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NEWCASTLE AND ORONO EDITION

## The Studio: A recipe for inclusion, growth

By Julie Cashin-Oster

In January, Autism Home Base (AHB) opened the doors to their second location, affectionately known as The Studio. While the organization's HUB on Church Street continues to bustle with activity, this new space on Scugog Street is already carving out its own identity — one rooted in independence, inclusion and the simple joy of preparing a meal.

Hailey Yates, Program Manager at AHB, can hardly contain her excitement when she talks about it.

"The space opened at the beginning of January, and the cooking programs are being funded through a three-year project grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation," she explains. "We dabbled with cooking at the other space, but this really is deepening that experience for people. It's much more kitchen-like."

That distinction matters.

At the original Hub, cooking meant assembling simple meals using microwaves, stovetops or induction burners. It was a starting point — important, meaningful, but limited. Here at The Studio, participants can use a full oven. They can bake. Roast.

Experiment. Learn.

"We can do more things," Hailey says. "Before it was kind of assembling really basic meals. Now we can focus on the Canada Food Guide, the healthy plate — really balancing meals so people can understand how to create something healthy at home for themselves."

The kitchen is thoughtfully designed to host six participants at a time. Each person has their own workstation — their own cutting board, their own measuring spoons, their own clearly defined space.

"It's really their own space, which is nice," Hailey says. "And if someone needs support, a parent or sibling can participate alongside them."

That flexibility has opened doors. Alongside regular cooking programs running three days a week, The Studio hosts smaller, one-to-one sessions where a caregiver and adult child cook together in a quieter, more specialized environment. The popular Global Chefs program continues, as does Supper Club — an evolution of an earlier favourite.

"It's busy in here," Hailey laughs.

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Photo by Karen Cashin

Larry Dickinson, Tim Southwell, and Faye Montgomery joined Rev. Jeff Doucette at Enniskillen Tyrone Church for an evening of support for our neighbours to the south. The gathering, led by Rev. Doucette, sang the songs loud and clear that mirrored those being sung in Minneapolis and other cities. Simple songs with a simple message of strength and resistance. Some drumming, cymbals and clapping accompanied the singers. Rev. Doucette started with *Come in and Sit Down*, and led the group through such known Resistance songs as *Put Down Your Weapons, Hold On, Stay with Us*. The gathering wound up about an hour later with *We Shall Overcome*. Rev. Doucett made himself available following the songs for input and comment from those gathered.

## Their record is their résumé — and it's taking them to Thailand

By Julie Cashin-Oster

From a gym in Bowmanville to the world stage in Bangkok, six young athletes from Redemption Muay Thai are preparing to represent Canada at the 2026 Muay Thai World Festival — and they could use some help.

The 2026 Muay Thai World Festival, featuring WBC Muay Thai championships for amateurs, pros and youth, takes place in Bangkok, Thailand from June 25 to 29, 2026. Its one of the biggest international showcases of the sport.

And this year, six athletes from Redemption Muay Thai have earned their place on Team Canada: Dakota McLennan, 20; Grace Richard, 19; Calvin Palmer, 18; Liam McCormick, 15; Rachel Love, 14; Olena Prokopchuk, 18 [not present for the interview]; and their coach, Steve Lee.

They've done the tryouts. They've earned the titles. They've put in the years. Now they need help getting there.

Dakota tells his story.

"I was having a fit in my room playing video games.

My dad told me I needed to go do something. I didn't want to. He made me try Muay Thai with his friend and his friend beat me up. I asked, 'Can we go back tomorrow?' I just loved it ever since."

Grace was four or five when she started. "My mom began training, and I just fell in love with it." Now, at 19, she's not only an athlete but a full-time coach at the gym.

Liam followed his brother into the sport — reluctantly. "I hated it at first. Then I made friends here. And then

I just started loving it."

Calvin started at six because his cousins were into it. Rachel joined at nine because she was bored at home.

Not one of them talks about chasing fame.

They talk about community.

"I love the people at Redemption," Dakota says. "I'm surrounded by ambitious, dedicated people. That rubs off on you."

Grace agrees. She grew up in the gym. "I started as a little kid. Then I started competing. Now it's my job. It's

my career."

Liam says simply, "Everybody around me makes me push and try harder."

Rachel calls it family.

And Calvin — who admits with a grin that he loves "to punch people in the face legally" — now also coaches the younger athletes coming up behind him.

But there's something deeper they talk about, too.

Dakota describes the emotional roller coaster of fight preparation — the brutal weight cuts, the hot baths,

MUAY THAI see page 8

**AHB from FRONT**

But busy in the best possible way.

Downstairs, the basement offers something equally important: quiet.

We sit below while a cooking class hums overhead — and yet, you'd never know it. This lower level is being carefully developed as a sensory-friendly programming space.

"At the HUB, it's busy," Hailey explains. "We want to craft the space down here so people who need something more sensory-friendly can book it. It's still fun, still out of the house, but quieter. Much more conscientious of keeping those sensory inputs down."

Inclusion, here, is not an afterthought. It is intentional.

The Studio is fully accessible — something the HUB cannot offer because of stairs. Now, individuals with physical disabilities can take



**Lincoln sautés fresh vegetables as he prepares to make his omelet during a hands-on cooking session.**



**Participants at Autism Home Base's *The Studio* roll up their sleeves in the program workspace, where this week's lesson focuses on mastering breakfast basics — learning how to prepare home fries and omelets from scratch.**

part in cooking programs without barriers.

"Now everybody can participate," Hailey says simply. "That's really nice to be able to offer."

The programming itself continues to evolve. This winter marks the second round of classes after a fall test session that helped staff refine recipes and structure.

"We're taking what we've learned and evolving it," Hailey says. "In this space, we can use different tools. We're building up adaptive tools so everybody can participate."

That's where Michelle Hunt plays a pivotal role. Part of her focus is ensuring that each participant has what they need to succeed — whether that means modifying how information is delivered, introducing adaptive knives or cutting supports, or finding safer ways to use a blender.

"What is the 'thing' they need so they can be successful?" Hailey says. "Michelle is always thinking about that, based on family feedback or her own observations."

Success, here, is not measured by perfection. It is measured by participation. By pride. By autonomy.

And soon, by lettuce.

In the spring session, The Studio will introduce hydroponics. A newly installed hydroponic tower will allow participants to grow herbs and greens indoors. Each group will have its own section — some for seed starting to plant outdoors, others for lettuce and herbs destined for their recipes.



*Photos by Julie Cashin-Oster*

**The cooking crew at Autism Home Base's satellite program space, *The Studio*, gathers before preparing their latest culinary creation. From left are Lincoln, Michelle Hunt (Program Support), Jade, Ashley, Aiden, Chef Jason Moniz (Culinary Lead), and Sean. The program provides participants with hands-on culinary skills while fostering teamwork, confidence, and independence in the kitchen.**

"There's something about picking something and literally shoving it in your mouth," Hailey says with a grin. "You don't have to worry about what's touched it along the transport route. It creates a direct connection to what you're making."

That connection matters deeply — especially for individuals who may be sensitive to textures or hesitant about new foods. Not everyone eats everything they cook. But they can contribute. They can share.

"They can give it to mom or dad," Hailey says. "They're sharing. They're contributing, rather than just receiving all the time."

One recent class proved how powerful that can be. A member who had never tried chicken wings — the concept alone felt strange to her, bravely prepared a batch alongside her peers. She ultimately decided they weren't for her.

"But she made these amazing chicken wings," Hailey recalls. "Her mom was more than happy to take them off her hands. It was really cool to watch."

Sometimes it's the group dynamic that encourages experimentation. In a small class of six, participants spend 12 weeks together. They get comfortable. There's chatter. There's

sharing.

"In a big group, sometimes people don't want to say anything or it's too loud," Hailey says. "But in a small group, they get to know each other. If they have extra or something they don't like, there's sharing."

And there's ownership.

When participants are asked what they want to cook at home, the answers shape the curriculum. If someone loves macaroni and cheese, that's not dismissed — it's expanded.

"Okay," Hailey explains, "that's your grains and a bit of protein. So how can we build that out so it's still something you'll eat, but it's balanced?"

Even flavour quirks are embraced.

"Some of the guys still want to put ketchup on everything," she laughs. "It doesn't always make sense. But if you've made a meal and you're excited about it and that's how you make it yours, then you're happy with it."

The Studio also enhances AHB's summer programming. During Palooza, the new space will serve as a launch point for day trips — a place to gather, cook, hop on the bus, return.

"It makes it feel like a full day," Hailey says. "Even though it's only a couple

blocks away."

There's something symbolic about that — only a few blocks apart, yet opening up an entirely new world of possibility.

Autism Home Base has long been a social hub for autistic adults and the people who love them. The Studio builds on that foundation — not just by teaching cooking skills, but by fostering independence, confidence and connection.

It is about more than meals.

It is about someone discovering they can chop a tomato with the right tool. About tasting something new because a friend did. About growing lettuce from seed and watching it land on a plate you prepared yourself.

It is about contributing. And in a community that values inclusion, that contribution is something to celebrate.

For more information about Autism Home Base, visit [autismhomebase.com](http://autismhomebase.com).

The Hub and administrative office are located at 132 Church St., 2nd Floor, Bowmanville (905-419-7900).

The Studio — Kitchen and Low Sensory Meeting Spaces — is located at 23 Scugog St., Bowmanville (905-556-2871).

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