

Giant Steps: a Montreal initiative teams up with Loblaw to provide jobs for autistic adults

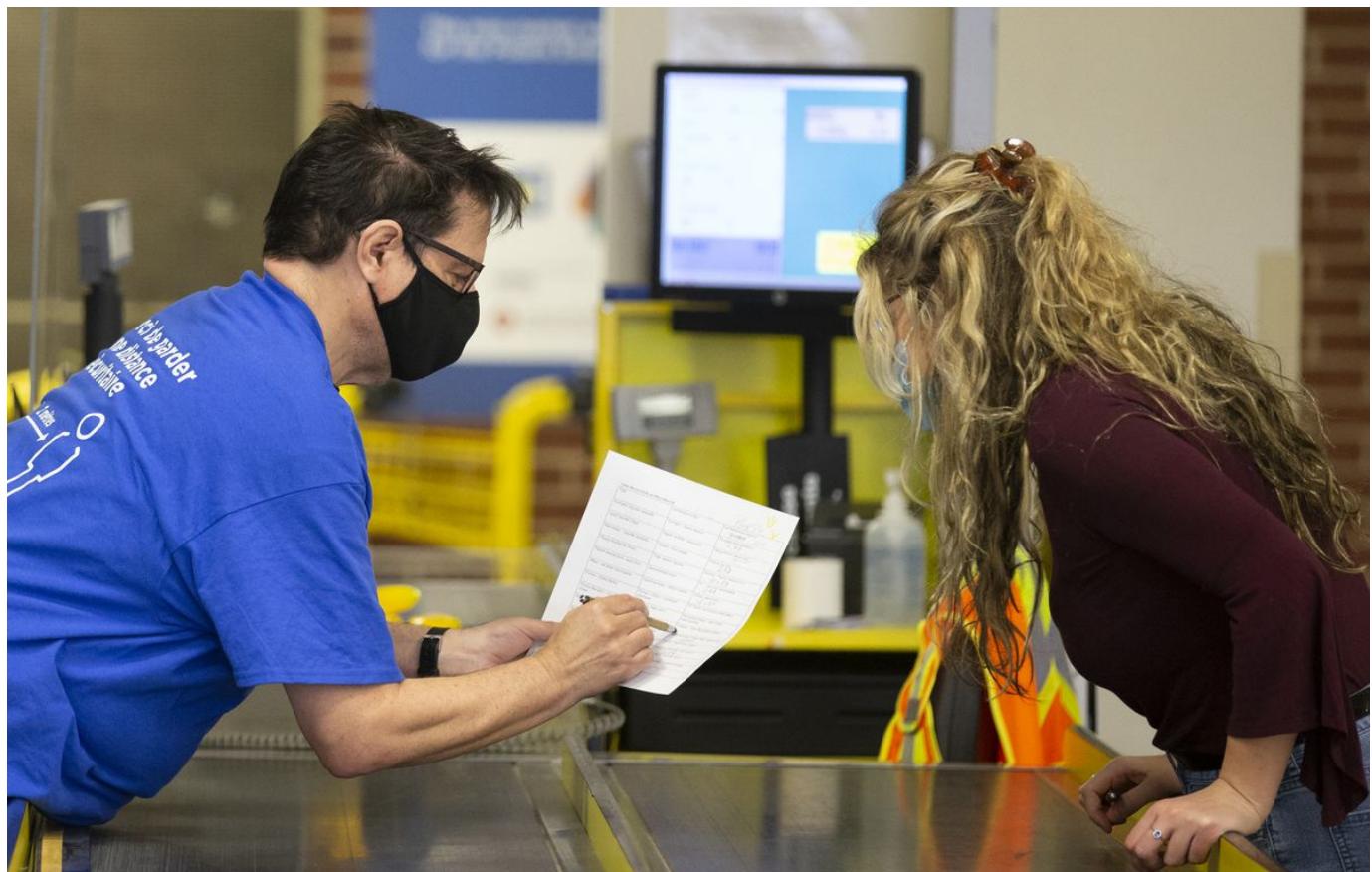
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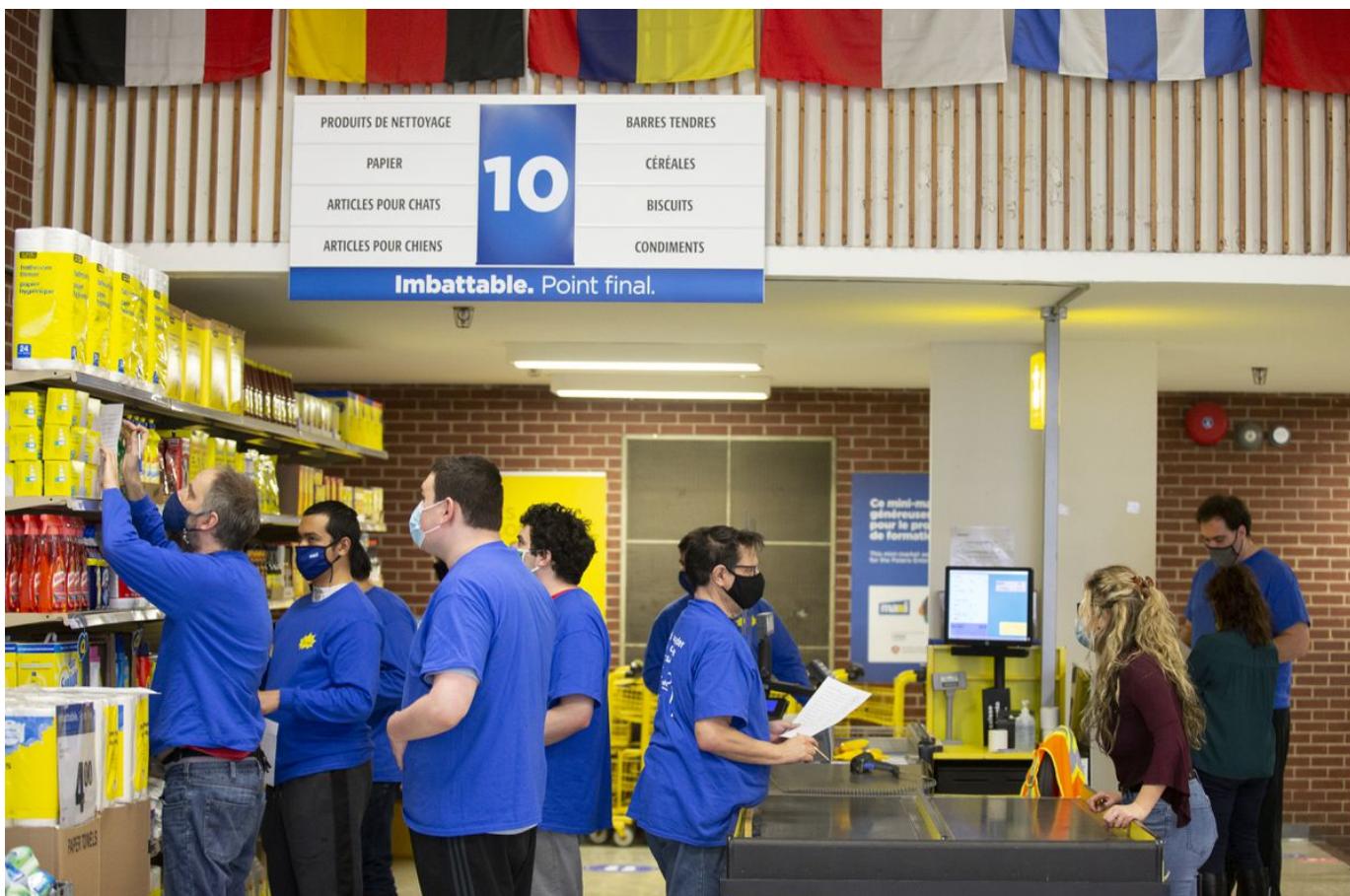
Student Pierre Quenneville looks for clarification on his list of groceries he needs to price from Georgia Kamateros, a social integration teacher in the Maxi mini-mart at Wagar Adult Education Centre in Montreal on Dec. 4, 2020.

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When you have a child on the autism spectrum, you can't help but worry: With an unemployment rate among autistic adults of more than 80 per cent, what will happen when you're no longer around to take care of them?

The Polaris Enterprise Initiative (part of Giant Steps Montreal, an organization dedicated to education for autistic youth) recently launched a program designed to give autistic adults the training and internships they need to find jobs. And it has teamed up on the project with Loblaw Cos. Ltd., which in Quebec includes the Maxi and Provigo banners.

The program was designed to provide hands-on experience through placements in different kinds of jobs within the Loblaw organization's stores and distribution centres. It also includes classroom work at Montreal's Wagar Adult Education Centre that helps participants develop skills such as organizing and prioritizing daily activities, communication, coping with changes in routine, and money management for independent living.



Students practice skills like finding products and verifying their prices at Wagar

Adult Education Centre.

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The first session was to begin in March, 2020, but had to be delayed when COVID-19 measures shut down the school. A new session began in August, with 10 students ranging in age from 21 to 62. During the spring lockdown, Maxi installed a mock-up of a mini-mart inside the Wagar centre where the students do practical assignments before beginning internships inside real stores and the grocery distribution centre. Assignments include learning to fulfill online grocery orders, restocking shelves, checking prices, counting inventory, practicing the cash and placing boxes on a pallet to practice for work in distribution centres.

During classroom time, the students work on self-esteem and other soft skills. Instructors identify each student's challenges and abilities, and develop strategies to help them succeed in the job market.

According to Paul Karwatsky, who works for Giant Steps, Pierre Quenneville, 62, is from Jonquière, north of Quebec City and came to Montreal for the program at an age when many people are preparing to retire in the hopes it will lead to the first permanent job he's ever had. "He's in the program because he wants to work. It's a great opportunity for him."

Andre Pereira, Giant Steps Montreal's project manager for employment initiatives, said he has seen positive changes in the students over the past three months: better attendance and communication, improved self-esteem and increased comfort with job skills. For the adults in the program, being valued is as

important as the paycheque – although the goal is equal pay with benefits.



Jean-Paul Ngindu properly replaces a box in a pallet as Provigo trainer Eric Bourbeau (orange vest) looks on during orientation at the Provigo Distribution Centre in Laval on Dec. 2, 2020.

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The on-the-job portion of the current session takes place at the Provigo distribution centre. Trainers assist the students during their first orientation day, then they are paired up with workers to learn about inventory. It's a modified version of Loblaw's regular training that has been shortened to three hours a week to accommodate the students' needs, for safety reasons, and to maintain physical distancing.

Eric Bourbeau has been training Provigo employees for 17 years. This session of the program is his first time training workers who are on the autistic spectrum, and he said that as long as he took the time to explain what he wanted and why, the students caught on quickly. "You just need a bit of patience

to be more precise with showing the tasks,” he said. “They understand fast, and they catch up.”



Jeremie Desmarais-Gauthier uses a scanner at the Provigo Distribution Centre.

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