

SELS program at Centre Dufferin teaching students important life skills?



Written By **MIKE BAKER**

A group of Shelburne teenagers are experiencing first-hand what it means to learn while on the job thanks to a hugely successful initiative launched in 2018.

Ruth Anne Chisholm-Davin is one of Centre Dufferin District High School's Special Education Life Skills (SELS) teachers. Since joining the school in a full-time capacity back in 2016, she has been working with students of various levels of ability, preparing them as best she can for their future.

While the program has been in place for decades at the local high school, Ms. Chisholm-Davin, alongside fellow SELS teacher Kate Heasman, felt more could be done to integrate their students into the community. And so the Community Connected Experiential Learning Program (CCELP) was born.

"CCELP is similar to a co-op education experience, but meets the varied and specific needs of Special Education students," Ms. Chisholm-Davin told the Free Press. "Students are trained in class on health and safety, worker rights and responsibilities and how to travel safely to and from work. They acquire the skills necessary to competitively apply for work, such as how to write an effective resume and cover letter, basic interview skills and employability skills such as teamwork and personal management. They then use the skills as they transfer their learning to an authentic workplace experience in the community."

Seven Special Education students were involved in the program in its inaugural year. That initial success has seen CCELP become a permanent fixture of the SELS program, with seven students again enrolled this year. Those individuals are provided with working opportunities at six local businesses and two in-school partners, including Foodland, Tim Hortons, Subway, Giant Tiger, Lubinator, Sunrise Diner, the CDDHS caretaking department, and CDDHS cafeteria.

Students work at their placements twice weekly for two hours per shift. A third shift is scheduled for alternating Fridays.

Speaking to the Free Press, 17-year-old Evelyn Baragar has been completing her work placement at Lubinator. After spending several shifts cleaning and detailing cars, she thinks she can see a future for herself in the industry.

"I basically grew up with cars, I love them. I enjoy the detailing, but I'm also learning to change oil, change tires and fix brake pads," Ms. Baragar said. "I think my favourite moment so far was seeing a 1944 Shelby - it was a beautiful ruby red. My eyes lit up for sure when I saw that."

If a career in the car industry doesn't work out, Evelyn could see herself getting into construction, noting "I've always wanted to go out and see what it was like to build a house". Evelyn, a Grade 12 student, will return to CDDHS for a victory lap before graduating in 2020.

Another student, Keven Rambally, works at Subway twice a week. There, he is responsible for prepping different meats and vegetables, as well as working the cash register.

"Subway is the perfect job. It's helped me make lots of new friends," Keven said.

While Keven enjoys his CCELP placement, he gets just as much enjoyment out of the in-class sessions at CDDHS. He is a passionate supporter of the SELS Popcorn Program, where the group takes turns alternating with a second, younger Special Education class, taught by Ms. Heasman, making popcorn and selling it to other CDDHS students.

"The Popcorn Program is a fundraiser we host each and every week. The students come together and make more than 100 bags of delicious popcorn, which they sell to the rest of the school. That money is then used for outings, and to support our Special Olympics program," Ms. Chisholm-Davin said.

Special Olympics is a big part of the SELS program. The students have seen incredible success in recent years competing in sports such as bocce, basketball and track and field. This year, the school's soccer team qualified for the provincial championships, which take place in Toronto on May 14.

"This is an incredible program with incredibly talented kids. I love it. I love seeing the progress each and every day. They're realizing they can do things they didn't think they could do," Ms. Chisholm-Davin said.

17-year-old Aaron Medeiros has been enrolled in Centre Dufferin's SELS program for three years. When Ms. Chisholm-Davin approached him at the turn of the year about potentially completing his CCELP placement at Tim Horton's, he jumped at the opportunity.

"I think of myself as something of a coffee (connoisseur) now, I've learned how to make all sorts of different coffees," Mr. Medeiros said. "I have three reasons for going to work on my placement - first, I love working with all my co-workers. Second, I enjoy helping customers, and third, I get to learn about coffee. I always wondered how Tim Horton's made their coffee so perfect. Now I know the secret!"

After a successful few weeks at Canada's favourite doughnuts shop, Aaron hopes to secure a job at Tim Horton's that will allow him to work beyond the terms of the co-op program. In the future, he hopes to pursue a career as a video game developer.

If it's college that Aaron wants, that could be a very real possibility, with Ms. Chisholm-Davin discussing "another pathway" for students outside of potential employment following CCELP.

"If these kids wanted to go to college, then there is a Community Integration through Co-operative Education program they can go to. They have to do some classwork to get into the co-op, they have to be independent and they have to pay for the program themselves. They won't be supported by an Educational Assistance (EA)," Ms. Chisholm-Davin said. "We haven't had any students go down that route just yet."

One real success story to come from CCELP is Emmanuel Dapaah. The 18-year-old, who is currently enjoying a co-op placement at Giant Tiger, secured a part-time job at Subway following a successful placement last year.

"I work a three-hour shift at Subway. It's fun. I get to make subs, wash dishes, slice vegetables," Emmanuel tells the Free Press. "My favourite is when I get to make the bread. It smells so good."

At Giant Tiger, Emmanuel is largely responsible for stocking shelves. Right now, he is in the process of putting out all kinds of Easter goodies.

Local residents may catch 20-year-old Rebecca Wells at Sunrise Diner in town. The CDDHS student has been on placement at the eatery for around a month and is tasked with cooking food and cleaning tables.

‘I’ve learned to cook a lot of new things. I enjoy working with the owner the most, though, and talking to customers. I hear a new story every day,’ Rebecca said.

Ms. Wells will graduate this year, after which she hopes to find a job, where she expects ‘to work for one or two years’. After that, she hopes to go to college.

‘I’d like to become an Early Childhood Educator (ECE). There’s a program at Georgian College in Orillia ‘I’ve been up there to visit a few times. My sister goes to school there, where she’s studying so she can eventually work with kids with disabilities,’ Rebecca says.

After securing provincial funding for CCELP back in 2017, Ms. Chisholm-Davin hopes to see the program continue long-term at CDDHS.

‘Work experiences are a critical component to prepare youth for the transition to adulthood, and they are particularly valuable for youth with special education needs,’ Ruth Anne said. ‘Experiential learning allows students to transfer the job-readiness skills learned in the classroom to an authentic work situation.’

In closing, she thanked all of the program’s ‘wonderful supporters’, without whom the students wouldn’t have a place to learn valuable life skills.

‘I am very grateful to the Shelburne business owners and managers who were willing to become community partners, and who dedicated their time, resources and efforts on behalf of our special needs students,’ Ms. Chisholm-Davin said. ‘The program is a huge success. Our students work hard and have done an amazing job learning new skills, making social contacts at work and making insightful connections between their learning and their futures.’