



member to member connection

Breaking through barriers for workers who have children with special needs

№ 14 Summer 2007 • 10th Anniversary Issue

A decade of heart and connections



We can all take pride in what we've accomplished and shared in the last 10 years —congratulations!

Denis Lemelin
2nd National Vice-President
Canadian Union of Postal Workers

It's been 10 years and counting—already!—since the Special Needs Project was put in place. Originally a summer pilot, it quickly morphed into a permanent project to help ease the financial and emotional stresses of CUPW families who have children with special needs. The project now also covers members of the Union of Postal Communications Employees (UPCE) and CUPW's Rural and Suburban Mail Carriers.

This is a project with a heart—a big heart. What makes it that way is the parents and children who have shown what it means to combine courage and determination with unconditional love. The project has also been about making strong connections—between members, between the union and the members, and between families. The bonds that have been developed have provided a sense of community and support, and a realization that we are all part of a larger family that shares a common heart.

This 10th anniversary issue of *Member-to-Member Connection* includes the stories of some of the families who have been on the project since it began, as well as the people who have kept the project running day by day.

As you will see, everyone interviewed for this issue has complimented the union for creating and supporting this project. And of course, we are very proud of our role. But it's the members who are the union. The real credit must go to all of the families who have been on the project and supported it throughout the years, and the members of CUPW who made it possible for

the union to negotiate and keep making improvements to the Child Care Fund. They show that when we're all together, we have the power to make meaningful changes, and to keep things moving forward.

As part of marking the 10th anniversary, we've redesigned the newsletter and our logo. The “butterfly” logo incorporates the two projects we now have: Special Needs and Moving On (for members' adult sons and daughters who have special needs). We are also launching a new web site for the projects that contains information and forms, and tools and resources on special needs. Please visit and bookmark www.specialneedsproject.ca.

We have a new logo and a new web site!

Our new butterfly logo stands for growth and change. The two different sides of the butterfly represent the two programs, the Special Needs Project and the Moving On Project. The left hand side is solid, symbolizing a more secure environment for the younger children. The right hand side is open—a more progressive environment for adults. The six circles on the butterfly represent the six stages of life: infant, toddler, child, adolescent, adult and senior.



We also have a new web site that includes information and resources on the projects and special needs issues, as well as a members' section. Visit www.specialneedsproject.ca.



Making a “huge” difference by taking action

It was an accidental beginning, brought about by the surprise results of a survey of postal workers' child care needs.

Everyone assumed that the needs assessment would show night and weekend postal workers had the most difficulty with child care. However, it turned out that a significant number of parents had children with special needs, and these families faced the greatest challenges by far.

To probe more deeply, CUPW brought in Dr. Sharon Hope Irwin, Director of SpecialLink: the National Centre for Child Care Inclusion. She was one of the principal authors of the CUPW-commissioned study of working parents of children with disabilities, which led to the development of the Special Needs Project.

“We were trying to find out how postal workers who had children with special needs were dealing with their situation,” said Irwin.

The study, *In Our Way*, found that many parents were not coping very well, and made several recommendations to the union. The key recommendation was that CUPW should set up a pilot project to address “the unmet and diverse needs of members who have children with a disability or long-term health condition”—a recommendation the union took to heart.

“I remember being stunned that a piece of research actually went anywhere,” said Irwin. “The parents in the study were also surprised there was an outcome. People are used to giving information that doesn't do anything for them, but provides interesting statistical data. It's to the union's credit that it went forward.”

A summer pilot project was put in place because that's the time of year parents said was the toughest. The union posted bulletins in local union offices and asked shop stewards to let people know about the project. By the end of the first summer, 105 families had signed on.

“That first summer was a learning experience and a joyous time, said Irwin. “We were taking calls 24 hours a day and it felt like the beginning of something quite wonderful, innovative and great for families.”

A year round, permanent project

The pilot was so successful that the union decided to go with a year round, expanded project administered by SpecialLink in Sydney, Nova Scotia. (The Special Needs Project is now administered by Family Place in Baddeck, Nova Scotia.)

From the outset, CUPW provided ongoing support through Special Needs Advisors. Advisors help families identify how project funds can be best used to meet their needs. They also call families three times a year to see how they're doing, and provide assistance and information on available community resources.

Member-to-Member Connection is another project support. The newsletter includes useful articles and tips, as well as letters from parents and “want ads” for requests and offers of specific help.

In addition to financial assistance, information and services, parents involved in the study “talked about how they wished other members (members without children with disabilities) understood better what they were facing,” said Irwin.

To try to bridge this gap, the union put together a package of educational materials to help members better understand the challenges of having a child with disabilities. In 2002, it produced a book, *Moving Mountains*, devoted to the story of the project and the members who use it. CUPW has also had an ongoing strategy of integrating issues for families of children with disabilities into all of its work on child care, including its child care videos and its five-day residential course on child care, *Child Care Now!*

Irwin said her involvement in the project gave her “a lot more understanding of progressive union policy. The union was saying quite clearly, ‘We can't solve the bigger social issue of child care, but through a project we can do something on another scale to promote a broader solution.’ Another thing the project demonstrated to me was how a fairly small amount of support can make a huge difference in people's lives.”



Dr. Sharon Hope Irwin,
Director of SpecialLink



Providing respite for a hectic life

H

aving four children makes for a busy household. But when three out of the four have juvenile diabetes,

the stresses and challenges are multiplied many times, and parents find themselves living day by day, says Kathie Plein.

When her children were young, she and her husband Walter coped by working opposite shifts for a few years. After that, Walter quit his job and stayed home for 5 1/2 years. The Pleins were unable to find and afford child care for three diabetic children.

“Each child needed six to 10 blood testings a day,” says Plein, who has worked in the Post Office since 1976 and just recently became a retail clerk in Elmira, Ontario. “The children all have special diets. We had three different colour-coded blood prickers, and books for charting blood testing sites as well as injection sites. You lined them up on the kitchen table and had to mark the spots — bums, legs and tummies — and keep track of the rotations. Otherwise, you can mess up, and we did that a few times.”

Life was especially stressful when any of the children became ill because that meant taking a blood test every hour or half hour.

An additional stress was having to take the children to a medical specialist team every three months. “When I needed the time off, I would often be denied and had to use my holidays for many years. The boss would say, ‘You can’t have the time off, I can’t spare the body,’ and I would say, ‘Well, I have to be there.’” Invariably, her supervisor would direct her to taking annual leave.



Clockwise from bottom: Walter, Scarlett, 16, Sebastian, 26, Spencer, 19, Olivia, 22, Kathie (CUPW Special Needs member).

The three Plein children with juvenile diabetes have all used the Special Needs Project. Scarlett, 16, is the only remaining child on the project and has been part of it since it started. Olivia, 22, and Sebastian, 26, were once on the project. The remaining sibling, 19-year-old Spencer, does not have a special need.

It was Plein's sister, a letter carrier, who initially kept at her to apply to be on the project. “I’d first read it in a bulletin, but never thought much about it. My sister kept calling, saying I should apply to the project.”

A wonderful camp

The project has helped the Pleins with respite and sending the children to “a wonderful diabetic camp over the years. There were two weeks each summer that they went and we did not worry about them at all. They made wonderful friendships and it was really appreciated by them and by us because it was a really healthy break and we could

put our guard down for a few days.”

Like many other parents on the project, the Pleins have contributed to *Member-to-Member Connection*, which Kathie says she is addicted to. Olivia wrote a letter to the editor once to thank the project for allowing the children to go to the diabetic camp.

“As soon as I get the newsletter I get my coffee and read it front to back and not just once,” says Plein. “Sometimes I’ve used the resources. And you learn about different things, such as the disability tax credit.”

Plein is now a union activist—a social steward who is also likely to become a shop steward for her local. She has taken several union educationals, and says the five-day *Child Care Now!* course was her favourite.

“I appreciated that not all the participants in that course were special needs people. There were other parents, grandparents, single people, and I got to see the different perspectives of how they view you. It was encouraging to know that at the end of the course they had a better understanding and could go back to the workforce with that and be more useful to their members.”

Plein is proud of her union for putting in place the Special Needs Project and says it has helped her to provide support to others who have children with special needs. “I think it’s really progressive to stand up and fight for our members on issues like that.”



Feeling understood makes a difference for activist

Gwen Holmes knew very little about her union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, when her family became part of the Special Needs Project almost 11 years ago. But that quickly changed.

“The project made me a union activist,” she says. “I went to a union meeting as a grateful Mrs. Holmes, mother of a special child, and came out as Gwen the activist.”

Holmes is president of the Coburg, Ontario local of CUPW and a part-time postal clerk. She says her gratitude came mainly from feeling that someone was finally acknowledging the barriers her family faced. Over the years, both of her children have been on the Special Needs Project. Jonathan, now 21, has Attention Deficit Disorder. He came off the project when he was 16. Elizabeth, now 19 and on the Moving On Project, is blind and developmentally delayed.

Before the Special Needs Project, life for the Holmes family “was a nightmare.”

“I was trying to keep up a front that everything was fine and my life is not different. It was incredibly stressful. When the project came up it helped me acknowledge that my life is different from that of many others.”

The project also helped to relieve the financial burden of paying for support workers, tutors to help her children learn life skills, medicines not covered by the benefit plan and special camps.

“It meant, for example, that we could have a tutor twice a week instead of once. It gave me that extra time for tutoring and life skills. That meant it freed up the family money for other things to support the children, such as toys for stimulation for Elizabeth, which were more expensive.”

Holmes has had three Special Needs Advisors and “I’ve loved them all. They were supportive, helped with information and never rushed you. They became part of the family.”



Left: Gwen with daughter Elizabeth celebrating St. Patrick’s Day. **Above:** Elizabeth hangs out at the hammock at home enjoying a warm summer day.

Sharing with others

She has taken every opportunity she can to share the program with others. “I talk about it when I’m with parents and with teachers. I hand out the *Moving Mountains* book [about the project] wherever I can.

I’m also a social steward so I’ve used the information to help support another parent in my workplace.”

Holmes says what has meant the most to her is “that by being part of the project there are people who understand and support us and can connect us with others who have similar circumstances.”

Holmes is one of a number of parents on the Special Needs Project who have “graduated” from CUPW’s weeklong child care course, *Child Care Now!* She has also been a facilitator for the course, which provides a caucus for parents who have children with special needs.

“The emotional connection with the special needs caucus is beyond anything,” says Holmes. “It’s amazing to be able to share knowing people will understand exactly what you’re saying because they are also living that life.”



Winning the fight to survive

"I think our union is the best because it thinks of all of the members, without exception"

W

hen Louis-Philippe Tremblay was born 15 years ago, the doctors said he might not make it, and if he did, he would never walk or go to school. Louis-Philippe was diagnosed with Trisomy 3, a rare disorder associated with many developmental delays. He is one of only a few people in Quebec born with this chromosomal disorder.

"We took it one day at a time," says Louis-Philippe's father, Alain. "There was lots of running back and forth to the hospital, our second home, and over the years we put in a great deal of effort to support him in his fight to survive and to live as normal a life as possible." Louis-Philippe's mother stayed home to provide care for their son, who is unable to speak.

"Financially, it was extremely difficult for us," says Tremblay, a

letter carrier in Montreal. "But our collective agreement and the Special Needs Project helped to relieve some financial pressure and pay for treatments, medicines, a nurse, and for respite care so that we could have some breaks."

Tremblay joined the Special Needs Project as soon as he heard about it in 1996. He says he was very surprised to learn about it. "It was super. It's a great satisfaction for me to say to everyone that I think our union is the best because it thinks of all of the members, without exception."

Tremblay also credits the support of his supervisor and co-workers for helping him get through rough times. He says he talked about his situation with them openly, and this helped avoid misunderstandings. People knew that if he wasn't in one morning, it was because he was at the hospital with his son.



Alain Tremblay and Louis-Philippe

Today, things are more settled for Tremblay and his family. The child doctors said would never walk or go to school does both. "Louis-Philippe is as strong as he's ever been. He walks without help, speaks using gestures and pictograms, and attends a special school."

A project with a positive impact

A recent annual evaluation of the Special Needs Project shows that participating members feel it has had a positive impact on their lives.

- 93% of parents say the project has reduced their stress around child care and related issues.
- 99% say it has helped reduce financial stress.
- 93% say it has eased family stress.
- 86% say it has made a difference to their overall health and well-being.
- 84% say it has improved their morale and effectiveness at work.
- 92% say it has positively affected their child's self-esteem and happiness.
- 84% say it's made a positive change in their child's communication or academic skills.
- 82% say it has helped them become better able to advocate for services for their children.
- 90% say it has improved their attitude towards the union.



Getting the message out far and wide

Family Place, the family resource organization administering the Special Needs Project, is located in Cape Breton.

However, executive director JoAnna LaTulippe-Rochon makes sure to champion the project and the issues of families who have children with disabilities right across Canada.

LaTulippe-Rochon talks about the Special Needs Project wherever she goes—whether at a meeting in another province, or abroad at an international conference in Italy.

“It's wonderful to talk to people from all over the world and share the vision and reality of a program that has been embraced and put in place, and to talk about the union's involvement. It creates all kinds of conversation.”

LaTulippe-Rochon says the project is a model that “could work for all kinds of organizations and a wonderful example of how people can come together and look at gaps in the system and say, 'We are going to do something about it.'”

At an office in Baddeck (population: about 900), three people work daily to oversee the operations of the Special Needs and Moving On projects. They determine families' eligibility for the projects; provide, collect and analyze information; make sure parents receive the financial support on time; and do all the other administrative duties connected with the projects. There is also a very personal and human element to their work.

“There is a feeling of being able to do something that concretely helps people, but also an understanding

of how important it is to be an ear at the end of the phone to listen,” says LaTulippe-Rochon. “Some days offering that kind of support and providing the financial support can be pretty equal in terms of their value.”

Similar programs needed

Employers and governments could also have an impact on the lives of families who have children with special needs by putting in place similar programs, says LaTulippe-Rochon.

“We're able to say that our organization is part of a project that goes that extra mile for children with special needs and then from that position we are able to challenge governments, businesses and others to do something. I can say, 'Look if a union can do this, if a relatively small non-profit organization can do this, if a head office for a project can be in Baddeck, Nova Scotia, then don't tell me as a federal government you can't do this. This is a wonderful thing we are part of, and now let's talk about you doing your part.’”

LaTulippe-Rochon says there's been a growing awareness of the challenges facing children with special needs. Often, though, the intent to take action is there, but the resources aren't committed. There have also been some setbacks, for example, the cancellation of the federal child care program. Several provinces had pledged to use part of the federal child care funding on inclusion.

“Research, those who work with children who have special needs and parents themselves strongly support the benefits of the children



JoAnna LaTulippe-Rochon talks about the Special Needs Project wherever she goes

“We're able to say that our organization is part of a project that goes that extra mile for children with special needs and then from that position we are able to challenge governments, businesses and others to do something.”

being exposed to others and to have some time away from parents.

“[Early learning and child care] supports the social development of children with disabilities and helps all children to grow up understanding that people are people. A good way to help society overcome stereotyping is to start with integrated child care.”

LaTulippe-Rochon says she feels privileged to be part of a project that makes a difference and where parents feel comfortable sharing their joys as well as the serious challenges they face. “The members open themselves and allow you to be part of their lives. I have such admiration for the families, and for the union for putting this project together.”



Special Needs Project staff from left to right:
Cary MacDonald, JoAnne Connors, Dorothy Keigan



A Special Needs Advisor

Researcher/consultant Donna Michal has had a long-term relationship with the Special Needs Project. She was a

member of the national advisory committee that started it all, and was one of the project's first advisors (a role she still has today). She has been a facilitator for the special needs section of CUPW's child care course, and more recently helped with the research for developing the union's new project for children with disabilities who are transitioning into adulthood.

Needless to say, the Special Needs Project is special to her.

“The great thing about the project is that it's individualized. A parent might need tutoring or child care and that's fine as long as they qualify for the program. It is also great that the program has advisors. While being an advisor is a commitment, it is not full-time. Those of us who are advisors have been able to continue to

do it even as other things in our lives changed. So there has been this ability to meet families' individual needs and also have some continuity of support.” Since the Special Needs Project began, the union has continued to respond to the needs of parents, says Michal, whose work as a consultant focuses on early childhood issues. “Benefit package changes that have been brought forward because of the members' needs and the development of the Moving On Project are two big examples.”

But she feels the same cannot be said for governments, who are in a position to provide the most support to the most people. Government programs that support families vary across the country and even within cities and provinces and territories. There just isn't enough support for policies and programs that would really make a difference for families across Canada who have children with disabilities.

“I hear how parents struggle so much to get what they need for their children. Even when services are available, it's still a struggle for parents. But what I've noticed about the Special Needs Project over the long-term is how supportive and responsive the union's been.”



The Special Needs Project over the years

1989: A joint CUPW-Canada Post survey of the child care needs of postal workers finds that parents of children with special needs have the most challenges.

1991: CUPW negotiates a jointly administered child care fund with Canada Post (Appendix L of the collective agreement). The fund is capped at \$2 million and the employer puts \$200,000 into the fund every three months. The fund can be used for projects on child care services for postal worker families, information and research. However, management and the union have difficulty agreeing on any projects.

1995: CUPW negotiates sole administrative control of the Child Care Fund.

1996: Through the Child Care Fund, the union sponsors a study, *In Our Way*, that looks at the work-force barriers for parents of children with special needs. It is the first research of its kind in Canada and Québec. The study recommends that the union set up a pilot program for CUPW parents of children with special needs.

February, 1996: The union produces the Child Care Fund video, *Juggling with Care*, which contains segments about families who have children with special needs. The video discussion guide features sections on the stresses and workplace issues around having a child with special needs.

Summer, 1996: The union puts in place the 1996 Special Needs Summer Project, designed in collaboration with SpecialLink: The National Centre for Child Care Inclusion. The pilot draws the participation of 105 members.

Fall, 1996: The pilot project becomes a permanent, year-round project intended to help reduce the financial, emotional and physical stresses of CUPW families of children with special needs. It is administered for CUPW by SpecialLink.

May, 1997: *Child Care Now!*, CUPW's 5-day child care course, is held at Port Elgin for the first time. The course contains a component on children with special needs, and a significant number of course participants are parents who use the Special Needs Project. New understanding and strong connections are forged during the course by those who have children with special needs and other parents. This bonding occurs each subsequent time the course is held.

June, 1999: *The Key to Caring*, another video, features three of the union's child care projects, including the Special Needs Project.

1999-2000: The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), on behalf of its component, the Union of Postal Communications Employees (UPCE), negotiates a child care fund with Canada Post. UPCE-PSAC and CUPW sign an agreement that CUPW will administer the Child Care Fund. CUPW makes the Special Needs Project and other projects under the CUPW Child Care Fund accessible to UPCE members working for Canada Post.

2000: The union prepares a package of educational material on what it's like to work and have a child with special needs. The package includes a poster and quiz, and is for locals to use on the shop floor.

2002: Family Place Resource Centre, a federally funded, non-profit organization, becomes the administrator of the Special Needs Project. A staff of three administers the day-to-day operations of the project out of an office in Baddeck, Nova Scotia.

The union introduces the Moving On Project to provide information, resources and financial support for families who have dependent adult sons and daughters with disabilities.

2002: The book, *Moving Mountains: Work, Family and Children with Special Needs*, is published and widely distributed. The book showcases the stories of families who are using the Special Needs Project.

CUPW wins the 2002-2003 ISO Families Award, given by the Quebec government's Council on the Status of Women, for the work the union is doing on the Child Care Fund to help parents balance work and family life.

2003: The union negotiates improvements to the Child Care Fund. The fund's coverage is expanded to include CUPW members with dependent adult sons and daughters with special needs, and members who provide primary residential and financial support for their grandchildren. The fund is capped at \$2.5 million, with the employer's contribution increasing to \$300,000 every three months.

2003: The Special Needs Project wins the Rosemarie Popham Award. The award recognizes exceptional contributions made to advocacy and social policy development on behalf of children and families. The award is presented by Family Service Canada.



Above: The Special Needs Project wins the Rosemarie Popham Award presented by Family Service

Below: CUPW wins the 2002-2003 ISO Families Award, given by the Quebec government's Council on the Status of Women



2005: The union introduces the Moving On Project to provide information, resources and financial support for families who have dependent adult sons and daughters with disabilities. The project helps families whose children with special needs are transitioning into adulthood, and who find that many programs or supports will no longer be available when their sons or daughters turn 19.

2005: CUPW negotiates access to the Child Care Fund and all of its projects for Rural and Suburban Mail Carriers in the RSMC collective agreement.

2005: The union produces a new poster, *Breaking through barriers*, on the Special Needs and Moving On projects. The poster wins a Canadian Association of Labour Media (CALM) award.

2006-2007: The Special Needs Project surpasses its first decade. The union negotiates cost-of-living increases to the Child Care Fund to ensure that the projects will continue to grow and be available to the members. By 2010, Canada Post will make quarterly deposits of \$324,000 into the fund.



A project that responds to members' needs

The Special Needs Project is special because it was built on a sense of equity, promotes “national” family and has been able to move research into action, says CUPW Child Care Coordinator Jamie Kass.

Kass says the union made it a priority from the start to respect the differences in people's lives. “The project allows for gray areas because issues can play out differently in different families and work environments, and there are differences in people's ability to cope. The project is not intrusive, but it is still transparent and accountable.”

The staff at Family Place Resource Centre, the community organization that administers the project, are “an incredible group,” says Kass. “They really do listen to what each family needs and respond by providing the appropriate support.”

The 40 Special Needs Advisors who call families several times a year have ensured that the project goes far beyond providing financial support to families. The aim has always been to “be there for the families” through personal support and understanding. Many families have formed a strong bond with their advisors, even though they have never met them in person.

Making the connections

“Giving people a feeling of being part of something that is coast to coast has also been important,” Kass says. “We have tried to build a sense of identity and community while acknowledging provincial and territorial differences.”



CUPW Child Care Coordinator
Jamie Kass

The feeling of belonging has come about largely through the newsletter, *Member-to-Member Connection*. And the union just launched its Special Needs and Moving On projects web site, which will include a section for those who are part of the project.

The project's impact has been profound. It has increased the well-being of parents and helped them develop advocacy skills, and supported their children in their development and interaction with other children and adults. There is a greater recognition of the positive role the union plays in members' lives, and the union has a new understanding of disability issues and their effect on every dimension of a worker's life.

By maintaining regular contact with the families, the union has been able to build a stronger, more responsive project, says Kass. It has taken special needs-related issues to the bargaining table, winning better drug and medical equipment coverage and the ability to make use of the Child Care Fund for

parents with dependent adult sons or daughters (aged 19 or older) who have disabilities.

“It is in continual change,” says Kass. “The project is designed to continually build on what we hear from the members. The union's approach has been to be open to hearing, listening and then moving to action.”

From the National President

We asked CUPW National President, Deborah Bourque, what she felt the impact of the Special Needs Project has been on the members and the union. Here's what she had to say:

“The project shows in a concrete way that the union is really about supporting people in both their work and family lives. By meeting the serious needs of our members for resources they're often unable to get in the community or through government, it shows that the union will step forward and can make a real difference in what matters most in peoples' lives. The project helps to make those connections for the members about what their union is for, especially for members who are not necessarily union activists.”





A Special Needs Advisor — *more than a decade of calling and caring*

As one of the Special Needs Project's first advisors, Bernadette MacLellan has provided much-needed support to the families she's called regularly for more than 10 years. They in turn have made a big difference in her life.

“At least half of the children have been with me for the full time of the project,” she says. “Once you start, it's a long-term relationship. I really enjoy talking to the families and all of them are so appreciative of the program.”

The Special Needs Advisors are the parents' main link to the project. They conduct telephone interviews and identify services and resources for families, calling each of the families on their list three times a year.

MacLellan says she's become attached to many of the families on the project. She feels for them and worries about them. Sometimes, she'll get off the phone wondering how the family is going to get through the next few months, and tries to help by calling around and researching any available support. She is also very moved by the courage and determination she's seen.

Inspiring examples

“There are all kinds of special stories. One mother who was very ill passed away last year. Her child has dwarfism and in spite of her illness she did an incredible job of making sure he was exposed to as many activities as possible. She was preparing him to make sure he could live independently. This mother had all kinds of suggestions on how she did it and I've passed the information on to other parents.”

MacLellan says there have been some consistent themes as well as changes throughout the life of the project. Two recurring issues have been difficulties with special leave and the hardship of transitional times, such as when children move into junior high school.



Bernadette MacLellan

Before the advent of the Moving On Project, there was also the very stressful transition to adulthood, when children turning 18 became ineligible for many government supports and could no longer access the Special Needs Project. “It was always a terrible feeling to have to say to families, 'That's it, we're all finished'. It was a major issue for families. Then when the Moving On Project [for CUPW families with adult children with special needs] came into being it was wonderful to say 'Yes, you will still get support.’”

MacLellan also says the workplace environment is more supportive of parents whose children have special needs than it was in 1996.

“At first we would get some parents saying that in their work area people were making sarcastic comments and that doesn't happen anymore. I think it's because of the union's internal education about what it's like to have a child with special needs and what the project does. It's something to really be proud of.”

Check out our new web site at www.specialneedsproject.ca

Franglais A A A [] [] []

Special Needs & Moving On
Projects of CUPW/UPCE-PSAC

Breaking through barriers for workers who have children with special needs

Home ▾ About Us ▾ Resources ▾ Calendar ▾ Interact ▾



One less stress in a challenging life

Cathy Furtak has always been fairly active in her union, so she was aware of the Special Needs Project as soon as it “popped out” in 1996. She applied for the program immediately.

At the time, Furtak was an inside worker (she's now a letter carrier in Edmonton) and the single mother of a child with severe mental and physical disabilities.

“The program meant one less thing to worry about,” says Furtak. “Child care was the biggest thing for me at the time. I was in a plant all afternoon and it was hard to find someone.”



Cathy Furtak and her daughter Samantha



Samantha, who is now 18, attends a private school for children with special needs

Over the years, Furtak has used the program for child care, a summer day care program, busing and specialized equipment for Samantha, who is now 18, and attends a private school for children with special needs. This year-Samantha's last before she transitions to the Moving On project-Furtak will use the program for a voice-generated communications device.

“It's a picture symbol signing program and Samantha can pick out the symbols in order and the machine will produce a sentence and a voice. It's especially good for communicating with strangers because we understand her but it's harder for strangers.”

The program has definitely helped with the stress of looking after a child with disabilities and “opened up opportunities” for Samantha. Resources such as the newsletter, *Member-to-Member Connection*, and the Special Needs Advisor have also made a difference.

“My advisor has always been a very good sounding board. And the newsletter makes you feel connected to other parents. There are always some good Internet links in there and you can learn from others.”

“The program meant one less thing to worry about,” says Furtak.

Furtak has also attended CUPW's weeklong child care course, which includes a component on children with special needs. She found the course “eye-opening. In the five days you spend there you don't think you could get that close to people, but it's a very strong bonding thing, and you take in a lot of information.”



Samantha will become part of the Moving On project

As an activist, Furtak is perhaps less surprised than most that CUPW successfully negotiated a child care fund and took the initiative to develop and implement the Special Needs Project—unique in Canada and perhaps the world. “I was surprised to a point, but when you are with a union that gets the first paid maternity leave in Canada, you're not that surprised when they negotiate a fund like that.”

Child Care Fund resources

What is quality child care? leaflet on the elements of high quality child care.

Five steps to finding quality child care, a how-to booklet for parents looking for good child care.

Special Needs and Moving On projects

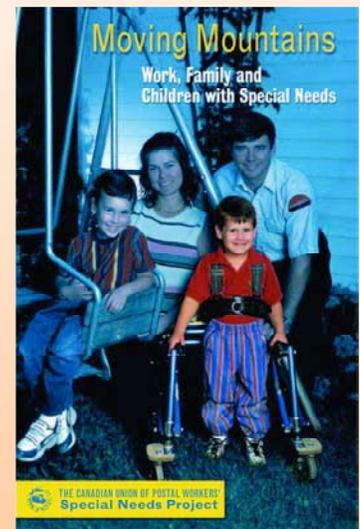
Breaking Through Barriers, a DVD about the Special Needs and Moving On projects.

Breaking Through Barriers poster about the Special Needs and Moving On projects.

Moving Mountains, a book that provides an in-depth look at the history and impact of the Special Needs Project. The book showcases the personal stories of families on the project.

In Our Way, an in-depth, ground-breaking study about the child care problems faced by CUPW and other parents of children with special needs.

www.specialneedsproject.ca, the web site of the Special Needs and Moving On projects that includes information, resources and a members' section. Email: info@specialneedsproject.ca





Helping children reach their potential

C

olin Kelly is 14, very likable, and won three silver medals in skiing at the 2007 Special Olympics British Columbia Winter Games.

Columbia Winter Games.

“He is an easygoing, thoughtful, generous person who is very helpful with other kids with special needs,” says his proud mother, Cynthia Kelly, a postal clerk in Kelowna.

Excelling at sports and being a “people person” are real accomplishments for Colin, who has speech and gross motor problems. He has been part of the Special Needs Project since it started in 1996.

The project helped “tremendously” with defraying the costs for specialized programs for Colin in social and physical skills development, says Kelly.

“When I first found out about the project, I thought, ‘What an opportunity thing to have.’ I can’t think of any other workplace that offers that for families.”

Kelly, who learned about the project from her shop steward, said resources such as *Member-to-Member Connection* and her Special Needs Advisor have been very helpful and made her feel more connected, as has the interaction with other parents at the



Colin Kelly proudly wearing his three silver medals

programs Colin has been enrolled in. Over the years, she and her husband have also regularly contributed reports on Colin’s progress in elementary school that have been published in *Member-to-Member Connection*.

Support means a lot

“You really need those support systems. Otherwise you’d be on your own. Through the newsletter, I’ve learned about different disabilities, what help parents have been looking for and the programs they found for their children. My advisor has been really supportive and is very informed. When I’ve needed someone else’s perspective on things, she’s made a difference.”

Over the years, Cynthia and her husband have regularly contributed reports on Colin’s progress in elementary school that have been published in *Member-to-Member Connection*.

The support from the project and from other parents of children with disabilities has helped to offset the lack of empathy she has encountered from parents of typically developing children in the schools Colin has attended. “That has been the hardest thing to deal with,” she says. “They really don’t understand what it’s like to have a child with special needs.”

Increasingly, Kelly is thinking about Colin’s future. Although he has expressed interest in working for the RCMP in some capacity, “I would like to see him do some kind of community living work because he’s been with so many different kinds of special needs people and knows about some of the special needs. He has a good attitude, and a good outlook, and he cares about others.”

“His teacher has said that Colin puts all his effort into everything he does. He wants to be included and accepted by his classmates.”

Find information and resources on our new web site at www.specialneedsproject.ca

Franglais

Special Needs & Moving On
Projects of CUPW/UPCE-PSAC

Breaking through barriers for workers who have children with special needs

Home About Us Resources Calendar Interact



"It's nice to know you're not alone"

For UPCE-PSAC member Lynn Fraser, quarterly calls from her Special Needs Advisor provide the kind of support that is hard to find elsewhere.

"She'll call and we'll go through the questions and lots of times after we will sit and talk," says Fraser. "It is really nice to have someone like that as a person I can release to," says Fraser, who works in administration in Canada Post's Fredericton Contact Centre. "She also gives me helpful hints and options I might not already have thought of. It's nice to have someone who can open doors for you or give you ideas."

Fraser has two sons, Austin, 6, and Jessie, 13. Jessie has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), a mild form of autism and a learning impairment that affects his memory. While medication has enabled Jessie to stay in school and learn, he has problems with aggression at home and needs support to develop his social skills.

The Special Needs Project "allows him to participate in programs that help him socially," says Fraser. "He can't read social cues and needs to be in programs with smaller groups so he can be more in his comfort zone and adapt easier."

Many of the programs revolve around sports and are provided by the school or the YMCA. Last year, when Jessie was in Grade 6, he won a medal for the most improved player in basketball.

Better skills

"It was a big thing for him," says Fraser. "Also, the good news is that he has done well socially with making friends and maintaining them. He has friends over all the time and goes to their houses.

Before he would latch onto them and he almost would scare them away."

Fraser is First Vice-President of UPCE-PSAC Local 60105. Although she has always been an activist, she was surprised and "very grateful" when she found out about the union's Special Needs Project six years ago and all of the supports it offered. She has brought other parents into the project and has formed a bond with co-workers who are in a similar situation, talking with them over coffee or on breaks to share stories and provide support.

"It's hard to have to experience any of this, but it is also nice to know you are not alone."



Austin, 6, and Jessie, 13. The Special Needs Project allows Jessie to participate in programs that help him socially. Last year, when Jessie was in Grade 6, he won a medal for the most improved player in basketball.



A commitment to inclusion

The 10th anniversary of the Special Needs Project represents a real milestone. This project has made a significant difference in the working lives of our members. It offers real support for post office families in juggling the extra financial pressures and unique stresses that come with having a child with special needs.

UPCE-PSAC negotiated our Child Care Fund in our 1999 round of bargaining and then met with CUPW to outline how we could work together for the benefit of both groups of members on child care. The result was an agreement that UPCE and CUPW would have one fund and that all the current child care projects would be opened to UPCE members. By Spring 2000, our members joined the programs. This project underlines very concrete support that our union can bring to the lives of members and their families. We now have members who are part of the Special Needs Project in all four regions.

UPCE is committed to promoting and encouraging other unions and employers to find unique and important ways to further support parents who have children with special needs and face additional challenges in remaining in the workforce. We will also, along with PSAC, stay in the forefront of the push for all levels government to put in place comprehensive public policies and funding to support adults and children with disabilities. We must build a society that is truly inclusive.

Richard L. Des Lauriers,
National President, Union of Postal
Communications Employees



Richard and his children, Ashley and Noah

Member-to-Member Connection is the newsletter of the Special Needs and Moving On Projects. It is produced by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the Union of Postal Communications Employees—Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Phone: 1-800-840-5465
Fax: 1-902-295-2296
E-mail: info@specialneedsproject.ca
Web site: www.specialneedsproject.ca

Please send letters by e-mail or to:
P.O. Box 237, Baddeck, N.S. B0E 1B0

The UPCE-PSAC Child Care Fund is administered by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and financed by Canada Post Corporation.



Check out our new web site at www.specialneedsproject.ca

Franglais A A A [] [] []

Special Needs & Moving On
Projects of CUPW/UPCE-PSAC

Breaking through barriers for workers who have children with special needs

Home ▾ About Us ▾ Resources ▾ Calendar ▾ Interact ▾