

Profiles of Success From Guiding Circles

The Strength of Gifts: Shirley Kelly

Shirley Kelly's 19-year-old son, Jesse, is much like others his age. He loves classic rock and the Toronto Maple Leafs, works out at the gym, volunteers at a "soup kitchen" and holds down a day job with Norcom Telecommunications as an administrative clerk. Jesse is also autistic – but thanks to his mother's belief in his "strengths" and the support of his local community – Jesse is able to accomplish much more than some his age.

Yet thanks to his mother's belief in his native strength and the support of his local community, Jesse is able to accomplish much more than most autistic children his age.

"If you ask someone what their strength is, they often don't know," says Shirley Kelly, program supervisor at the Shooniyaa Wa-Biitong Training and Employment Centre in Kenora, Ontario. "You need to talk to them, to bring it out...you need to get them to tell their story," she says.

To help Jesse tell his story to the outside world and to find his strengths, Kelly turned to the Guiding Circles program (www.guidingcircles.com) – a self-exploration package that combines traditional Aboriginal teachings with contemporary career exercises.

Having used the program in previous training workshops, she decided it would be the perfect tool to help her own son find employment and understanding in the workplace.

"The Guiding Circle approach is a non-intrusive approach...it brings insight into gifts, talent or aptitudes," says Kelly. "In Jesse's case, one of his personal gifts is his memory."

As it turned out, that's a gift that allows Jesse to meet his everyday work responsibilities of filing account information, data entry and maintaining supplies and inventory. "Once we identified Jesse's strengths, the next step was to 'expand the circle' to include the community and the employer," Kelly says. "So we talked to others about Jesse, explaining that he needs structure and guidance and we

set-up a relationship with the employer."

That was more than a year ago. Today, Jesse is thriving with the support he has received from others. He has a work mentor, a fitness friend and he's enrolled in a literacy program. His next big goal is to get his driver's license.

Expanding the circle even further at a local job fair, Kelly also developed a unique activity to help other young people evaluate their career choices. "We wanted to offer an interactive booth at the fair... instead of just offering brochures or pamphlets," she says.

To create a hands-on approach, Kelly devised a series of different colored sticky notes that booth visitors could fill in and stick on a giant career circle. The circle was sectioned into a variety of topic areas such as interests and work connections.

"The kids would fill out something like "I like guitar playing" or "my uncle is a police officer" and then place them in the appropriate area," Kelly says. "It helped them to think about how all this connects in the career circle."

Ultimately, the giant career circle got everyone talking about their individual stories and how that might affect their career options. As Kelly has demonstrated, young people need to find their strengths and then highlight them to others. "Not a lot of people want to listen to others... but that is the only way to hear what their story is," explains Kelly.

"Sometimes, you even gotta brag a little."

To learn more about Guiding Circles please visit www.guidingcircles.com, or contact Trina Maher, Director Skills & Learning, Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada at 1-866-711-5091.



Shirley Kelly, Program Supervisor at the Shooniyaa Wa-Biitong Training and Employment Centre, Kenora, Ontario

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Jesse Kelly with tutor