

Chris's Story – Living the Dream with “A Little Help from My Friends”

Independence is a big focus for Chris Quast who has just celebrated his first year living on his own in an apartment here in Powell River. Chris will be turning 20 soon and is proud of himself for accomplishing this long time dream despite the many obstacles that seemed to be in his way. He loves the fact that he is able to manage on his own and live by his own rules. As far as he is concerned, this freedom keeps him out of trouble because the majority of his conflicts in the past have been with people who are trying to get him to follow their rules!

Of course, not all is completely rosy. Chris is struggling to pay all his bills, keep his place clean, and have healthy food on the table. As with many young people, setting these as priorities is hard and it is easy to get side tracked. He is learning that life without any rules is not always perfect. Now that he has the freedom he so wanted, Chris is starting to explore what else he wants out of his life and how to get there. As part of this process, he is also learning that it is okay to accept help...this does not need to take away from his hard earned independence!!

Reflecting on where he is today, Chris has much to celebrate. According to his landlord, Roy, “There are some things I worry about but really if every young tenant could be like him...it would be great”. So...although he still has some challenges to work through to stay on track with his goals, Chris is on his own and likes his life – a far cry from a year ago when he was angry a lot, in trouble with the law, and struggling to find a place to live!

When asked what the secrets to his successful year might be, Chris is clear that his determination to make it on his own is his biggest strength. But next on his list, is his support system. Over the past few years, he has built strong connections with a number of individuals who he considers his family. These are people he values and trusts, who he knows he can count on in an emergency, and who make a point of connecting with him regularly just to see how he is doing, share a meal and spend time with him. Included in this group are his former foster parents, Dave and Pearl, his dad, Mike, his friend Gary who he met through his former group home and visits with regularly for movies, dinner and biking, Gauri, another former staff who shares his love of and can cook Indian food for him, Lindsey from wheelchair basketball and his friends Kalin and Mike (Dave and Pearl's daughter and son in law). Recently, Chris has added a peer to this list, a new buddy, Chase. He and Chase enjoy going to community events together as well as playing video games. They spend time together each week. For a brief period, Chris spent time with a girl friend who Chris says brought out another side to him. She encouraged him to get out bike riding, walking and swimming, all activities he enjoys doing but dropped when he first moved on his own and had the freedom to play video games as long as he wanted with no one telling him when to stop! Reflecting on this habit, Chris observed that he doesn't want to spend all his time on this anymore. “I want more for my life...a job, a girlfriend, and friends”. Figuring out how to make these happen is Chris's next focus and may possibly stretch him to let more help in from his network. Already some of that support is coming his way. For instance, he is looking forward to some paid work in September – a gig he has secured through Dave on a landscaping project. This may or may not lead to more work but Chris appears to prefer this more informal route to employment over more formal supports through PRACL's employment service, Steps to Employment. Right now he seems to be rejecting the paid workers in his life which means his network plays a more important role.

Tarra's role in helping to facilitate Chris's network has been more of a “behind the scenes” one. When asked about his involvement in the *Art of Asking* project, Chris was vague stating, “I don't know...was I part of that?”. Programs are not important to Chris...his drive to do things independently has led to a different approach to personal network building for Tarra that is less about creating the connections and more about exposure to different groups. He and Tarra are currently exploring the pool league as another possibility for meeting people. Chris seems to make connections on his own quite easily when the opportunity presents itself so finding places where people share similar interests is more appropriate than making the links with specific individuals. Another bonus along the way is Chris's recognition of the role he needs to play. He acknowledged that he is learning about the give and take involved to sustain relationships over time. “I know you can't always do what you want to do. You have to do what matters to your friends too, especially your girlfriend”, he observed with a smile.

Are personal networks important to Chris? Yes is clearly the answer. Living on his own is his dream come true. But he is quick to recognize that the support he counts on from friends and family has been a big part of helping him get to where he is today! Reaching out to them on a consistent basis is the next step for him.