

Unschooling - a different way of getting an education

By Frances Mallon

In Ontario, the usual way for most children 4-18 years of age to learn is in a traditional school environment. It is sometimes referred to as the four 'B' system; buildings, buses, budgets and bottoms-in-seats. Some families opt for home-schooling, which is often like running a classroom in the home, with an adult supervisor.

Then there is Unschooling. On the Unschoolingcanada.ca website, it is described as "the educational philosophy of consensual learning, and self-directed education, usually practised under the legal education category of home-schooling. Students choose what they want to learn, when they want to learn it and how they want to learn it, instead of the government dictating what they have to learn."

According to this website, there are about 10,000 students involved in unschooling in Canada.

For two Newcastle teens, 15-year-old Severn and 19-year-old Thomas, this is the only method of learning they've ever known. And they love it. Their parents, Sharon and Dave, share the same values for education, and decided early on this is the path they want for their children.

Dave states of his wife, "Sharon didn't want to go out and earn money to pay someone else to look after her kids." And so, they set out on this journey with all the key elements for Unschooling in place, such as adult availability, resources, and unstructured free time.

Thomas describes his experience as, "learning in everything you do, even when you're playing a game." Case in point, Thomas was a very early reader. His dad notes that in order to play this video game 'World of Goo', he taught himself to read. To be independent and read the instructions, he set about doing so. Not in a vacuum, but with questions posed to his father and him practising what they discussed. His father states, "it only took him a couple of weeks, then he stopped with the questions. Thomas adds, "a large part of that experience for me was motivation to learn."

Severn points out, "well, if you think about it, you've been learning since you were born, you take in a whole new world. That's the most learning you've ever done, which I think is kind of cool." She has kept right on learning with each new experience and area of interest that she

tackles. Her dad states that she learned to read later than Thomas and posed the question to him, "do I have to learn to read?" He responded by saying that some people don't read, but it's good to be able to read things like signs. Severn responded, "I love signs, I'm going to learn to read. "She learned very quickly after that discussion. They learn what they need when they need it," he adds.

Learning within the confines of the school hours is something that neither Thomas nor Severn can relate to. For them, it's all the time. Severn refers to her experiences in the brownies, girl guides and pathfinders as being very educational, as well as the babysitting course she took at the library. Both of them have been actively involved in the improv classes offered periodically at A Gift of Art and have written and performed their plays in that environment.

Unschooling gives them the freedom to take off without working around the school calendar. The family is well travelled, visiting places in the USA and Europe and taking in the culture in those locations. When they lived in Toronto, they spent a lot of time at the Royal Ontario Museum, the Science Centre and the cultural festivals in order to enrich their experiential learning.

"If there's a course series for example, we're not worried about them getting a certificate, so they could go in for part of it, so they get the learning that they need from someone with the experience, rather than push to the end for that piece of paper," states their dad.

Pen and paper tasks are not necessarily their go to way of processing information. "If we want to learn something about whether it be math or science, we have a conversation about what we want to learn with either our mother or father, and make a project about it," states Thomas.

Sharing their results with their parents is their form of validation, a grade as such is not assigned. In fact, testing is not a requirement Unschoolers need to fulfill. In fact, one of the first official tests Thomas took was for his driver's license, which he passed, and he went on to get his license soon after.

Resources are listed as key to the success of Unschooling. The primary one for Thomas and Severn are their parents, one or the other of whom they have direct contact with daily. "They

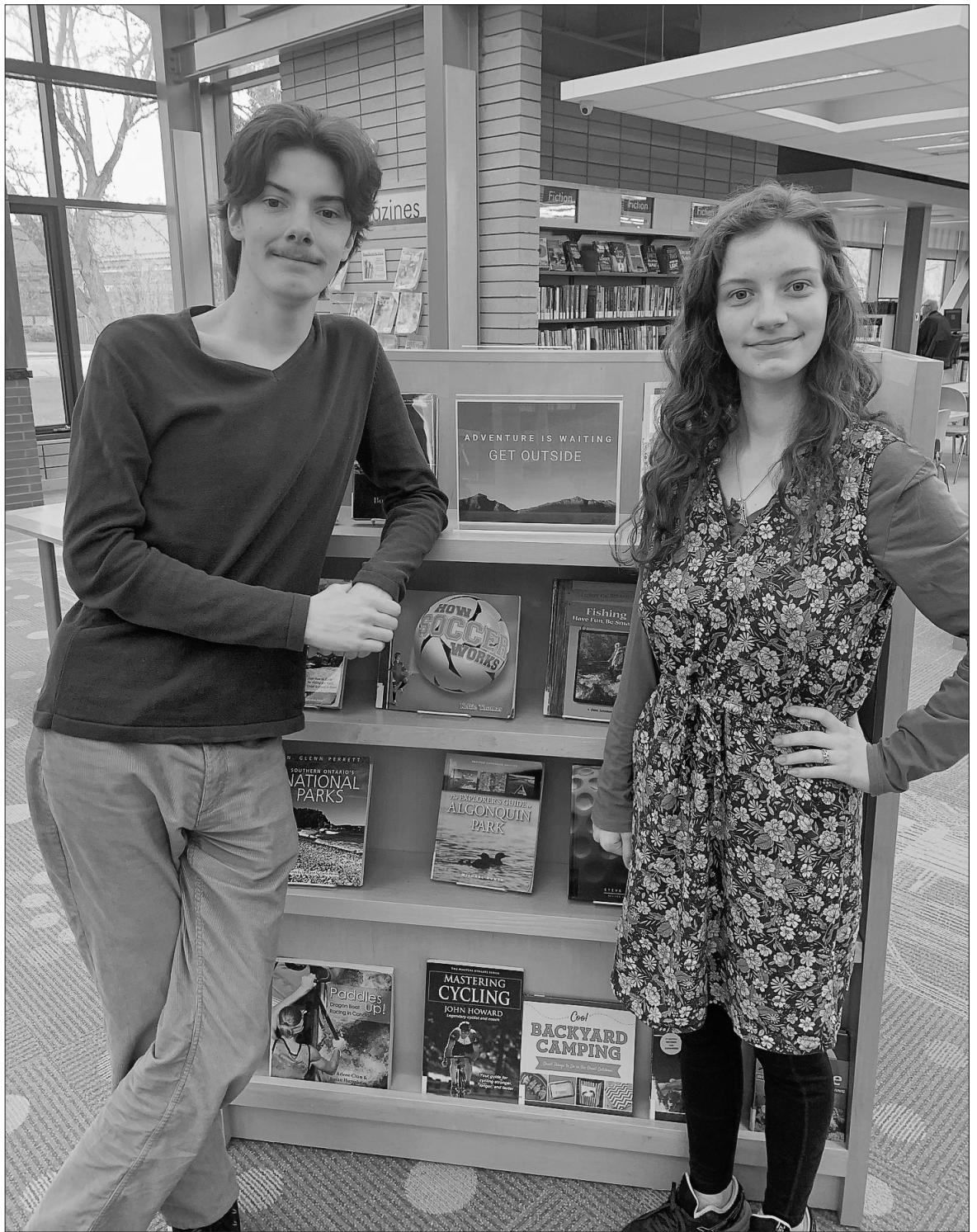


Photo by Frances Mallon

Thomas and Severn, a brother and sister from Newcastle, describe their experience with the educational style of 'unschooling'. It's an unconventional way of learning, and does not suit everyone, as Thomas states, but they love it.

get attention at a level that most people don't get," dad Dave says. Thomas adds, "we spend two hours a day talking with one of our parents. Most kids don't get that kind of conversation that explores nuance."

They both are adept at using online resources and navigating the internet to get the information they need. They're skilled at keyboarding, which makes that task much easier. They search out books on topics of interest, and as Severn says, "we have so many books, probably more than a lot of people."

So, following a traditional curriculum does not fit with their unschooling experience. That leaves them free to volunteer within the community, as Dave said, "we've raised them to be very community minded. They're not oriented toward the job market per se, they are oriented toward living and experiencing." They have taken swimming and first-aid training however, in the event of an

emergency the family feels it's important they are prepared.

Since they do not belong to a grade cohort, they have learned the social skills needed to interact and play with kids of all ages, and have a diverse group of friends, some in person and some in online communities they've established for themselves.

They admit to being not current with some of the typical teenage social situations and behave how they may be expected to behave. But they have their friends at the rec centre groups and people they've met through their community activities. Thomas made note of the fact that had they ever wanted to attend traditional school, that would have been something they could have done. "But we'd have had a long conversation about it first," laughs Severn.

Post secondary courses have not been ruled out, and enquiries have been made by the family to some institu-

tions about gaining admission. There's no hard and fast timeline however, true to form, it will be a decision they will arrive at if and when they decide to go that route.

The teens will be on staff this summer at 'A Gift of Art' summer camps during July and August. They're looking forward to interacting with the children, and they'll be bringing their special brand of experiential learning to share with the campers.

Severn and Thomas agree that they're happy to be unschooled, and proud of what they have experienced in their short lifetime. They've got plans for areas of investigation for the future, in Computer Science like their dad, in reading and doing 'deep dives' into the world of literature, art and holistic health studies. There's a whole world out there to explore, and they're off to a great start.