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Shadow Lake director looks back on 39 years of camp fun for intellectually disabled guests

Gary Ouellette has helped thousands of intellectually disabled people enjoy an outdoor getaway.



Shadow Lake director Gary Ouellette has passed the mantle to the centre's new program supervisor, Erin Mlotek, who is grateful for his mentorship.

By: [Leslie Ferenc](#) GTA, Published on Wed May 27 2015

Everything old is new again at Shadow Lake Centre in Stouffville, where, after 39 years as director, Gary Ouellette has passed the mantle.

It seems like yesterday that he first visited the centre in the dead of winter and sat in front of the snow-covered buildings. At once, Ouellette says, he recognized that the centre, owned and operated by Community Living Toronto, had great potential as a year-round facility.

Fast-forward, and Shadow Lake Centre has grown and evolved over the years with Ouellette at the helm, offering summer programs for more than 600 people with intellectual disabilities who might not otherwise have a place to go for vacation. It's also rented out to school groups as a nature education centre and community organizations throughout the year.

But it's the people who come to Shadow Lake Centre who've had the greatest impact on Ouellette.

"It's the best job in the world," he says, adding he'll miss Sunday check-in days, when guests come off the bus "and jump into my arms because they're so happy to be back at camp. Sunday has always been my favourite day."

While he can't single out a special memory or event, Ouellette is sentimental when it comes to the friends he's made at Shadow Lake. "They've changed my life," he says.

He's also had an impact on the guests. Jason Evans created a memory book with photos of staff and his camp pals recording special moments. He dedicated it to Ouellette and included a letter telling him why.

"You have a special gift with people with special needs," Evans wrote, adding that without Ouellette, "Shadow Lake Centre would not be what it is today, and people like me and my friends would not be able to experience this great opportunity."

Erin Mlotek, who's taken over from Ouellette, knows the joys of summers at Shadow Lake. She's started there as a counsellor in 2007.

"I've always loved camp and working with people with special needs," says Mlotek, 27, who did her undergraduate studies at Ryerson University in early childhood education and post-graduate studies in autism and behavioural science. "Shadow Lake quickly became home to me. It's where I'm at my best."

For many, time spent at Shadow Lake is their only getaway from daily life, so the experience has to be memorable, says Mlotek, adding: "We do our best and then some," because over the years "guests" have become friends and part of the Shadow Lake family.

Staff make all the difference, and the counsellors "are fantastic people," says Mlotek.

She's equally grateful for Ouellette's guidance, teaching her the business side of running the camp, and for leading by example. Mlotek is ready to step into some big shoes.

"Gary has taught me that the guest always comes first," she says. "And I see Gary talking with families and reassuring them their loved ones are in good hands. Gary has devoted his life to Shadow Lake. He's made the difference."

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