

# Fort McMurray Autism Support Group 2016 Update

Fort McMurray Autism Support Group (FMASG) has been busy this year.

In January, a few parents attended the Autism Conference in Edmonton where Temple Grandin spoke. It was a 3 day conference. There was lots of information shared and many inspiring stories.

**In February** Fort McMurray was approached by Autism Society Alberta to participate in a research project funded by Autism Speaks and overseen by the University of Calgary. The grant was intended to look into ways to help build ASD capacity in rural and remote communities. FMASG hosted two conference calls in March with members of Fort McMurray and surrounding communities in the Wood Buffalo region. We had participants from Fort Chipewyan and Janvier attend the phone conversations.

These conference calls eventually led to in-person, circle talk conversations. The circle talks took place on **April 20 and 21st**. The talks were attended by parents/guardians, adults on the spectrum, and representatives from the school board and MLA's office, as well as professionals from mental health, speech therapy, and a doctor. From this research it became clear that in order to help reach rural and remote families, a hub or autism centre needs to be made available to the community. A place for someone to go to access guidance, information and support throughout their life.

**On February 16** the Kinette Club of Fort McMurray held a Toonie Swim Day fundraiser for the Fort McMurray Autism Support group, and in March they presented our group with a check. This donation helped sponsor our next two events planned in April.

**On April 2** our group held a Toonie Swim Day for Autism Awareness and Acceptance, and had a wonderful turnout. There was a table set up with some information. We also had some awareness ribbons for sale, as well as some Kids First Camp T-shirts and colour changing water bottles to help raise money for our Kids First Camp.

**On April 21** we hosted a "Thank you" event to thank our local sponsors over the last 5 years. We had 22 plaques to give out and a guest speaker, Jessica Pigeau from Edmonton, who is an adult on the autism spectrum. She joined us to tell us a bit about what her life was like growing up, who her main supports were, how she made friends, and where she is now.

**On May 3rd** our community was evacuated. Many families made their way to the Maier Centre in Edmonton. A family who use the Maier centre for support donated sensory toys to all our families from Fort McMurray. There were also donations collected for our families to use. Our families got to access supports and services through the Maier Centre that were unlike anything offered in Fort McMurray. This evacuation experience has opened our eyes to what we are lacking and need in our community. The Maier Centre welcomed our community members, and they have been helping support and guide many of us since our return to Fort McMurray through emails and continued phone conversations.

**June 3rd** was re-entry to Fort McMurray. The Maier Centre pulled our community together and hosted a conference call on June 7, including professionals as well as parents in Fort McMurray. In the call, it was identified that a centre similar to the Maier Centre was needed in Fort McMurray. On June 21st a second conference call was hosted by the Maier Centre, and this call really pulled our community together and gave us some concrete goals to work on in terms of bringing supports similar to the Maier Centre's to our community.

Many families have not come back to the community. Services are in high demand and are still not fully up

and running as of now, August 9. Fort McMurray is in a rebuild mode and trying to catch up from the last two months, and our Fort McMurray Autism Support Group is in the same mode. As most of the community has not made it back to Fort McMurray the Kids First Camp that had run for 5 years in a row was unable to go ahead this year. Instead, our group reached out to MacDonald Island Park. Along with Scotiabank, they were generous enough to sponsor MacIslands Summer Camp for this year so all kids could attend for free. McMann Services managed to gather enough workers to support some of our kids so they could also attend the camp for free, as well.

During this camp, kids would meet at 9 am and then would split off into different smaller groups to do activities during the day. They did floor hockey, flag tag, building towers out of giant foam blocks, rock climbing, swimming, soccer and more. The Bricks 4 Kidz Lego camp also invited us to participate in their themed camps. Kids would meet at 9 am and do different themed lego projects until lunch time. They would use motors and make things move and have races. The kids were given patterns and learned how to build them step by step.

On **July 15** there was a Fun for all SoftBall Fundraiser held down at MacDonald Island Park. Luis Lozano organized the event and helped raise \$1,025 for the Fort McMurray Autism support Group. As requested by Luis, we will use the funds raised to host another family movie night at our local movie theatre. Our group rents the whole theatre, and the management accommodate us as well as they can by not turning up the sound too loud, while also leaving more lights on than usual. This allows our families to relax and not have to worry about interrupting anyone.

We hosted our first back to McMurray meeting on **August 2** at the library to try and continue where we left off from the conversations on April 20 and 21. As a stem from the research project, Autism Society Alberta and the Sinneave Family Foundation, through the Ability Hub in Calgary, have partnered together and submitted an application to Autism Speaks for a grant to help build better communities. The grant would be used to help replicate an Ambassador program within Fort McMurray. It would help fill two positions to help run the autism service centre our community needs. On **August 5** Corinna and Kirsti attended a meeting with the Neighborhood Development Manager and Community Partnership Program Planner. At this meeting we also agreed to explore different options for program spaces over the coming weeks. Our community wants to rebuild even better than before, and now is our time to make this happen.

We have also been helping support a local Man from Fort McMurray, Jeff Bowers, who has been accepted into the New York City Marathon that will take place on November 6. Jeff has been training and preparing as much as he can for his charity run while gathering donations and raising awareness for FMASG in partnership with Autism Society Alberta. As of August 9, Jeff has raised \$2,185. Jeff also has a son on the autism spectrum who enjoys the family movie night outs and Family Fun days. His son has also attended the Kids First Camps that we hope to run next year in 2017 with help from Jeff's fundraising.

As a person who was born and raised in Fort McMurray, I am grateful for everyone across Alberta for helping my whole community. Alberta has been here for Fort McMurray for the last two years in this partnership, and is helping us grow into a better community. I am honoured to have you all with me on this path, and I am excited to see what we will be able to do together.