

Peers Support Others with Disabilities

Last month we began a series on the SMART Fund, which supports innovative, community-based initiatives that promote and improve the health of VCH residents. In this issue, we profile two SMART Fund projects for people with disabilities.

SMART supports CARMA, the Community and Residents Mentors Association, a peer support group started by former residents of the George Pearson Centre, who are members of the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities.

“CARMA is about people with disabilities supporting other people with disabilities,” says Christine Gordon, Executive Director of the Coalition. “People used to living in an institution may not recognize the possibilities open to them. CARMA mentors help George Pearson residents resettle in the community or set life goals. CARMA helps people secure housing, establish support networks, and obtain home support and life skills, depending on individual needs.”

“CARMA gave me the feeling I wasn’t alone,” says former GP resident Richard. “CARMA supported me through my efforts to leave the hospital.”

Another CARMA recipient, Joanne says, “CARMA is a wonderful organization. It’s so good to be able to live on your own. Now I’m more of a person than a number.”

In February, CARMA invited people in the neighbourhood to help George Pearson residents build a Cobb house, a mud house used in many parts of the world. The project helps residents build skills and relationships in the community. Built in partnership with

the Neighbourhood Garden Society, the house will be completed by early fall, and will become the garden house for the centre.

Another SMART project is the BC Paraplegic Association’s Peer Program, a peer support network for people with disabilities. The Peer Program recruits and trains peer volunteers to assist newly injured people as they move through the rehabilitation process and integrate into the community.

“We empower peers to pass on the knowledge and skills they have learned through their own experience to people facing a new set of challenges in learning to live with a disability,” says Stephanie Cadieux, Provincial Peer Coordinator. “As participants develop new skills, their isolation diminishes, they experience vocational achievements, build a stronger community, and rely on each other more, and on professional support less.”

“Meeting Teri was great. Just having someone to talk to was helpful. With her encouragement I have taken up tennis and kayaking and I love it,” says Lorraine, a Peer Program participant.

“When I was first injured the program didn’t exist and there were no others like myself to turn to when I needed someone to talk to about my new body,” says Brian. “Now I can get together with others like myself, those with more experience than me, and

people I can help. The peer program is a great resource for anything from body questions to travel planning and tips. We are a group of people with some extreme physical and social challenges helping one another to live fuller lives.”

More than 430 people have worked with 97 volunteers in the program, since it began in May 2001. “We hold events and activities every month to facilitate peer introductions and promote community, such as the Access Bus Stop Hop (a scavenger hunt using all forms of accessible BC Transit), comedy night (featuring comedians with disabilities and others), a women’s networking afternoon, a seminar on personal advocacy, Bingo, a BBQ and so on,” says Cadieux.

The Peer Program coordinates support groups, facilitates one-on-one matches between peers when people have specific questions or needs, and has launched a website, www.peerzone.org to keep people informed and enable peers and others to connect with each other and the network.

Richard Long, CARMA participant

