

Karyn Lazareck;
A Passion to GROW
by
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G.R.O.W. (Gaining Resources Our Way) was built on the foundation of Karyn Lazareck's passion for young people with special needs and her belief that everyone has the right to be part of community life.

This passion was inspired by the birth of her third son, Jordan, who was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum long before that term became common place. Karyn says, "When Jordan was born, not many people were talking about autism, so I pretty much had to make up things as I went along."

Jordan had the opportunity to go to a program in New Haven, Connecticut, which focused on life skills and independence within a supportive community. "I saw no reason why a similar program could not be developed, or even improved upon, right here at home," Karyn says. "We had the professional expertise, the spirit of volunteerism and a wonderful location to pilot the program."

What began as a summer program in Gimli under the auspices of the Rady Jewish Community Centre, is now one part of an independent not-for-profit agency. The G.R.O.W. day program in Winnipeg now has 15 full time participants, Gimli has 12 attendees over the course of the summer and G.R.O.W. outreach has up to 28 individuals enjoying social activities twice a month.

G.R.O.W. is first and foremost a teaching program. "Life skills such as grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and banking are part of the curriculum, but there is so much more. The program provides workplace readiness, resume writing and opportunities for placements within the community," Karyn says. "All the skills that many take for granted are taught at G.R.O.W. in a way that leads to greater independence. Some of the participants have moved into their own apartments, which is a wonderful accomplishment and a testimony to how well G.R.O.W. has succeeded in its mandate. Each step towards self-reliance, even taking a bus independently to and from the program, is a step in the right direction."

The purpose of G.R.O.W. is to be person centred. “We didn’t care that much about numbers, all we wanted was to see how far along we could bring the individual,” Karyn says. “You can’t be all things to all people, but you can make a significant difference in someone’s life.”

Karyn insists that she is not that special; she has been fortunate enough to be able to connect with the right people. “The people that have worked on our committees and more recently the board members come from a wide array of disciplines: occupational therapy, special education and medicine,” she says. “We have people who just care, and that includes our exceptional staff with backgrounds in occupational therapy, psychology and education. I can’t say enough about our board and our volunteer committees and the individuals who work in the program. I feel insignificant compared to all of them. You couldn’t buy the devotion and the expertise that they bring to the table.”

Karyn says her real skill is recognizing people who have talent and bringing them together. She likes being part of a team working towards a common goal. “I’ve always had ideas about how things could be done and perhaps done better,” she says. “For instance, I felt certain that the program Jordan attended in the States could be improved upon largely because it would be right here in Winnipeg. Winnipeg is an extraordinary community; you can reach out to anybody and people are open to new ideas. We have a generosity of spirit that sets us apart.”

One of the great features that Karyn sees in G.R.O.W. in Winnipeg is its placement in Tuxedo. “G.R.O.W. is located across the street from Asper Jewish Community Campus which encompasses the Rady JCC,” she says. “It has a pool, a gym, a theatre and a library. Within the campus there are opportunities for vocational training, attending cultural events and participating in a healthy lifestyle. It is a hub for all sorts of great activities which add valuable enrichment to the program.”

“The Rady has hired one of our G.R.O.W. participants part time,” she adds. “The participants are also invited to attend special events which take place in the school and in the theatre. It is a very welcoming environment.”

One of the biggest misunderstandings about G.R.O.W. is its demographic. “Many people thought that it was just for Tuxedo/River Heights residents, or just the Jewish community, but that is not the case,” Karyn says. “It is non-denominational and open to all Winnipeg residents, as are all the programs that serve individuals with special needs within our city.”

But as far as G.R.O.W. has come, Karyn sees it going much further, with opportunities to expand. “Many of our families don’t want to transition out of the program,” she says. “They want us to develop G.R.O.W. Phase Two with a focus on vocation. So we are working on that now.”

“I have a million other ideas,” Karyn says. “I’d like to run an enriched educational program, like a night school along the lines of Continuing Adult Education. Maybe we could start an orchestra or a band, maybe a theatre group.”

Karyn’s goal is to be able to provide a place for people throughout their lives. “Ideally I would like to see our young people to be out there working, but still have the G.R.O.W. community to come back to,” she says.

The program got its start in a large part through Jordan himself, when he had his Bar Mitzvah. “He did a fabulous job,” Karyn says. “But instead of receiving presents, we encouraged donations to the Jordan Lazareck Fund for Special Needs at the Jewish Foundation.”

Over the years, so many other families and individuals have contributed to the fund that today it helps individuals with special needs participate in their communities throughout the city.

Although G.R.O.W. accounts for much of Karyn’s time and passion, she is also a devoted wife, mother and grandmother. She says that her husband Mel, “has been wonderfully supportive of all of the G.R.O.W. initiatives.”

Other family are: her oldest son Adam, her son Sam and daughter-in-law, Chloe and three grandchildren, Julia, Dylan and Benjamin and, of course, Jordan, “The most famous of the family,” she says with a smile.

Karyn and Mel love traveling with friends and family. “We like to spend time at the lake, boating and fishing and having quality family time,” she says, “Especially with our grandchildren, who are completely delightful. We are a very close family. I am so grateful for all my children, each one brings much joy to our lives.”

Karyn has been living in Tuxedo for many years and says simply, “This is where I live.”

“I could easily come up with 10 good stories about people all around me in this neighbourhood who do extraordinarily good things for their community, so obviously it is a good place to live,” she adds. “Many of our board members and volunteers are from this neighbourhood.”

Karyn says, “Community is a very important cornerstone of G.R.O.W. In fact the Vision Statement says, ‘Each individual with social and intellectual disabilities belongs to his or her community.’ And this is the community where G.R.O.W. resides...What could be better than that?”

So for the foreseeable future, Karyn plans to enjoy time with her family, watching her grandchildren grow up, and continuing to feed her passion for G.R.O.W.

To learn more about G.R.O.W. go to the website at www.gainingresourcesourway.ca.

Also watch out for the ‘Goals for GROW’ fundraiser coming your way in the spring of 2017.