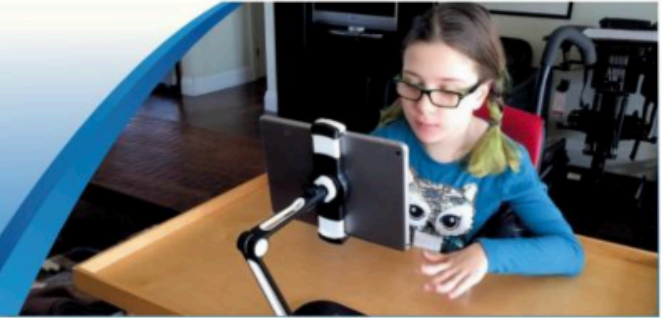




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FOR SOME, THEY'RE HARDER TO ACHIEVE. LET'S CHANGE THAT.

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December • 2022

ADVERTORIAL

"Ability Online Has Already Changed My Life"

MICHELLE MCCLURE

That's just one example of the heartwarming feedback I've received over the years as Executive Director of Ability Online. It's another reminder that creating a sense of belonging and community is crucial and worthwhile. Many things have changed since we started over 30 years ago, but the need for young people with disabilities and health challenges to connect with others in a safe, judgement-free environment hasn't. Social isolation wasn't new for them when we were all impacted by the pandemic. It just got worse.

We have separate online communities for youth, young adults, and their caregivers and families. They all promote inclusion, respect, personal growth, mental well-being, and the sharing of lived experiences. These foundations are the same as in 1990 when Dr. Arlette Lefebvre set up Ability Online. As a psychiatrist at the Hospital for Sick Children, she saw the social isolation of young patients

due to chronic hospitalization and physical limitations alongside the potential of the web to level the playing field. At the time, I was a Recreation Therapist at what is now known as Holland Bloorview Children's Rehabilitation Hospital. On day two, I brought Ability Online's initial online bulletin board system to my clients—teens with head injuries.

We've grown since those early days to welcome a much broader audience. Those seeking a safe haven. A place free from the fear of bullying or disrespect, both online and in person. Our reach to those more vulnerable among us also now extends across Canada and the USA.

We've also evolved from a simple online bulletin board to a fully accessible, secure, and mobile-friendly community platform. The many features are designed to engage and connect members—discussion areas grouped by topics of interest, live chat sessions, blog-style "Journey" posting, and access to many curated resources.

I've witnessed firsthand the transformation of our youth and

young adult members—their increase in self-esteem, confidence, friendships, and independence. I hear stories about members not wanting to miss the weekly chat night while in the hospital or even delaying the start of family birthday celebrations! It's also no surprise that many take on a mentorship role to help others based on their experiences. Or that our student volunteers often want to stay on after their college or university placement ends.

Let's not forget our unsung heroes—family caregivers. They often need just as much care and support as their children. To feel that they're not alone in the seemingly unique and daily challenges they can face. Feedback like "it's been my shoulder to cry on" reminds me of the value we're able to share with them—a welcoming and understanding community of peer support, professional help, and resources.

None of this would be possible without the supporters whose generosity we heavily rely on, and I thank you all. To mention just a few, I'm thrilled that



LONG-TERM COMMUNITY MEMBER AND MENTOR, KRISTIN, PROUDLY WEARS HER ABILITY ONLINE T-SHIRT! © KARIN LAINE

Sephora Canada's commitment to belonging through building confidence resulted in "Classes for Confidence" for our young adult members, and I am also grateful for their promotional and financial support. I'd like to thank the TD Ready Commitment program, the Petro-Canada CareMakers Foundation, The Echo Foundation, and the team at

Synergiq Solutions, who bring our members together on their state-of-the-art community platform.

Join us. Together, we can reach our potential!

Become part of our community—a member, supporter, or community partner. Learn more at abilityonline.org