

**A kinder world**

**After getting support from a United Way agency, Sam started raising awareness around people with different abilities**

Sam’s first encounter with Community Living Toronto — a United Way-funded agency that supports children, youth and adults who have an intellectual disability — was when he started volunteering for the agency while he was in high school.

“I have always known about the agency because I’m an individual with autism spectrum disorder,” he says.

Over the years, Sam has held a number of roles within the organization and is now a Public Relations and Fundraising Ambassador. The part Sam enjoys the most about his job is that it empowers him to share his story with businesses, donors and community members in order to increase people’s awareness around people with different abilities.

“I am very capable of having meaningful conversations and have pretty good social skills because my parents supported me and I started absorbing what made me unique early on,” says Sam.

Sam previously benefitted from Community Living’s Youth to Work Program which helped him build employable skills, make decisions about post-secondary education and even supported his continued success as an attendant at a café where he has been working for seven years and counting.

After seeing Sam shine in his volunteer roles, Angela, a Director at Community Living Toronto, offered Sam a position as a Public Relations and Fundraising Ambassador, helping to raise people’s awareness around acceptance, true inclusion and what it’s like to have different abilities, while representing the organization.

“Sam has taught us a tremendous amount,” says Angela. “One of the things we are advocating for all the time is amplifying people’s voices by assisting them to tell their own stories as well as being an example of the success in hiring people with different abilities. Having Sam as a co-worker makes our team so much stronger. His insights and contributions are crucial to advancing our work.”

During the pandemic, Sam worked from home and connected with his team regularly. Although his ambassador work was over Zoom, he inspired people with stories every day and challenged them to look at things differently.

The lockdown also meant that the agency couldn’t offer some of their in-person, community-based programs and began to offer some supports virtually. To help maintain a sense of connectedness, Community Living offered phone calls, Zoom chats, pen pal letters, emails and more. It even supplied technology to people who hadn’t had access, ensuring they wouldn’t feel isolated.

United Way’s flexible funding allowed the agency to be flexible and responsive, providing person-centred supports to people by pivoting to meet emerging needs.

“If it wasn’t for United Way, organizations like ours would not have been able to move quickly and respond to the changing needs that the pandemic presented,” says Angela. “United Way was quick to hold out their hand in help. They started from a place of ‘yes’ and that makes Toronto a better place for everyone.”