

Ending Social Isolation with the Light of Inclusion

When a small group of Calgary parents joined together in 1970 to create a social club for their teenagers with disabilities, they had no idea how much their humble plan – or Village – would grow. At the time, Calgary had almost no recreational opportunities for youth with disabilities, which left their teens socially isolated. The parents decided to change this through a weekly “meet-up” for their kids. The teens named their group ‘The Pink Pelican Club’ and quickly developed friendships and a sense of belonging among themselves.

Unique in Calgary, the Pink Pelican Club continued to attract members as well as community support. By 1976, the club had expanded to include the ‘Mini Pelicans’, a group for 8-12-year-olds, and was receiving community funding. In 1981 the club registered as a non-profit group and initiated campaigns for full funding as a charitable organization.

In March of 1982, THE CALGARY BETWEEN FRIENDS CLUB – Fun and Fellowship for Disabled Youth became a registered non-profit with the Province of Alberta and formally set its vision and mission.



Between Friends provides quality social, recreation, and development opportunities for people with disabilities and by doing so, creates an inclusive community where each member can achieve their potential and be recognized as valued citizens.

The Between Friends values acronym was created to drive this purpose – Fun, Respect, Inclusion, Equity, No Barriers, Diversity, Skills (FRIENDS).



To realize its mission, Between Friends wanted to develop additional programming to help more children. In 1983, the club established Camp Bonaventure, a day-camp for youth disabilities. Over the next ten years, membership levels in Between Friends, and participation in Camp Bonaventure, expanded dramatically. By its 10th anniversary, 350 members were benefiting from more than 35 programs, offering social and recreational opportunities designed to help members develop new skills, new interests, a sense of belonging, and life-long friendships.



As Calgary grew and matured through the 1990s and 2000s, so did Between Friends. The organization added weekly recreational and sports programs and social nights for children and teens and Camp Bonaventure was supplemented with Camp Fun'zAmust, a week-long sleep-away camp. As its membership grew, Between Friends also focused on engaging specially-trained volunteers and staff to run these programs, offering parents and caregivers essential opportunities for their own recreational and social activities.

By 2010 new programs included adult programming, and the organization officially expanded the membership age range from 5 to seniors. The Adventurers program was added to give adult members a social circle, in which they could develop new skills and create a personal sense of independence. Weekly social events, as well as day trips, out-of-town excursions, and a once-yearly sleep-away camp, offered new experiences as well as much needed respite for member families.

Then, and today, Between Friends raises funds for these programs through sponsorships, fundraising events, and the generosity of individual donors. A charitable Golf Tournament, 'Skate A Kid to Camp Day', a Bowl-a-thon, Friendship Day, and many more initiatives help to subsidize programs and camps, making them affordable for all families. A team of volunteer spokespeople also supports the organization – members so strongly impacted by Between Friend's programs and benefits that they wanted to help in return.



Although Calgary's economy and growth have slowed in the last half-decade, Between Friends continues to support a wide range of Calgarians with disabilities through fundraising, sponsorships, and donations from Calgary's business community and many very generous individual donors. In 2019, Between Friends celebrated its 37th year by working with over 800 members involved in 130 in-house programs, and with 53 local partner organizations.

With a new decade dawning, Between Friends remains committed to providing people with disabilities opportunities for full inclusion as valued citizens of this vibrant, dynamic City. Just as the Menorah at Chanukah continues to bring light and hope in the darkness of winter, Between Friends continues to bring the light of social inclusion to all Calgarians.

"I don't see myself anymore as that poor kid with a disability but I have something very special, a 'Me-ABILITY'. I can help as much as possible and that makes our community a better place"
– Constantin, Volunteer and Participant.