



He is exceptional in many ways, but Andrew's disability will make it difficult for him to access postsecondary education. *Where does he fit in?*

# A place for Andrew

by Lynn Cunningham

As Andrew's 18th birthday approached, the application deadline loomed. There were the in-person appointments to schedule, forms to fill out and documentation to gather. We made it, with two days to spare. A month or so later the good news arrived: he'd been accepted.

No, it wasn't by Guelph or Queen's or Brock. It was by the Ontario Disability Support Program, which will provide about \$800-a-month assistance once he turns 18, and a few hundred more if he lives on his own. The college or university issue won't arise for another few years – he's not setting any speed records in high school. Still, last year he passed the Ontario literacy test, unlike almost 50 percent of other so-called special-needs kids. Currently he's taking 20th-century Canadian history and can vividly describe World War I trench warfare. Before the American election, unprompted, he cogently explained why he would vote for Barack Obama if he lived in the States, and why he thought the Republicans were "lame." He has other strengths, too: he's been playing guitar since he was 12 (actually three – an electric, a bass and a 12-string acoustic), and far from being a lonely outsider, he has a posse largely made up of "normal" kids, including the ones

in his band. In most respects, including age-appropriate obnoxiousness, he's indistinguishable from his pals.

Andrew's disability is not the kind we tend to think of when we hear the word in the postsecondary environment, largely because we don't encounter it there. He's not in a wheelchair or hard of hearing; he doesn't have the kind of information-processing problem that can be accommodated simply by additional time for tests. His fetal alcohol syndrome, or FAS, which translates to permanent brain damage, is the result of his mom's drinking during her pregnancy.

When he was 16 months old, Children's Aid intervened and he's been with me, his step-grandmother, ever since, although for simplicity's sake, I usually just refer to him as "my kid." His deficits include almost non-existent organization skills – his teachers know by now not to send any important notices home with him because they're bound to dematerialize long before they get to me. His handwriting is that of a 10-year-old. Give him more than two or three instructions at a time, written or oral, and you can almost hear the brain circuits shorting out.

However, Andrew is exceptional in more ways than the provincial public school system recognizes (there are 12 categories of "exceptionality" in Ontario, including behaviour, learning

disability, mild intellectual disability and giftedness; Andrew's slot is learning disability, or LD). If he were like many teens with FAS, by now he would have dropped out of school, perhaps be living on the streets, even be in the slammer.

That's the story of most of the children whose parents attend the FAS support group to which I belong. Instead, Andrew hardly ever misses school, where he takes most courses in regular classrooms but returns to a special home room, for about 10 teens, that's staffed by a teacher, a youth worker and, one day a week, a psychiatrist. There he gets the support that allows him to complete assignments and study for tests. Last year, when I asked him whether he thought he wanted to complete school, he responded with a withering teenage riposte: "Well, duh. Otherwise, what's the point?"

Good question. Another is, what is the point of advanced education for him and other kids with intellectual disabilities? Don't they belong in sheltered workshops or what used to be called "opportunity classes" when I was in high school? (Two years of hairdressing and short-order cooking for the girls, auto repair for the boys.)

Not according to Harvey Weingarten, president of the University of Calgary, which in 1992 was the second university in Canada – the first being the University of Alberta, in 1987 – to

fully integrate students with intellectual disabilities.

“It’s important that as many people who can benefit from postsecondary have the opportunity,” he has said. “Our job is to give our students, all of our students, as many opportunities to prepare themselves for the world ahead.”

Twenty years ago, Bruce Uditsky, now chief executive of the Alberta Association for Community Living, and consultant Bruce Kappel elaborated on this point. Among the benefits of inclusive postsecondary policies, they listed “improved opportunities to secure employment” and “preparation for challenges within the larger community.”

The biggest hurdle for Andrew and his cohort, though, is finding someplace to be challenged at.

I started my search at Ryerson University, where I teach, since immediate family members can attend free of charge. The director of the Access Centre, Tanya Lewis is clearly supportive of the inclusivity model, and was encouraging when I outlined the kinds of supports Andrew needs to learn. A tutor? Check. Extended time for test taking? Check. Modified assignment instructions to compensate for his trouble with receptive language? No problem. No big classes? That might be an issue, but there could be a way around it.

My optimism faded considerably when I talked to the registrar. “Being

a student at Ryerson involves certain things,” Keith Alnwick said dampeningly. “Are students capable of doing what is required of students?”

And of course the first thing required of students is to get in, which, under the regular enrolment process, Andrew would not, given his scatter of credits across applied, college and university levels. What about future planning regarding broadened inclusion? “There’s no initiative at the present time,” Mr. Alnwick said. Just to make his point clear, he added, “It has not reached an action level for us.”

It may be about to. Fran Marinic-Jaffer describes herself as engaged in removing “massive roadblocks” for her 21-year-old son, Ashif, who has Down syndrome. An Ontario Scholar, he attended York University’s Glendon campus, starting in 2006. For reasons that may ultimately be illuminated via a lawsuit launched by Ashif, the university failed to provide the accommodations that were available to other students: a note-taker, a tutor to help him retrieve information, extended time for exams. (A university spokesperson’s 2006 comments about “maintaining the integrity of degrees” hint at the issue from York’s perspective.) Now Ashif is applying to Ryerson.

He is clear about his motivation with regard to the suit: “I need to stand up for my rights as a person.” His mother is too: “We live in an extremely deceptive environment about tolerance. We’re talking about visual discrimination and we’re

talking about barriers. Because there is that horrific assumption that a person with this genetic disposition is not a functioning member of society.” Championing her son’s and others’ rights to inclusive education has led her to do doctoral studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (where she was about to defend her thesis in late 2008). Now she’s planning to apply to law school.

Feisty doesn’t come close to describing Ms. Marinic-Jaffer. She relates how York suggested Ashif just audit courses and describes her response. “I told them, ‘You can kiss my ass,’” she says, relishing every syllable. She’s the epitome of what Melanie Panitch, director of Ryerson’s school of disabilities studies, calls “accidental activists” – mothers who, because of a child’s disability, have been drawn into struggles with institutions and agencies, in the process improving conditions for other children as well as their own.

Dr. Panitch has been an activist in her own right. In 1984, when she was working at Toronto’s Humber College, she supported a father’s request that his intellectually challenged son be allowed to attend the school. With the assistance of the Community Integration through Cooperative Education program, or CICE, a pilot project was launched. Today, Humber admits 18 students annually to its two-year certificate course, and three other Ontario community colleges – Lambton College, Sault College and,

