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# **The Challenge of Helping the Disabled**

The Sunshine Workshops is a recent personal initiative that has started to brighten up Saturday afternoons for a number of young girls in Vaudreuil-Dorion, a town located just west of Montreal, Canada. For the last 4 years, a group of young volunteers has been holding activities for mentally and physically disabled people in facilities loaned by a local rehabilitation center.

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### **The woman behind it all**

Local school teacher Diane St-Onge came up with the idea during a conversation with Armina, a fellow teacher and the mother of a disabled child.

For some time, Diane had been dreaming of starting up a project that

would encourage youth to develop their potential for generous service. But what would be the best thing to do? The idea began to form in Diane's mind after she started attending a centre of Opus Dei. The atmosphere of serenity she found there, combined with intense work, cultural interests, and above all, attention to each individual, inspired her to be generous and encourage others to do the same. Diane found out about an association of parents whose disabled children were having learning and adjustment challenges. Why not invite some young teenagers to give a hand a help brighten up the afternoons for these children? It might even give parents a deserved break. The timing was right as her friend Armina had been sending her son to a local facility that was now shutting down and she now had no place to turn to.

With that, the “Sunshine Workshops” were set up. For more than 4 years now, high-school volunteers aged 14 to 18 have offered to spend their afternoons helping these disabled children. The experience has taught them to see beyond disability and discover the simplicity and greatness of each human person there present in front of them.

It has definitely been a challenge, but volunteers are delighted by how warm and welcoming people with a physical or mental disability can be. Linda, a volunteer, says she benefits enormously from her meetings with her new friends. She actually feels she is receiving more than she is giving!

## **Participants**

Programme participants never miss a meeting and have become eager beavers! Whether they are learning to cook, act, sing or dance, doing

crafts or playing, little by little they are becoming more independent. Activities at Sunshine Workshops are not just a pastime: they are opportunities to develop at one's own pace. Participants also try to replicate at home what they learn at each meeting.

So every meeting becomes a happening, something they wouldn't want to miss, a unique opportunity to socialize and progress.

While their children are in safe hands, the parents of the disabled children can enjoy some respite.

## **A growing need**

Are Saturday afternoons boring? Not for everyone! There is clearly a need for Sunshine Workshops, as the number of participants has been growing. The volunteers have shown real commitment. They make their Saturdays so much more exciting by

putting them all into community service. What a difference a few hours out of a weekend can make!

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