No one can tell Reyaz Sulaiman that his options for the future are limited. Through Student Links, Reyaz has had the opportunity to explore and learn from industry professionals in three distinct areas of passion—chiropractic medicine, the music industry, and a recently discovered love of public speaking.

“I was feeling really happy,” Reyaz said when asked how he reacted to news that Paul, a chiropractor in North York, agreed to take him on as a student. Working with Paul and physiotherapist Chetana, he’s learned to operate the ultrasound machine, hot wax machine, Tens machine, heating pads and other equipment. He has had the opportunity to shadow assessments and to learn about chiropractic care.

Reyaz is also a big fan of calypso and reggae music, and especially dancehall rapper, musician, and singer Sean Paul. He submitted his favourite songs as part of his personal curated playlist that MuchMusic aired under his name in March. “I was so excited to see my name on the TV,” Reyaz proclaimed, grinning infectiously from ear to ear.

Far from just a friendly, inclusive gesture, the playlist turned out to be a shrewd business move. Gregg Stewart is Bell Media’s Associate Director of Music Marketing Strategy.

“Sean Paul has never failed to deliver, when it comes to numbers, on radio and television, across this country, or any country for that matter. It’s a known fact—a statistic, actually—that anything with those kind of vibes, and his music in particular, that it’s definitely an audience draw. So, when Reyaz sent us some ideas as to what it was he liked, we were all thrilled and excited to work with him to compile that hour of music.”

Asked how she views the positive experiences Reyaz has had, his mother, Camille, summed it up succinctly. “Awesome, in one word.” It’s apparent that she has seen some changes in her son since he started getting hands-on experience in the areas he was interested in, saying “I’ve seen so much growth in him. It’s really been awesome. He’s just blossomed into being more responsible, and more independent.”

As for future plans, Reyaz has recently discovered a love for public speaking. He is working with Marlin, a member of his local Toastmasters organization, to develop a story of his life. He isn’t quite sure what he’ll do with it yet, but he loves motivational speaking. “All of my cousins, my uncle,” he said, listing some of his family members who have encouraged him to talk in front of an audience. “I like to really speak in a crowd.”
Patrick Rumball says he could see himself working with comic books in a bookstore, after spending about three months doing just that.

Bookstore Employee Sherry Farrell can see it too, or Patrick embracing his passion for comic books in some way in his life. She says the teenager taught her a lot about comic books while working with her at the Timmins bookstore that employs her.

“I really enjoyed spending the time with Patrick and getting to know him,” Sherry says. “He’s got a really good sense of humour. We had some laughs and it was nice to see him open up.”

Patrick’s mother, Debbie Rumball, says she saw his self-confidence grow through the experience, along with his understanding of the workplace environment and what employment entails. She also saw her son’s pride build as he came to know the operations of the Bookstore.

Patrick and Sherry were matched through Student Links, an initiative in which students who have an intellectual disability investigate ideas for their future by working with mentors who have the same interest or occupying the role the student wishes to explore.

Patrick was comfortable talking with Sherry, but the usually quiet and shy teen gradually revealed his personality and comedic side – to the delight of many.

Patrick was proficient at many tasks at the store including resurfacing DVD’s, ordering and bagging Comics, shelving DVD’s but it soon became apparent that Patrick has a real knack for customer service. “He was pretty quiet at first” Student links Coordinator Cristy Webb observed “but, all of a sudden, and of his own accord, he started welcoming customers, and started conversations with them, really got them talking and laughing. He’s got a dry sense of humour, and a really extensive knowledge of comics. He was really in his element.”

Through his involvement in Student Links and the bookstore Patrick has realized there is a world of opportunity within his interest in comics, and is now considering post-secondary studies in business.
It’s never too early to start planning for the future. That’s why Jay Patel, 15, hasn’t simply learned web development through Student Links—he’s developed a set of skills that he hopes will have a direct application to the family business.

Patel worked with Rohit Prasad, his mentor and a recent graduate of Software Engineering and Industrial Design. Together, the pair designed a web site concept for his father’s metalwork company, D and J Fabrication in North York. Jay developed content and populated the web site. The best part was that the concept was not just an exercise—there are plans to launch the web site as part of his father’s business.

Jay’s excitement for learning was evident from the get-go. “Meeting Jay was really exciting because he reminded me of myself when I was in high school,” recalled Rohit. “He loves technology, he’s super eager to learn and he’s willing to try new things. So when we first met, we decided it would be a good idea to learn how to create a simple web site. I’d walk him through it and he could keep exploring other possibilities on his own.”

Jay seems to be doing just that. Not only is he developing the site for D and J Fabrication, he hopes to take over the company himself one day. He’s trained for that potential eventuality, having helped out over the years. “I’ve seen a lot of physical metal work, and I figured I felt strong enough to be able to take over that stuff,” he boasted. “I’ve known how to use a lot of machines. I use the welding machine. I use the punching machine, pretty much everything.”

Rohit gained something from: spending time with Jay as well. “It was great being exposed to Jay’s eagerness to learn, but also at the same time, it felt great to impart knowledge, to be able to teach something you’re passionate about, and work with someone equally passionate about it.”

Since their time together, Rohit has taken a job in Germany, but the positive relationship he developed with Jay has left its mark. “We’re going to keep in touch, and I like to think he’s learned as much from me as I did from the whole experience!”

The opportunity with Student Links has given Jay what he believes is a strong direction to focus on as he completes high school, saying “I’d like to start taking IT courses, business, stuff like that.”

In addition to possibly taking over the family business one day, Jay is exploring the idea of opening his own IT company, which may assist D and J Fabrication as well. Planning for the future, indeed!
Omar Shehadeh loves taking pictures. That much is evident from the slideshow he and his mentor, Michelle Chappus, put together for Community Living Ontario’s 6th Annual Commence Conference, which showcased stunning lakeside sunsets, autumn forests with freshly-fallen leaves and towering cityscapes.

“He has a great eye,” said Chappus. “He’s a natural at taking pictures. He’s always taking pictures.”

“I think it’s great,” Omar said of the opportunity to develop his photography skills while on photo shoots with Chappus, whom he met through the Student Links program.

“I’m enjoying the moment and the chance to learn every time we go out.”

The two met when members of the area’s Arts Council were asked if they knew of anyone who would be interested in mentoring somebody with a passion for photography. Chappus, who was a Windsor Camera Club member, took up the offer. Since she was a teacher before retirement and loves photography and working with youth, “It was a perfect match, and that’s how it started.”

For their first meeting, the two went to an art gallery with their cameras and Chappus says that “…we hit it off right away because we were both having such a good time taking photos. He’s very comfortable trying new things. Before, he was a little bit nervous with meeting people and maybe apprehensive about his skills, but he’s very confident now.”

For her part, Chappus encourages anyone thinking about spending time with a student to give it a shot, as “it turned out to be a lot of fun. I find that because we both have the same interests, we both learn from each other photography-wise. You have nothing to lose and I think you have a lot to gain if you’re considering doing this, because you develop a relationship with somebody. It just feels good to share something that you both have a mutual interest in.”

Most tellingly, though, Chappus described what Omar has taught her, saying “He has opened up my eyes to the beauty around me at times when I may have missed looking outside of the box from my own perspective.”

At Chappus’ urging, Omar has now joined the Arts Council himself and has been involved in several group shows. He’s found his passion to be profitable as well, as he’s started to sell his work at the events. As for the future, Omar plans on putting his skills to further use, saying “I probably want to be a wedding photographer.” Given his abilities, that would be a worthy goal, indeed.