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## Network Promotes Independent Living

By Kinjal Dagli Shah

Brandon Fowler is an active 16-year-old who attends Stouffville District High School and is involved in different areas of Special Olympics.

The fact that he was born with Down Syndrome doesn't deter him from exploring his potential, and his mother Jennifer wants to ensure that he has the necessary resources to aid him. Coming to her rescue is the ABL Network, a fee-for-service, registered charity for young adults over the age of 21 with intellectual disabilities.

"Joan Hurst and I founded the ABL Network in 2008," said Barb Allan, who runs the program in Aurora with Joan.

"We both have daughters with Down Syndrome and we were concerned about what was going to be available for them when they finished high school. We researched what was out there and found there was a large gap in services for young adults with intellectual disabilities." They hope to have the program running in Stouffville by September 2015.

Since it was founded by two moms facing similar challenges, it is the perfect resource for youth like Brandon who are high-functioning but need guidance and experience to become independent.

"We wanted a program that would provide support for these individuals so that they could participate fully in their community and teach their full potential," said Barb. "Since we could not find any such program available, we decided to start a community-based program ourselves." Parents like Jennifer couldn't be happier.

"It's all about raising the bar for them," she said. "These children are capable of giving back to the community and being independent. This program teaches them everyday life skills that I wouldn't necessarily have the time to do."

Jennifer recalls the early days of her struggle with Down Syndrome. "We moved to Stouffville 16 years ago and that's when my son was born. The early years were very difficult but I was determined to get involved with early intervention. Those early years

are important to build on," she said.

"As a parent, I could solicit a job for my son because I know people in the community. But the idea is to teach them the social aspect of independent living as well, whether it is buying a movie ticket for themselves or buying food and getting the right amount of change back."

The gaps are exactly what the ABL Network hopes to fill, and it is already doing so in Aurora, supporting 15 individuals. "Our participants come to us Monday to Friday from 8:30 to 4:30," said Barb.

"We support them in our five core programs of work experience, transit training, recreation, literacy and volunteer opportunities. Our programming all takes place in natural job and community settings. Each participant has a work experience placement in the community, where they work a minimum of one shift a week to some working five shifts a week. Many participants have some form of pay for what they do."

The program has a strong focus on transit training as a goal to have participants travel safely throughout their community with some independence.

"Each participant has a gym membership and they exercise approximately three times per week," Barb explained.

"We provide a weekly literacy program that focuses on functional literacy and life skills. We also give back to our community by volunteering at local churches, etcetera. Each participant at ABL has their own schedule which is carved out to suit their goals and abilities."

ABL Network hopes to serve four York Region communities by 2020, said Barb.

"Our plan is to have a program running in Stouffville by September 2015. Stouffville is an ideal community for our program as there is a transit system, a recreation facility and most importantly, a strong community feel."

In the next year, she added, organizers will concentrate on finding a local base and on identifying young adults who could benefit from the program.

Write to Kinjal at [kinjal.dagli@gmail.com](mailto:kinjal.dagli@gmail.com).

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Jennifer Fowler and her son, Brandon, in their Stouffville home.

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## Multicultural Association Welcomes New Members

The Stouffville Multicultural Association (SMA) is off to a busy start for 2014.

On Friday, Jan. 31 from 7 to 9 p.m., the association will host a celebration of Tamil Heritage Month at Nineteen on the Park. Admission is free and the evening offers insights into the Tamil way of life, music and the arts. Everyone is welcome.

A celebration of Black History Month will be held on Saturday, Feb. 22 from 1 to 3 p.m. at Nineteen on the Park

with entertainment, refreshments and information. Admission is free and everyone is welcome.

If you are interested in joining SMA or would like to know more about the organization, visit [stouffvillemulticultural.com](http://stouffvillemulticultural.com). You can also drop into one of the monthly meetings which take place on the second Tuesday of the month from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Stouffville Legion, 150 Mostar Street. Call 905-642-1377 for more information.