

## Provincial cuts leave adults with disabilities 'hanging on a ledge'



Nazarenus Rimando, 24, left, with independent facilitator Joanne Wilson at Centennial College's Scarborough campus. Rimando, who has autism, struggled with college before connecting with Wilson, who helped him regain his confidence and begin to flourish in school and the community. (TORONTO STAR)

**Like too many young people on the autism spectrum, Nazarenus Rimando struggled with the transition from high school to adulthood.**

After failing most of his college courses in computer repair maintenance, he retreated to the family's Scarborough apartment, where he grew increasingly withdrawn and depressed.

Rimando's mother Maria, who searched frantically for help between shifts at her factory job, says it "felt like watching a slow death. It was

The turning point came in the spring of 2016 when the provincial Developmental Services Office suggested the family try independent facilitation, a service that since 2015 has helped more than 1,700 young people like Rimando create a meaningful adult life.

Through independent facilitation, Rimando was able to re-enrol at Centennial College, start volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, join a local martial arts gym and even learn how to sail a tall ship.

But the Ford government decided late last year to axe the \$3.1 million demonstration project March 31. And now the Rimandos and other families across the province are mobilizing to save it.

As part of an online campaign launched this month, more than 40 individuals and family members have posted poignant videos and testimonials about how the program has changed their lives. Dozens more are contacting their MPPs for support.

Provincial NDP social services critic Lisa Gretskey (Windsor West), who met with families in her riding Thursday, said she is shocked Ford's "government for the people" is abandoning such a vulnerable population.

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"These families have been completely blindsided by this cut and don't know where to go to pick up the pieces," she said Friday.

"People with developmental disabilities want to be part of society just like everybody else," she said in an interview. "And we need to make sure, as legislators, we are making decisions that are empowering them to be able to do that."

Before the Rimandos met facilitator Joanne Wilson, Maria says her son was "just a shell." "Now, he has someone he can trust. And who I can trust too. I can really see the growth. He's becoming a better person," she says.

Rimando, 24, also feels the difference. "I was stranded. I didn't know where to go," he says. "Joanne gave me the direction I needed ... If the government is going to completely cut this fund, I will be left hanging on a ledge or worse. I may even topple down."

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