

Basil Waugh

UBC prof leads new eight-month program to empower people with intellectual disabilities

Callan Parker, who was born with Down syndrome, says graduating from high school meant leaving her comfort zone.

When her last class finished at Vancouver's Gladstone high school, she said goodbye to a close support network of teachers, services and friends.

"That's when it really hit home," says Parker, 18. "The future was very scary for me. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I realized that I needed a plan."

That plan is coming into focus now that Parker is enrolled in a new UBC program—the Canadian Inclusive Lives Learning Initiative (CILLI)—which was launched last month to empower individuals with intellectual disabilities and families so they can lead rich, fulfilling lives.

Led by Prof. Tim Stainton, director of UBC's School of Social Work, the program helps people with intellectual disabilities to create a comprehensive plan for their lives. It covers a wide range of topics, including: personal planning, decision-making, employment, housing, financial literacy, government and other resources, community connections and legal matters.

Other day-long or weekend courses exist on these topics, but Stainton says UBC's eight-month CILLI program is the most comprehensive of its kind. Aimed at families and people with intellectual disabilities across B.C., it employs a combination of online learning with camp-style retreats and telephone check-ins.

CILLI is also unique because people with intellectual disabilities do the course along with family members, friends and supporters. The inaugural program's 22 participants, from all around B.C., range from romantic couples to children with parents.

Callan Parker, the program's youngest participant, is joined by her father Michael Parker. So far, the course has focused on identifying key organizations for people with disabilities and how to apply for funding and services.

Hearing the experiences of other parents has been important, but getting to know other people with intellectual disabilities has been even more important, he says.

"Meeting other people with diverse needs who are living independently —working in jobs, in relationships, traveling—has been really helpful," says Michael Parker, who is juggling a family of four while working on his Masters in Film Production and Creative Writing at UBC. "It is inspiring to see people taking control of their lives, and gives us a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges that Callan might face."

So far, one of Callan Parker's favourite exercises involved making a collage with images of life goals. Filled with pictures of fashion, fine foods and travel, the self-proclaimed "fashionista" says the project was an important first step toward the "masterplan" the program is helping her to make. "It helped me to think about some of the steps I need to follow to survive," she says.

Another highlight was a recent “CILLI Idol” talent show, where Callan and a classmate broke out into a spontaneous dance after the group sang Johnny Cash and Celine Dion songs. Callan, who also takes a language course at Vancouver Community College, jokes she has “dance syndrome,” not Down Syndrome.

CILLI is a project of UBC’s Centre For Inclusion and Citizenship (CIC), which aims to make society more inclusive for people with intellectual disabilities. Founded by Stainton and a UBC Okanagan campus co-director Prof. Rachelle Hole in 2008 with a \$100,000 grant from Community Living British Columbia, the CIC conducts policy research, training for professionals, education and publicizes its findings.

“Surprisingly, very little research exists on the ways to best support people with intellectual disabilities,” says Stainton. “There is also a real shortage of qualified professionals in this field, so we are working to identify best practices and transfer that knowledge to government and professionals through training and policy work.”

To begin with, CILLI is focusing on B.C.-based resources and opportunities, but Stainton and his team are working to make the program national in scope.

“Ultimately, we want to help people take control of their lives,” says Stainton. “We think that will help them be a leader and support to others. At the end of the day, we want to inspire justice, equality and a sense of inclusiveness for people with intellectual disabilities in every community.”

For more information, on CILLI and CIC, visit cic.arts.ubc.ca

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UBC Social Work Prof. **Tim Stainton** (left) has launched an innovative program for people with intellectual disabilities and their families, such as **Callan Parker** (centre) and her father **Michael** (right). **Martin Dee** Photograph

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