

Chatham This Week

The mayor's right-hand man

Mayor Randy Hope has accepted a challenge from his counterpart in Sarnia, Mike Bradley, to provide employment opportunities for persons with intellectual disabilities and to encourage businesses in the municipality to do the same.

"All of us have a part to play in society," says Hope. "We're making sure no one is missed."

Hope says the municipality welcomes diversity but asks, "Can we do better? Absolutely."

Hope created a volunteer position in his office to welcome the contributions that can be made by those with an intellectual disability. Since November, Chad Sauve has been helping out wherever he can at the municipal centre.

Hope and Sauve first met during the election campaign in the fall at an open house at Community Living Chatham-Kent. Sauve approached Hope about work opportunities with the municipal centre and Hope promised him to look into it if he was re-elected.

Sauve admits he was skeptical about ever hearing from Hope again, but he received a call from the mayor's office after the election asking him to come in for an interview.

Among his duties, Sauve shreds documents, makes photocopies and delivers mail. "I'm all over," says Sauve, 26.

He's signed a confidentiality agreement and sits in on many meetings, including the council budget sessions, where he helped out the committee by acting as a runner. Among the duties he has recently taken on is sitting as a voting member of the Chatham-Kent Accessibility Committee.

"He brings a new element into my life," says Hope, who finds that Sauve has a different perspective on issues and adds, "He wants to be active and involved, he wants to participate and he wants to contribute."

Hope says, "He believes in himself that he has something to contribute," and even though the work is unpaid, he adds "money isn't always the object."

The mayor says Sauve has the ability to not only make a difference for himself but for the broader community.

"He can speak on behalf of persons with disabilities," says Hope.

Sauve is not a person who likes to hear the word, 'No.'

"There's nothing I can't do," he says. He relates how he was told he would never be able to drive a car, but he earned a license. Among his other accomplishments, he's run his own restaurant.

Sauve says he has been in touch with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's office requesting a brief meeting with him during the summer. He says he would like to get his photo taken with the prime minister and tell him about the contributions people with disabilities can make to society.

"Tell me I can't do something and I'll try twice as hard," says Sauve. "Just watch me."

Intensely interested in the events at city hall, he says his dream is to be the first person with an intellectual disability to be elected as a municipal councillor. He does admit to having difficulty with reading and says he would need someone to help him interpret documents, but he has an understanding of issues and an excellent memory.

"I like it here," says Sauve of his placement at city hall. He says that in some places he has worked, he feels like he was just treated as a number. "Here, in Chatham-Kent, working for the mayor, I am not a number."

"We're breaking walls down," says Hope, who points out that it wasn't that many years ago that people with an intellectual disability were institutionalized. "We need to integrate people, not segregate." Hope says "all of us have limited capacity in some way," and everyone has a contribution they can make.

In the past two years, employment support programs offered through the two local Community Living organizations have helped nearly 60 people secure a paid position making a competitive wage.

David Katzman, executive director of Community Living Wallaceburg, says, "Employers in Chatham-Kent have responded quite well." He adds placements have been made in a wide variety of workplaces, woodshops and framing shops to positions with franchised companies. Katzman says, "We look forward to working with the municipality."

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