

31 January 2017

Dear Selection committee,

Lifetime Networks nominee for The Chamber of Commerce's Non-Profit Association of the Year Award nomination

We are writing to offer our gratitude and support to Lifetime Networks for providing incredibly valuable support to our son, Micah.

Three years ago, Micah was struggling to find his way through the pressures of young adulthood. The first years after high school can be a difficult stage for many people. For Micah, losing the structure and social contact of high school, while coming to terms with having an intellectual disability, led to anxiety and depression. He described his life as being hopeless and meaningless. We felt close to despair as we watched Micah withdraw from us, his friends and his life. Micah was seen by a psychiatrist, who offered a serious diagnosis after a 15-minute assessment – his loneliness was pathologized, but not supported by the medical system.

At his lowest point during this period, we were fortunate to be connected to Lifetime Networks. Through this creative and compassionate agency, Micah's life and mental health began to improve. He was able to access excellent counselling and he was connected with young adults who guided him out of his isolation through activities such as swimming, soccer, hiking, job preparedness, shared meals and just hanging out. Through Lifetime Networks he has been matched with two young men who support and inspire him, with a retired social worker who encourages him to focus on his goals and he has befriended a university student with whom he shares ice cream and walks. Lifetime Networks has helped our son create a community by giving him the skills and developing the independence required to navigate the complexities and challenges of young adulthood.

Lifetime Network fills a unique and challenging role for young adults with special needs (and their families) through their innovative and holistic program. For the past two years, one of the coordinators at Lifetime Networks has facilitated a mapping / planning exercise for Micah in which he, with help from his brother and friends, creates a visual representation of his goals and plans for the year to come.

Micah is currently working part-time at a grocery store. He exercises every day. He has returned to Camosun College, where he is enrolled in a job exploration program. He also spends time as a companion to a middle-aged man with physical and mental health challenges. He is now thinking about further studies that may allow him to work as a community health worker. A big step for a young man with learning disabilities who, prior to Lifetime Networks, was disengaging from his community.

There will no doubt be more challenges ahead, but, as Micah's parents, we feel blessed to have the resources of Lifetime Networks to draw upon. They have supported Micah and they have also supported us by providing advice and alternatives.

There are likely many non-profit organizations that are deserving of recognition from the Chamber. Social enterprise and innovation is blossoming in Victoria and there must be a broad spectrum of groups that are worthy of the Chamber's support. However, organizations that are able to combine financial acuity and innovative programming and bring it to individuals and families faced with physical and intellectual disabilities in our view stand apart. Society, especially recently, can best be measured by how we treat those less fortunate and less able and it is organizations like Lifetime Network that provide us with the mechanisms to recognize and do this work.

We encourage the Chamber of Commerce to continue to recognize the importance of community and to honour organisations who strive to create community for those who are so often excluded and isolated. This is essential and meaningful work.

Gratefully,

Ben Finkelstein
Michelle Dale
Parents of Micah Finkelstein