



NOTEBOOK



By Wendy Singer

My calendar for March and April was overbooked with events that I was looking forward to attending and reporting on. It was disappointing when, one by one, events that the community worked so hard to plan were cancelled, like **Steven Atme's** much anticipated *The Power of One* premiere and Montreal Autism in Motion's conference, the Spectrum Works Job Fair and the Montreal Centre for Learning Disabilities workshop with **Sarah Ward**. We missed the C.A.R.E. Centre's fundraising dinner, the Social Tree's congress, the Lester B. Pearson School Board's resource fair and many more.

Yet, amidst the challenges, the special needs community has shown collective resilience, moving swiftly online to offer services, workshops, support groups and lectures. I have attended many events over the past few months from my home office, covering topics that we would not have imagined discussing a few months prior, like "the new normal" or "the five stages of grieving." This shift has given us new ways to connect, learn and cope together, and reach beyond our communities as issues of concern for the special needs community are addressed, and opportunities for hope and change emerge.

To speak to the times, in this edition of the Notebook, I share only a few pre-COVID-19 events. Instead, I too shift, from sharing the social to more personal stories. I hope you enjoy it!

The community mourns the passing of Steve Bletas

On May 6, the community said goodbye to **Steve Bletas**. He was the first Chair of the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board (SWLSB), where he sat from 1998 to 2012, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Société de transport de Laval since 2015. He also sat on the Board of the Centre de santé et de services sociaux de Laval and the Sir Wilfrid Laurier Foundation, the Executive Committee of the Quebec English School Boards Association and was a member of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association.

"While education was Steve's passion, his professional experience within structures such as the school board, as well as personal health challenges made him an ideal advocate for the special needs community. Ultimately, he was appointed, and deservedly so, to the Société de Transport de Laval's board of directors, where he played an integral role in improving accessibility services for several years," said his good friend **Nick Katalifos**, principal of Wagar Adult Education Centre and chair of Giant Steps School. "Even with all of his professional accomplishments, there is no doubt he was most proud of his kids."

Bletas was a guest columnist in the Spring/Summer 2012 edition of *Inspirations*, where he shared the challenges he was facing due to serious health issues, particularly spinal stenosis. He explained how the challenges of becoming a wheelchair user prompted him to make a conscious decision to put his disability into perspective. "The initial news of what I was facing was

devastating, and I rapidly discovered that people with mobility issues have a great deal to contend with. Even in a society as modern and advanced as our own, we have not done enough to facilitate individuals with physical impairments, and most locations are not wheelchair friendly," he wrote.

"Determination and tenacity," he wrote, kept him going and doing what he loved to do serving SWLSB constituents and the English-speaking community of Quebec. He advocated for students and people with disabilities with heightened sensitivity and awareness. Bletas' closing remarks remain relevant today: "While the road ahead will not always be an easy one and indeed, may be an uphill battle at times, it will nonetheless always point forward."

We join together in sharing our deepest sympathies with the Bletas family, the SWLSB, the STL and all of those that he touched.



Steve Bletas.
(Photo, Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board)



Danielle Kasner, Max Kasner, Carly Goodman, Elizabeth Wiener, Max Levy and Shelly Christensen at The Gelber Centre on February 13. (Photo, Federation CJA)

On February 12, Federation CJA hosted a three-hour workshop led by Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month founder **Shelly Christensen**. Amongst the many messages she imparted that day, Christensen encouraged community leaders to work together to move inclusion from discussion to action, and to involve stakeholders in every step of their inclusion plan. (To read more about Christensen's presentation, consult our Winter 2020 edition.)

The third hour of the workshop included a panel discussion where guests **Elizabeth Wiener**, founder of Wise Women Canada and mental health advocate, and **Max**

Kasner, his sister **Danielle Kasner** and **Max Levy** shared their experiences. They educated attendees on the challenges and stigma they face on a daily basis, sharing how upsetting it is to be excluded for no real reason and how simple it is to remove barriers to inclusion. Max Kasner shared his thoughts on how living with a developmental disability affects his life. "It makes me very interesting. I have a disability but I don't let it get in my way." Kasner is an I Can Dream Theatre star, a member of the Shira Choir and a Friendship Revolution leader. His sister Danielle urged leaders to fight now for inclusion and spoke on behalf of sibling-caregivers and their concerns for the future of their loved ones.

Let's Get Going! teams up with Inspirations

Marcie Balaban, founder of Let's Get Going!, is an expert sales consultant and business matchmaker. For the past 18 years, she has been coordinating pairings of entrepreneurs and corporate executives by arranging small boardroom meetings and VIP lunches with owners or upper management of companies. The idea is to make good matches and create direct meetings between organizations that have a common purpose.

In March, Balaban's meetings went online, to great success. "Since the pandemic, my business has evolved in ways I never expected," said Balaban, excited that her clients are embracing regular Zoom meetings and continue to connect.

This year, Balaban is honouring *Inspirations* as a Let's Get Going! Making a Difference organization. In doing so, she has provided us a platform on her website and a voice in her corporate relationship building meetings.



Marcie Balaban.
(Photo, Lawrence Clemen Photography)

In searching for organizations to feature in Making a Difference, Balaban is initially drawn to leaders that she develops a connection with, similar to the way she seeks out business partners. She is particularly pleased to be giving back to children with special needs through her donations to *Inspirations*.

We have been attending Balaban's meetings and are impressed with her acumen and wisdom in nurturing partnerships. In these meetings, we share *Inspirations* and the concerns of the special needs community. This outreach is invaluable to us, and we thank Balaban for seeing the merit in our work, supporting the special needs community, and providing us this opportunity to educate and match up with like-minded executives from all parts of corporate life. To learn more about Let's Get Going!, visit <https://letsgetgoing.ca/>