

A chance to just be a teenager

Circle of Friends gives girls an opportunity to talk, bond

By Jessica Botelho-Urbanski

JORDANA Kilgour wheels into a conference room at St. James Collegiate and starts waving excitedly. The life of the party has arrived.

"Hi guys!" the Grade 12 student beckons to her Circle of Friends.

For five years, the support group, organized by Community Living Winnipeg, has met Tuesday mornings to help Jordana learn social cues and build lasting relationships.

Jordana, 18, uses a wheelchair and is developmentally around four years old, her mom, Wendy Taylor, said.

As much as Circle of Friends helps Jordana build bonds, it also gives six other girls a chance to unload about their lives.



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Jordana Kilgour holds the 'talking stick' with members of her Circle of Friends program at St. James Collegiate, where she learns to interact with people of her own age, and where her friends have an outlet to talk through life's problems.

What's discussed in the room during the half-hour sessions, stays in the room, co-ordinator Jolie Lesperance said.

"This is the thing about it being five years (running). The stuff that we've all gone through, the things that have been shared and the life that has been lived, there's a lot of history," Lesperance said. "The circle is only a model. But then you have to have people wanting to do it and all these wonderful girls have wanted to do it all the time."

As a colourful talking stick gets passed around the circle, the girls discuss their issues, personal victories and what Circle of Friends means

to them. It's a flurry of fast talk, with roaring laughs and near-constant questions to find out more.

The conversation runs the gamut from why mac and cheese is the best breakfast food to grad dress shopping.

"I can share things that I wouldn't share with anyone, and I can have a place where I know people wouldn't go gossiping about me at school," said participant Jamie.

Lesperance only sees the girls once a week for the support sessions. Hearing them talk about how Circle of Friends affects their lives makes her well up.

"Stop crying, stop crying! No crying

here. Breathe in, breathe out!" Jordana reminds herself.

The girls graduate from high school this year and agree they will continue to keep in touch and stay friends.

Recently, Jordana has started practising walking to prepare for their graduation ceremony. She plans to use a walker to accept her diploma.

"I'm going to walk on stage! My mom's going to bring lots of Kleenex. She's going to cry," Jordana said.

Lesperance encouraged others who might be interested in creating circles for people who have an intellectual disability aged 13 to 22 to contact Community Living Winnipeg. The Circle of

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— Circle of Friends participant Jamie

Friends concept can be tailored to fit each person's needs, and the group of friends can be invited or volunteer to participate.

United Way Winnipeg has provided core funding for Community Living since 1966 and gives nearly 20,000 Winnipeggers who have a disability opportunities to help them live more productive lives.

Donations can be made to Community Living Winnipeg through the United Way, call 204-477-UWAY (8929) or online at www.unitedwaywinnipeg.mb.ca.

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