

Orangeville man with autism navigates the local job market

Written By JAMES MATTHEWS

Students will soon be beating the streets in search of summer jobs, and local resident Sheri El-Sarraf remembers well the difficulty her son Sebastian faced in securing employment.

She said that difficulty was exacerbated by a perceived unwillingness to give the lad a chance. She's thankful he did eventually find a place among those employed in Orangeville. But he's yet to find a place in the industry for which he went to college and studied, said El-Sarraf.

Sebastian studied at Sheridan College and obtained a diploma in computer systems technician for information technology infrastructure and services.

"So far it's been very challenging, to say the least," said Sebastian, who added that he still has a difficult time trying to fit in and socialize with people. "I find it to be a battle."

El-Sarraf said her son is basically like every other young man in his early 30s. He drives. He's had a steady part-time job for the last three years and has always managed to find temporary work since he was 12 years old.

But there's indication that he's on the autism spectrum, she said. His social skills and a slight stutter when stressed betrays his difference.

"He tries his hardest to do his very best and as long as you do not overload him you will get his best," El-Sarraf said. "He is honest to a fault, and very reliable, and kind."

"He just wants the chance to work with his peers and utilize his newly earned diploma. Hopefully someone soon will give him that chance."

Sebastian received a college diploma at 30 years old. She said that's some years longer than it could have taken to graduate. But he spent three years investigating other college programs and then took a year off to re-examine his goals.

"Does this matter in the grand scheme of things," El-Sarraf said. "He can support himself proudly, he can drive, he has a few friends, he says he is happy and can't wait to start working in his field."

It was an arduous road El-Sarraf tread with her boy, she said.

Sebastian agrees: "I wish people would be more accepting of others," he said.

Sebastian started at public schools under the umbrella of the Upper Grand District School Board before El-Sarraf felt he wasn't getting the resources required for him to get the most from his education.

That led to virtual high school classes at Hillcrest Private School in Orangeville.

"Sebastian thrived at Hillcrest both academically and socially," she said. "Class sizes mattered greatly and there were no more than 10 students per class."

"Sebastian did not need segregation. Just a smaller class size where there was a teacher accessible to him at all times in case he needed clarification as well as to keep him focused on the work at hand."

El-Sarraf said their objective now is for Sebastian to begin a career in the field he chose.

‘Someone with a child needs to know how to navigate the school system,’ she said. ‘It’s great to have what Sebastian is dealing with now as the ending.’

The rise of people with autism in our little but growing town is shocking, El-Sarraf said. Parents need better direction toward the resources needed to help their children who are on the spectrum to put them on the road to success.

Nowhere are those resources more needed than in education, she said.

‘This determines whether or not they will be a productive member of society or a tax burden as this will definitely happen if the correct resources are not in place,’ she said. ‘He knows now the real hard work begins: Life.’