

Angela and Nathalie:

A Story of Friendship and Commitment

The story of **Angela Zhou** and **Nathalie Gagnon** is one of friendship, affection, and commitment.

Michelle and John are the parents of little Angela. They emigrated from China in 2006 in order to pursue higher education. Their plans got turned upside down when their little girl Angela was born with major deficiencies due to a bacteria that infiltrated the placenta and reached the foetus. Over time, it became clear that the illness was affecting Angela's neurological, motor, and sensory skills, and John had no choice but to put his studies at Concordia University on hold and take care of his daughter. Michelle saw to the family's livelihood by taking a job as an accounting technician.

Angela's medical condition had been monitored by a host of specialists since birth, and rehabilitation workers introduced the Zhou family to the Lighthouse in September 2011. A typical day with Angela was full of challenges and worries because she had to be fed seven times by gastrostomy, and someone had to constantly watch over her because of the choking risks associated with her condition. Angela's mobility difficulties often further complicated the many doctor's appointments. Her parents were constantly on edge, and the insidious fatigue was eroding their morale. Then Angela began specialized respite stays at The Lighthouse, Children and Families, where she particularly enjoyed the music workshops, visits to the pool, and listening to stories and fairy tales. Michelle and John were impressed with the skillful care given to Angela along with the heartfelt and professional approach taken towards her condition and well-being. They also appreciated these beneficial breaks that gave them an opportunity to rest and recharge their batteries.





Meanwhile, Nathalie Gagnon was working as a lawyer with McCarthy Tétrault on the Labour and Employment Law team. An extremely generous woman with a heart of gold, she had already been giving up her Sunday mornings for twenty years or so to be with children at Sainte-Justine Hospital. One day she read in the local newspaper that the Lighthouse was looking for volunteers in her area for their in-home respite service. She was keen to get involved in another social cause, so Nathalie took the Lighthouse training course in January 2012. In March she was paired with Angela as her Saturday friend. The two of them hit it off right away, and it was the beginning of a great relationship. When Nathalie comes to the home, Michelle and John can get their chores done or take time to relax. In the meantime, Angela and Nathalie play simple and repetitive games that delight the little girl. Nathalie speaks proudly of the progress Angela has made since March 2012: “Her comprehension has improved immensely, she’s started to use sign language, she crawls and can now sit up unassisted. She is a very expressive child with a hearty and infectious laugh who loves when I sing her songs and point out all the things around us.”

Angela’s parents—courageous, resilient and discreet people—light up whenever they speak of Nathalie. The words trust and commitment come up repeatedly as they describe the special connection between their little girl and her volunteer. Michelle insists that Nathalie is first and foremost Angela’s friend, and as soon as Nathalie steps through the front door, her daughter can always count on her good friend to be enthusiastic and give her her full attention.



Michelle and John have also developed a close, strong relationship with Nathalie, a friendship that is nurtured by their love of good cuisine. Slowly but surely, Nathalie became a friend they adore and a confidant in whom they put great trust. Angela's parents admit they sometimes feel lonely and isolated, as do many immigrants. Although they are active in Montreal's Chinese community, Angela's condition still makes daily life quite challenging. Skype keeps them in touch with family in China and support groups for parents with disabled children, allowing them to share their difficulties as well as their small victories. Nathalie has been of invaluable help because she is always willing to guide them through the red tape of bureaucracy.

This relationship based on simplicity and sincerity has given Nathalie, Angela, and her family the opportunity to share wonderful times together. Whether it was when Nathalie attended Angela's graduation from the Early Childhood Centre, when she was there for Open House Day at her new school, or when Michelle and John came to Nathalie's surprise birthday party, all of these moments are a testament to the rich friendship they share.

When asked about her role as a volunteer for Angela, Nathalie offered "I admit I was a bit apprehensive at first. I was used to the structured environment of a hospital setting and I was nervous about being in the private space of a family home. I also feared the child's medical condition would leave me feeling powerless and not very helpful. Nonetheless, all my worries vanished the moment I met Angela and her family, who made me feel welcome and appreciated."

Nathalie has demonstrated her commitment to the Lighthouse in a number of ways and by sitting on various committees. She offers free legal services to the Lighthouse team on employment matters, she takes part in the Scotia Challenge by doing the 5-km run with the Lighthouse team, and she was a member of the My Birthday as a Gift Committee—an original concept that invites people to offer their birthday as a gift by asking their friends and family to make a donation to the Lighthouse. In 2015, the Lighthouse presented Nathalie with the Katharine Pearson Tribute Award in the category of volunteer support to children and families. The Quebec section of the Canadian Bar Association also acknowledged Nathalie's exceptional contribution to her community's well-being by honoring her with the Pro Bono Rajpattie Persaud Award.

Angela is a wonderful little girl with soft hair and a twinkle in her eye, whose pictures are in full view in Nathalie's office. You can't help but melt when you meet this smiling, affectionate, sociable, and charming girl. She is loved by dedicated, giving, and courageous parents. Nathalie Gagnon is a reputable lawyer who is highly respected in the legal community for her commendable talent and skill. Her involvement at the Lighthouse, and particularly with Angela and her family, has led her to have genuine and meaningful relationships.

These exceptional individuals, united by a true and wholehearted friendship, teach us a lot about authenticity. Together they provide hope for the future, and in Michelle's womb a new life is in the making that will without a doubt fortify this unwavering commitment and affection.

