

Volunteer, mildly-autistic man forge friendship over Dungeons and Dragons play



West Island Citizen Advocacy makes all kinds of matches. For example, Andrew Mackay (left) meets up with Simon Piché to play Dungeons and Dragons as part of the Youth Engagement Program. TC Media- Courtesy WICA

● John Malanos

It's 7 p.m. on a Saturday night and Andrew Mackay, Simon Piché and others, are huddled over a table filled with handbooks, character sheets, and 20-sided die. The night's campaign of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), a fictional role-playing game that Andrew and the gang play several times a month.

The role of Dungeon Master belongs to Andrew, a volunteer with West Island Citizen Advocacy (WICA). The other players, including his protégé Simon, must act within the construct and challenges created by the Dungeon Master.

Both Andrew's and Simon's strong interest in games, specifically D&D, is what prompted WICA community worker Susana Trindade, to match the two young men together as part of the youth engagement program.

The youth engagement Program was started by WICA last year to respond to the growing need for volunteers to help youth adults with an intellectual challenge.

For 20-year-old Simon, what he's facing is a difficulty connecting socially with others due to his mild autism. His soft-spoken way of talking can often be mistaken for shyness but that isn't the sense one might get from meeting him.

With Andrew, the two share a mutual interest in D&D.

"It makes me feel better because I'm not a very social person," said Simon. "In meeting Andrew, I get to meet other people. Basically, I get to do other things than stay in my basement. It makes me see things outside my everyday life."

As a whiskey blender in his early forties, Andrew enjoys volunteering with a young

protégé because it allows him to be more in tune with a younger demographic.

"When you're working with younger folks, you tend to pick up more of the vibe of what's going on; through social references and cultural references," said Andrew.

Andrew and Simon have been playing D&D since they were matched six months ago and don't seem to get tired of it, partly because the game offers endless possibilities. The characters they choose coupled with the actions taken make the game infinite.

"Part of what I love about this game is the creative aspect," said Andrew. "As the Dungeon Master, you're trying to build a narrative around the characters the other players are trying to create. It lets me step out of my world and into something completely different."

For Simon, "it just feels like an activity. Something to take your mind off problems and you just focus on something else."

Their mutual interest in D&D shows that Andrew and Simon are more alike than they're different. There's a welcoming and comfortable ambiance to the group because there is no sense of status or judgment.

"Part of the game's mechanics asks you to take yourself out of your comfort zone," said Andrew. "So it does make you a bit vulnerable because you're showing a different part of yourself. You're trying to employ your imagination and you're asking everyone in the room to let you embrace it."

As the night wears on, it becomes more apparent that D&D is more than just a game, it's a tool which allows Simon to express himself comfortably, where his imagination and unique personality are an advantage in a fictional world within reality.