

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion ventures outside of mental and physical boundaries

A day to shine

You know you've hosted a good party when your guests don't want to leave.

That was the case for third-year medical student Andrée Vincent and Dr. Roxanne Pinson, a pediatric resident at the Alberta Children's Hospital in Calgary, and their 2016-17 Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion grant program project: Starlight Performance Camp.

On a sunny July Saturday, at Edmonton's Ortona Gymnastics Club, Andrée and Roxanne applied their cheerleading, gymnastics and competitive dance skills and talents with several more medical (and other) students and graduates from the University of Alberta to facilitate a very special day in Edmonton for chronically ill or disabled children.



Dr. Roxanne Pinson (l) and third-year medical student Andrée Vincent (r) at the Starlight Performance Camp. (Photo: Trevor Mah)

Under the enthusiastic and caring guidance and instruction of 20 volunteers, the 34 children – ranging from five to 14 years old – ventured outside the mental and physical boundaries of their conditions to explore the world of performing arts through gymnastics, dance, cheerleading and fashion workshops.

“The goal of Starlight Performance Camp was to introduce children living with a chronic illness or disability, to the world of performance and physical activity,” says Andrée. “We believe it’s important to advocate for these children, who often feel restricted by their condition ... to make them feel like stars and facilitate the discovery of a passion for dance, cheerleading, gymnastics or fashion.”

The full day of activities was framed in an environment of inclusivity, in which the participants and their siblings, medical students and other community members could meet and learn from each other. In the Starlight Performance Camp’s safe, non-judgmental environment – so different from other camps, where “the kids are mingled and mixed up with kids that aren’t restricted by conditions” – it was apparent that the children cared for and looked out for each other.

“There was a girl with Down Syndrome in my group,” said one leader. “Even when she wasn’t participating fully in all the activities, the kids in my group always made sure that she had a spot to join them when she wanted to.”

The day of workshops concluded with a special showcase for the parents, featuring guest performers and participants performing routines together.



The goal of Starlight Performance Camp was to introduce children living with a chronic illness or disability, to the world of performance and physical activity. (Photo: Derek Eng)

Careful planning brings results

Andrée and Roxanne spent many months planning and preparing for the camp, starting with the quest for funding, including their application for the Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion grant. Project mentor and pediatrician, Dr. Melanie Lewis, helped the project leads polish their application. Dr. Lewis also helped recruit participants through her clinic.

With funding confirmed, Andrée and Roxanne secured the venue, Ortona Gymnastics, which subsequently provided the facility and two gymnastics supervisors at no charge. Over the ensuing months, the pair coordinated set-up of the [Starlight Performance Camp](#) website, preparation of marketing materials and recruitment of participants, volunteers and guest performers.

When they began last April to recruit children for the camp, “We weren’t getting a lot of immediate interest, and we were a bit concerned,” says Roxanne. That all changed over the two weeks before camp day, July 8, as they received 60% of their applications. The resulting 46 participants generously exceeded their goal of 40 registrants, and a few cancellations netted the final attendance of 34.

“Although we knew prior to Starlight that children with chronic illnesses and disabilities felt restricted by their condition, we didn’t realize to what extent,” Roxanne adds. “When the applications started to flow in, we found out that many children had already attempted dance, gymnastics or cheerleading but had given up, as they felt discouraged and couldn’t keep up with other children.”

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Camp on repeat

Andrée and Roxanne plan to make the camp a long-term, annual project, offering workshops to sick and disabled children in Edmonton every summer.

“Many of our volunteers want to be involved again next year,” says Roxanne. “As medical students, we’ve never felt so rewarded. It seems we’ve all developed a passion for health promotion in this population of children.”

The responses of the children and the comments of the parents also served as validation of need and benefits. “Our efforts showed that children with special needs thrive in positive environments, and there is a lack of such opportunities in the community,” says Andrée.

“A lot of these kids really do need that confidence boost and reminder that they can do something, even if they experience a few more challenges. But they can still do it because they love it.”



Taking a break from the action. (Photo: Derek Eng)

About the ELiHP grant program

The [Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion \(ELiHP\) grant program](#) provides funding to help medical students and resident physicians conceive and implement health promotion projects in support of the development of their CanMEDS/FM core competencies, particularly health advocacy.

Jointly sponsored by the [Alberta Medical Association](#) and the [Canadian Medical Association](#) and its subsidiaries – [MD Financial Management](#) and [Joule](#) – ELiHP projects facilitate the growth of physician leadership and advocacy skills in a mentored environment while enhancing the wellbeing of the general Alberta population through education, advocacy or community service.

Banner photo credit: Derek Eng