

# RHS teacher receives award for inclusion

Shaun Gibbs made sure two students with disabilities would still have a 'meaningful experience' in his outdoor pursuits class

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In Shaun Gibbs' outdoor pursuits class, there is a simple motto: No one is left behind. The Riverview High School teacher ensured that mantra was followed recently as he helped two students with disabilities feel like valued and important members of the class.

"The idea is that everybody can contribute to the class and it's not necessarily about getting to the final destination. It's more about how everyone does it together and works as a group. We're

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only as fast as our slowest member," Gibbs said.

Ryan Boudreau and Nick Gauthier are 18-year-old Grade 12 students at RHS. Boudreau has autism, while Gauthier has cerebral palsy and requires a walker to get around.

Outdoor pursuits is a physically and mentally demanding, "survival" class, which sees the students do things like canoeing, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, building winter shelters, as well as a variety of team and group building exercises.

Both Boudreau and Gauthier were welcomed with open arms to take part in Gibbs' class earlier this year, with the teacher and fellow students banding together to make sure it would work.

"Nick with his walker, on the first day the class kind of came together and said, 'How are we going to get Nick out there so he can participate?' We piggybacked him out into the woods; another person would help him with his walker," Gibbs explained. "When we went out the first bunch of times, a whole bunch of students had a chance to take their turn. After the first time or two, I don't think I had to ask anybody, it was always somebody just helped out. We kind of helped build that community."

The inclusivity effort didn't go unnoticed.

"Those kids, they are awesome, helping me get back and forth in the woods," Gauthier said.

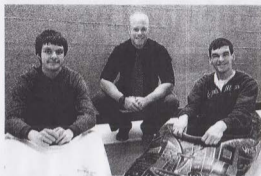
"I can't bring my walker into the woods — it will get stuck — and it's nice for the class to help me out."

Boudreau was also happy to be included in the class. He wanted to take outdoor pursuits "just for the fun of it" and said it was good to feel part of the team.

While Gibbs was happy to adapt his class to include everyone, he was humbled recently when his efforts earned him a Champion of Inclusion Award from the New Brunswick Association for Community Living.

NBACL works with and on behalf of children and adults with an intellectual disability and their families. Its Champion of Inclusion Awards recognize people, businesses and organizations that accept and include every person unconditionally as a valued member of their community, that view all people as important and contributing citizens, that has shown strong leadership for inclusion and/or have demonstrated community leadership for an inclusive society through their work or through their daily life.

"Shaun Gibbs is most definitely a true champion of inclusion," said Phil Ouellette, a member of the NBACL Board, in a press release. "He teaches his students a lot of skills in his Outdoor Pursuits class, and he challenges them in a way that helps each and every one of them learn a lot about themselves. But one of the greatest lessons he taught this year's class, he taught by



Riverview High School teacher Shaun Gibbs, centre, recently received a champion of inclusion award from the New Brunswick Association for Community Living. He won the honour for ensuring all students could take part in his Outdoor Pursuits class. Ryan Boudreau, left, who is autistic, and Nicholas Gauthier, who has cerebral palsy, are two students who were able to take Mr. Gibbs' class, despite their disabilities. PHOTO: COLE HOBSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

example. By simply including two students with disabilities, he taught all his students that everyone can participate in, and contribute to, a team, a class, a community."

Gibbs' colleague and fellow teacher, Ginette Boudage, nominated him for the award on behalf of his students.

"What I witnessed in this class made me proud to be a teacher, because I saw inclusion at its best," she said in her nomination letter. "How did he do it? Simply by doing what he always does for this class — he made the students work as a team and take responsibility for each other."

Boudage described what an impact it made for the students to take it upon themselves to piggyback Gauthier into the woods.

"Every day for months, they would do this," she said. "Nick has explored places that he would never have been able to see otherwise. He was amazed by the view and the beauty of nature."

Meanwhile, Boudage noted that the class realized Boudreau had a strength in keeping things in order. The class therefore made him responsible for checking all the supplies, making lists and keeping track of time. He was also the chief fire starter.

"I saw inclusion at its best when I saw that giant smile on Ryan's face as everyone in his group was enjoying hot chocolate around the fire he started and laughing at his knock-knock joke," Boudage said.

"(Gibbs) did not treat Nick or Ryan as if they had a disability; he treated them like all his other students, giving each one what they needed."

Boudage also noted that Gibbs should be an example for the community at large.

"If a teacher can teach students with both physical and intellectual disabilities how to survive in the wilderness, give

first aid, hike mountains, kayak, snowshoe, propel and work as a team for the success of all, then surely we as a society can do much more for persons with disabilities," she said. "It takes one leader to inspire and show others it can be done. Shaun Gibbs showed all 100 staff at our school that it is possible, but more importantly, he also showed each one of the students in his class. The snowball effect of this strong leadership is simply the beginning."

For his part, Gibbs said he was "happy, but more humbled than anything" to receive the award.

"I was just trying to make it work for Nick and for Ryan in the class and just trying to make sure everyone has a meaningful experience so that somebody did that. It was really nice," he said, noting inclusion should always be at the heart of education.

"It's everything because everybody should have the opportunities that everybody else has. It doesn't matter what slows them down or makes them go faster, it's really important."

While he was honoured to receive the recognition, Gibbs said the true reward was seeing the big changes in those two students as a result of the class.

"Confidence. The level of confidence. With Nick in the kayak, we had him in the pool, he wanted to try it but he was quite nervous when he first got in. Then he wouldn't let me take my hand off the kayak to support him. Within a couple minutes, he was on his own paddling away. I didn't have to help out at all," he said.

"A lot of it comes from seeing a challenge and then just being willing to try to overcome it. The only thing that really holds people back is what they think. It would have been really easy for Nick to say, 'No, I can't go in that kayak.' The fact he was willing to try it and have success at it just shows perseverance, which is awesome."