cheques payable to: **Community Living Toronto re: LIGHTS fund**

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