

What diversity – the changing face of Canada – means to me
By Katherine Tikkanen

“The fight for equity and justice is what organized labor is all about.” as mentioned by CWA Secretary-Treasurer Barbara J. Easterling. Growing up in a union household with both of my parents being union members, this fight has always been instilled in me. My quest for equity and acceptance of those that are diverse, is a goal I have set for myself and I work towards making my community and the world a more accepting place.

To me, this means embracing diversity and the acceptance of other fellow human beings. This includes differences in ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religious beliefs and age. My primary focus is on those with different physical abilities and I accomplish this through volunteering to help disadvantaged girls.

In my school, most students are provided with an inclusive environment, however, when I was in Grade 9, I noticed there was one group who were divided from the rest of the school: students with disabilities. I started making a conscious effort to include them in group activities by encouraging and supporting their efforts. I feel a result of my actions is that the school has a more accepting environment towards students with disabilities.

A specific example of this is the relationship I have with one student in our school who has autism. Many subjects within the classroom environment are partner based such as Physical Education and Foods. When the teachers would ask the students to select a partner, the student with the disability was almost always left out. Seeing this, I would invite her to be my partner. If group based, I would ask her to join my group. This helped to foster a more inclusive environment. Our relationship further developed outside of the classroom when I volunteered to take her for lunch each week. In addition, I worked with her in school extra-curricular activities such as choir and library club.

There were several benefits as a result of our connection. During the time I escorted my fellow student off school property, it provided her assistant a break. Our activities increased the other student's independence. Not a motivating factor for me but one that I appreciate is the recognition and gratitude the student's mother and the student's assistant have both expressed to me. I was also acknowledged by the school and was the honoured recipient of the Principal's Award of Merit.

The relationship I have with this student is an ongoing one and has been in place throughout our years together at Rockridge. It has not only provided me with a sense of pride and personal satisfaction but also been a source of inspiration to others. I believe it has helped to nurture a more inclusive environment within our school and I feel it is a strong example of my character and my genuine commitment to service.

In addition to this volunteering, I have canvased for Heart and Stroke, helped out with the set up and cleanup of local events, and was a committed volunteer at the 2010 Lions Bay Torch Relay Event. In my school community, currently I mentor a group of Grade 8 students, I am an active member of the Graduation Committee and member of the Interact Club. In addition, I co-founded the Rockridge Microfinance Club. Each year throughout high school, I have reached the Outstanding Service Award levels (highest level obtainable).

Aside from my volunteer work, I am a Junior Coach on the Hollyburn Country Club Swim Team. I am constantly forced to push my boundaries by overcoming new challenges every day. This has allowed me to become a better coach, and a stronger leader. In addition to my coaching responsibilities, I am an active team member. Within my swimming group, I take a leadership role. The dedication and strong initiative I demonstrate has allowed me to be the recipient of the Leadership Award for the past two years. I feel my efforts and recognition help inspire the younger swimmers to improve at their sport and be better team and community members.

I am also the instructor for the Lions Bay Back Yard Pool Program. Running the local Swimming Program has had a profound effect on me. When there is a screaming child sitting on the side of the pool, refusing to even dip their toes in, my carefully thought out lesson plans are not of any use. I am forced to think on the spot and come up with something new. This newly developed adaptability has also helped me in my academics, especially when working on group projects.

I believe we must work every day to improve ourselves and in doing so, we improve our community. It is my intension next fall to study at The University of Calgary and continue to meet my goals and develop new and more challenging ones. I will continue to volunteer to help make the community and world a more accepting place. I will continue to help speak for those who cannot. I will continue to advocate for those who are diverse and not able to do so for themselves.

I would be honoured to be awarded the John Belcarz / Dan Zeidler Memorial Scholarship. The qualities that their lives exemplify: hard work, integrity and unselfish dedication to others are attributes that I work towards and I would be humbled to be recognized in their memory.