



Craig Zealand and the 2021 Clarington Summer Camp Inclusion Team

## Fostering inclusion and success for individuals of all abilities in recreational programming

**THE MUNICIPALITY OF CLARINGTON** in Ontario's Durham Region has been working for several years to create an inclusive environment in which people of all abilities can participate in its programs and services.

One of its early priorities has been its summer day camps for children ages four to twelve. The camps run from July to September at four recreation facilities in Clarington.

"We provide supports to open our camps to more children who may have special needs such as intellectual or physical disabilities, hearing or vision impairments, or medical conditions," says Erica Mittag, Community Development Coordinator, Diversity and Inclusion, with the municipality's Community Services Department.



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Craig Zealand, Summer Camp Inclusion Counsellor Assistant

“Our goal is to give all children the chance to be successful at camp. We provide one-on-one supervision, and program and environmental adaptations to ensure campers with special needs have a positive and inclusive experience,” she says.

For the past three years, Liam Cox has led this day-camp programming in his position as Inclusion Counsellor. For the 2021 camp season, the municipality was able to augment its inclusion program with the hiring of its first-ever Inclusion Counsellor Assistant. This was made possible with support from the CPRA Youth Employment Experience program.

Funded by the Government of Canada’s Youth Employment Skills Strategy program, the CPRA program supports a diverse group of young people to gain skills and build experience in the community parks and recreation sector, including people who might otherwise face employment barriers.

The municipality has built partnerships with community organizations to expand volunteer and paid employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Two of those partners, Participation House Durham Region and the Abilities Centre, supported the municipality in recruiting and interviewing candidates for the assistant job.

The successful candidate was Craig Zealand, who worked with and received mentorship from Liam throughout the summer. The pair moved to a different camp location each week, where they were partnered with a new camper.

Craig is a very confident and positive person; he likes working with kids and is eager to learn. Previously, he volunteered with the Knights of Columbus Youth Group and worked with youth ages 10 to 18 years. Craig was introduced to the Municipality of Clarington by The Participation House Project (Durham Region) – an organization that provides services to those with developmental and physical disabilities.

Craig is a person with Down Syndrome and he says he was attracted to this job because he had seen others work with



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kids – including his mother, who worked with children with behavioural challenges – and knew he wanted to do the same.

“I enjoyed learning more about being a counsellor,” says Craig. He says the highlight was doing activities with the campers and getting to know them. “I really adore the kids,” he says. He also says he would do a job like this again, “in a heartbeat.”

“I wanted to give Craig not only a foundation for working with children who have special needs and different abilities, but also some skills that he could take into other jobs in the future,” says Liam, describing his mentorship goals for Craig. “Important skills for any type of employment include being flexible and taking initiative, and Craig definitely grew in these areas over the summer,” he says.

Liam says his work as an Inclusion Counsellor is satisfying on many fronts. “It’s amazing to be able to welcome kids that wouldn’t normally have a space in a program like this. For a lot of the campers, it provides the stability and routine that they miss in the summer, being out of school,” he says.

It was rewarding to see how much both Craig and the campers benefitted from the experience, says Olivia Pigden, Summer Camp Inclusion Supervisor, Liam and Craig’s supervisor.

“It was a great experience for the kids to have two counsellors, and they really enjoyed interacting with Craig. Everybody took away a lot of valuable skills and learned a lot. Craig was working towards his goals and had met them by the end of the summer.”

Erica shares this assessment of the value of the experience. “It was also an opportunity for Liam to demonstrate his leadership skills by sharing his knowledge and experience with Craig. I think the opportunity for that mentorship had some far-reaching benefits, and we are truly grateful for this opportunity from CPRA. 🍁