

A Journey Down Main Street



Justin was physically and verbally aggressive, preoccupied with violence and virtually unable to function in most facets of his life. That was until **Main Street Community Services** came along.

Lisa's developmental disability is compounded with a dual diagnosis of a brain injury. Her unpredictability made public outings nearly impossible for her family. That was before she was introduced to **Main Street Community Services**.

Justin and Lisa are two examples of the hundreds of children in our area requiring services and programs geared to their developmental delays and highly complex needs. Unfortunately what many families have discovered is that conventional practices often don't work for their children. Main Street Community Services founder Shelley-Anne Steinburg recognized this void while at the same time envisioning a more compassionate approach to giving social services to children and youth. As a registered not-for-profit charitable organization Main Street prides itself in providing quality, research based programming to children and families. This includes four therapeutic behaviour respite homes, an after school program, social skills training, developmental respite, a social skills summer day camp, individual and family counseling and a mentoring program.

"If community is truly about families then Main Street builds families"

What sets Main Street Community Services apart from so many other organizations is they have put an emphasis on relationships, individuality and dedication to humanitarianism. Not surprisingly this approach has won them scores of admirers. They have been quietly

going about the business of building a stronger and more vital community one child and one family at a time. Their services have caught the attention of other agencies and health care providers. Main Street soon became known as the place that would support "the kids no one else would take" because of their dual diagnosis and highly complex needs and difficult behaviours. They were recognized for their successes with these children. By moving away from textbook solutions aimed at treating a syndrome Steinburg and her staff addressed each individual's own unique issues. The philosophy being that no two children are alike so why should their plans of care be the same. The therapeutic aspect of the programs and respite homes creates an individually tailored environment in which a child can learn the necessary life skills to help manage the disabilities. The therapeutic relationship between the staff and the children promotes a vital level of trust and understanding. This commitment to individuality empowers children and youth and contributes to a healthy self-esteem and social well being.

"If community is truly about families then Main Street builds families," says staff member Erica Rinfret. She describes the individualized approach to the children as being crucial in helping them learn, interact and thrive. Rinfret cites the example of one child with high anxiety and aggressive tendencies. Three times a day staff will do deep sensory treatment on her and the difference in her mood afterwards is like night and day. *"It may be as simple as laying on a mat and rough housing and tickling her. She immediately relaxes. Her entire day changes. That's what stepping outside the box and interacting with children individually can do."* That's why, she adds, Main Street is so successful.

As one father described the services his daughter receives, *"The approach is disciplined, structured and centered around achieving specific targets and goals while maintaining a friendly and loving approach. This allows her to fully express herself freely while being with other children, a place to learn and develop many new skills."*

The first thing one notices when walking into a Main Street is the enthusiasm, friendliness and tireless energy of the staff. Their dedication and commitment to the children and the vital work they do is palatable. They will all tell you that it is the vision and approach of this organization that fosters such a good atmosphere. There is also a real team aspect with the staff. They don't underestimate that the environment can be stressful but they feel by communicating with each other there is a real cohesiveness to the services they provide. Tammy Doane, a long time member of the Main Street team, says this is the first place she's ever worked where it's more like your friends and family rather than co-workers

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and clientele. She believes this contributes to the successes the children have and the comfort level both they and their families have with Main Street.

While consistency and structure are maintained, the main component to the success they have with the kids is the therapeutic relationships they are able to build. It enables them to make progress in areas that previously tried practices were unsuccessful in addressing. Many parents reiterate the feeling of family that their children have with the caring and loving staff. This eliminates so many worries and burdens for them knowing that not only are their children comfortable in going to respite or a program but that they are happy and content throughout the stay.

“It’s a real home atmosphere at our respite places. We cook dinner, bake cookies, go swimming, even go to the zoo, watch TV and do the bedtime routine. Naturally that brings a closeness and comfort level. It allows for them to really learn, “ says Rinfret, “It’s so rewarding to watch them experience what they are

capable of.”

It doesn't stop at the children. As staff member Tyler Kells says, Main Street is a refreshing working experience for him because of the complete care provided to the children and their families. *“We are involved in all aspects of their life, be it school, home or as guests in our respite homes. We prefer to work with the parents rather than just help the child and then send them back to their family and be expected to cope.”* So many Main Street parents say that for the first time they are able to have a real relationship with their child.

This past summer 65 special needs children a week were able to participate in a recreational and social skills camp which would otherwise not been available to them.

As one mother commented, *“I am so grateful to have found the Main Street Summer Camp for my 10 year old son Benjamin. There are very few camps in this city that I know of that are equipped to handle all of Ben's unique needs. Main Street Camps have fostered a sense of a being valued above your disability. I always felt as a mom , when I brought Ben to camp he was welcomed and befriended unconditionally.”*

One tearful mother described her stressful experience of dropping her son off at the summer camp the first day. Her 13-year olds aggression was overwhelming. She vividly remembers him physically lashing out at her and feeling helpless. Then she watched as the staff calmly and patiently took over. *“I heard their words of comfort and I literally fell apart in the car weeping with relief knowing that finally someone else could help us.”*

Steinburg's philosophy of total family involvement promotes a feeling of teamwork among staff/parents and caregivers. For many this is often the first time they feel like an active participant in their child's positive life skills development. There's a feeling of hope and optimism. The staff are approachable and willing to share insights and observations. They want parents to be a part of the process but yet they will not unnecessarily burden them if an incident or issue can be handled in the moment. This allows parents to benefit

from weekend respite.

“Since finding Main Street two years ago, my husband and I have been able to actually go out of town, just to recharge our batteries and get some breathing space. We love our daughter, but she is a handful,” says another mother, “We know the staff will not call unless it’s an absolute emergency. We trust them with her care and have come to rely on this wonderful organization. Main Street is unique and fits a niche when it comes to the care of these difficult kids.”

“Every waking hour we were consumed with our son’s volatile behaviours. We felt verbally and emotionally abused and our home was a toxic war zone”

Another family relates the experience of their first trip away from their Special Needs son this summer. They were contacted and told of the urgent medical issue their son was having and were going to return home. Instead they received the assurances of Steinburg that the situation would be handled. *“They were true guardian angels for us and we were so grateful for their kindness and intuition in figuring out what was wrong with our son.”*

The compelling stories from parents who were in their words ‘rescued’ by Main Street are a testament to the impact that this therapeutic approach has on children and families dealing with so many issues.

“Every waking hour we were consumed with our son’s volatile behaviours. We felt verbally and emotionally abused and our home was a toxic war zone,” says one mother, whose son was placed in Main Street’s therapeutic respite behaviour home after health care providers determined he would benefit from a more highly structured environment than was possible to simulate in a regular home setting. *“It was the most painfully difficult decision we’ve ever had to make. But in*

hindsight it was the very best thing we could have done for our son and our family.” A year after entering the program the child was reintegrated into his family home. What difference did Main Street make?

“His behaviour was, in large measure, the cause of the stressful and negative atmosphere in our home. With his stay at Main Street, he went from no successes in life to baby steps on a more encouraging path. Upon his return we saw so many measurable improvements. He continues to take part in all the programs including the summer camp, after school program and weekend respite. If I were to put video and a daily journal documenting the boy he was a couple of years ago next to the teenager he is today you would not recognize them as the same person. We have our family back and that’s solely because Main Street was able to successfully and effectively give our son the kind of care and treatment he needed. Something that no other agency, program or treatment plan we’ve tried in the past was able to do.”

“The most rewarding aspect of my job is the strong bond that has developed between myself and the children I work with,” says staff member Sherry Simpson. She has seen firsthand the positive impact Main Street’s philosophies have had on the kids. In the loving and supportive environment that is provided the children learn about compassion, empathy and the importance of working together as a unit. This, Simpson believes, will have positive repercussions as they return to their families.

When reading the testimonials from Main Street parents one can’t help but be moved by the pits of despair these people found themselves in trying to meet the challenges of their special needs children. Many describe the unsuccessful accommodations, unequipped or inexperienced workers and horrific school placements that they experienced. One mother in particular says Main Street has completely changed the life of her family. Almost six years ago her autistic daughter’s behaviour deteriorated. She became aggressive and self-injurious. Highly specialized workers were needed but soon quit. In one school day there were 100 self-abuses and 48 aggressive episodes. She was harnessed and

transported alone to school in a van and virtually any attempt at learning was nil.

"No one could or wanted to deal with her," she says, until she was introduced to Shelley Steinburg at Main Street, "It was the first time that I felt we had found a place that could help. We told our story and right away Shelley was planning behaviour management strategies. She was not deterred by our daughter's violence or aggression and in fact saw through all this to understand and care for the child trapped inside the body and mind ruled by autism."

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Today that young girl has no reported aggression at school or during transport. She no longer wears a harness and like her mother says her learning ability is moving forward again in a place she has found she can have fun and friends.

"Main Street has also been a great source of strength and support for me as well. They listen to me when I am in crisis with my daughter and immediately suggest solutions for improving the situation. They are also the first program ever that hasn't called me to 'come get my child'. They have dealt with anything she could throw their way and treated her and us with dignity and professionalism. I can't even begin to describe the peace of mind this has brought."

If they aren't working with the children, raising funds to support services and programs then you may find staff rolling up their sleeves to renovate a respite home or cook a meal. It is not uncommon to find Steinburg counseling a parent over the telephone or attending a parent/teacher meeting. Others will be volunteering on the many fundraising activities Main Street must do as a charitable organization to raise

monies for their many programs and services. These fundraising initiatives include everything from selling 50/50 tickets for the Sens Foundation at the Ottawa Senators games, Entertainment books, bracelets and sweatshirts, to hosting an annual dinner, dance and auction.

On the office walls at Main Street you'll find inspirational quotes and empowering phrases. They reflect the beliefs of a company determined to continue to make a difference in the lives of children, families and communities. As their motto says, "**Achieving is Believing**" and for them success is the smiles on the faces of the children and the gratitude in the eyes of the parents. By embracing an alternative vision of how social service should be provided Main Street has put humanitarianism back into the system for families.



For more information or to find a program that would help your child, please contact us at:

Main Street Community Services

1453 Main Street
PO Box 432
Stittsville, ON K2S 2E5

Tel. (613) 831-6606

Fax. (613) 831-6381

E-mail: mainstreetcommunity@bellnet.ca

Charitable Number: 861936672 RR001