



Former Esterhazy resident Shyla Cowan Masse recipient of Parent of Distinction award.

Shyla Cowan Masse of Edmonton and formerly of Esterhazy has been named one of 10 recipients of the Alberta School Councils Association Board of Directors Parent of Distinction awards for 2011.

Masse received this award because she “demonstrates the ability to promote parental involvement in the public education system. Truly exceptional in her dedication and initiative, this individual is a dynamic leader who creates a welcoming and inclusive environment for all partners in education,” according to the associations press release.

Masse is the chairperson of the Parent Advisory Council at Beacon Heights, vice-president of The GRIT Program (Getting Ready for Inclusion Today) Board of Directors, and a member-at-large on the executive committee for the Alberta Association for Community Living. She is actively involved in creating a welcoming environment for all. This includes all children, staff, teachers and parents. The goal is an inclusive life at home, at school, and in the community, and quality education that meets the diverse needs of all learners.

“I love being involved in my children’s

education the way that I am,” Masse said on her blog. “I see the opportunities I take advantage of as a way of focusing on the positive, and a way for me to cope with what is. My husband (Ronan) happily supports my passion because he views my time away at meetings, conferences and workshops as a free education for my job as a mother. I have made a commitment to myself to be an advocate because I love it, and I need it.”

Masse is the parent of five-year-old Carson Masse, who attends Beacon Heights Elementary School in Edmonton. Carson was born with a chromosomal disorder, and is not yet able to speak, is tube fed, and lives with global developmental delay and a seizure disorder; but most of all, he is one of the boys. Masse’s other children, Meagan, 15, and Blade, eight, also have diverse learning needs.

“We are not burdened by Carson or his diagnosis,” Masse said, “nor are we broken. Carson is a blessing, just the same as our other two children are. He is happy, full of purpose, irresistibly adorable, and he can already assume credit for inspiring a lot of positive change in the world.

“It is our vision to see Carson surrounded by great people with positive assumptions,” Masse said in her blog. “Through peer support and the use of assistive technology, Carson will participate with his classmates in many dynamic learning opportunities and age-appropriate experiences.”

According to an article in the Edmonton Sun, it is because of the tireless work of his family, school staff, and the provincially-funded GRIT Program that Carson doesn’t miss a beat at Beacon Heights.

“The roots of my advocacy are in our family’s vision,” Masse said in her blog. “I was not born an advocate. I learned to be one because I need to be one. It was through The GRIT Pro-

gram that I learned the Value of a vision, collaboration, and communication.”

GRIT has worked with Carson for three years, according to the Sun’s article. GRIT uses a team consisting of an occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech and language pathologist, and teacher Maggie Gibson, who consult and collaborate on a monthly basis with the GRIT developmental specialist Lisa Shorten, who assists Carson one-to-one every day, as well as the Masse family and the school.

“Carson’s expressions are not typical, but there is no question he’s excited on the way to school, when his legs stiffen in his seat,” says his mom. “It just fills him with excitement.”

The team uses specialized equipment such a sensory items, supportive seating and voice output communication devices. Carson is beautifully included at Beacon Heights.

The benefits have been immense, according to Masse. Carson is more engaging, is eating better, and has made huge gains in his eye contact since starting kindergarten last fall. Incredibly, he has also left his wheelchair and learned to walk, something Masse never dreamed possible.

“We learn new ways to include Carson in our family life every day,” Masse said. “Ronan, Blade, Meagan and myself are each learning how to envelope life with Carson at our own pace, in our own way, gratefully, with the support of The GRIT Program, Beacon Heights School, and our community.”

Masse and her husband Ronan have been married for nine years. Masse completed school at Esterhazy High School in 1994.

“Former Esterhazy resident Parent of Distinction”, by Shelley Gillespie, The Miner-Journal, Esterhazy, Saskatchewan, Monday, May 2, 2011.