

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

"Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks".  
— Gloria E. Anzaldúa

## Foreword

This project is about people in a sensitive state of body and mind, photographed in a very special environment. When I first approached Variety Village, I did not expect a quick response and I was most certain that they would refuse my offer. Yet they did not. They were happy to have me come over and take pictures. They told me, that no one would mind it, and that in fact some might really enjoy being photographed, because they rarely are. That was a moment of great surprise and relief.

So what exactly is Variety Village? Initially, a project of Variety the Children's Charity, it is now a full time fitness and life skills facility that is focusing on inspiring people of all ages and abilities to become active and to be proud of their achievements. Variety Village offers a wide range of specialized programs to all its members and their families. Being a closed community rather than a sports centre, the Village promotes appreciation, equality, self-esteem, and above everything else wellness and education.

Their vision is straightforward and very appealing. Opportunities for people with disabilities. No judgment, no critique. Acceptance, respect and care. Who would say no to that? For myself, a person who comes from a different culture, it was difficult to believe, that Variety Village is actually making a difference in the lives of its members. On their website, they emphasize that their goal was always to improve the quality of life and integration into society of people with disabilities. There is no such thing in the place I came from. You are not going to see people in wheelchairs on the streets, let alone playing basketball. Thus, I have made a discovery that I am not likely to forget. We can always make a difference. The question is, are we ready to do so for someone else's wellbeing and happiness?

Huge thanks to Linda and Erin, the communications team. They have made my stay as comfortable as possible. Prior to my first day Erin even put a sign at the reception desk that would tell: Attention members. Photographer on site. So that people would get an idea of what is coming for them.

This book is my way of paying a tribute to the amazing people of Variety Village, both its members and staff. I know it was not always easy to bear with me, and I am grateful for everything each of you has shared and for all the smiles you gave me.

Sandra Shore  
03/18/2014



*"Dedicated to people of all abilities, Variety Village is a great place to get fit and have fun".*



*Zachariah & Unknown Boy*

# Mission

Variety Village promotes appreciation, interaction, empowerment and inclusion. We facilitate the achievement of life goals for people with disabilities through sports, fitness, wellness; awareness; education; training and skills development.



*In the corridors of Variety Village*





I have spent here not more than two hours on my first day. Could not more. It was emotionally difficult. Even though I did my research and the staff was more than helpful, I found it extremely hard to be around people with disabilities. I thought I was prepared to deal with someone who is different. Yet it was not easy to look them in the eye and smile as if everything is perfectly fine.

Next time I came here to shoot, I was still processing my emotions and feelings from day one. I looked at the images I made in the Village and realized that there is so much more to the place than I first thought. I finally saw I could come and go, as I please, fear being the only thing stopping me from doing so. And the fact that it was not always bright and happy in the Village. There were boundaries I was not ready to break. Some people are in pain and in constant need of medical attention. You fear pushing too far, getting too close.

*Sheila & Jacob*





Even here, loneliness is an issue. People of all ages and backgrounds feel the need to bond and to make friends. The Village is not an ordinary place. It is a community in its essence, a strong and powerful tool to bring people together, to make them feel needed and appreciated. Unfortunately, at the end of the day people part and go home and there is not always someone waiting for them.

But in the Village there is always someone who cares, who can volunteer his time to help you, who will teach you how to take care of yourself, how to engage with others, how to find happiness in the world that surrounds you. Even how to get your shoes on.



*Roan & Graham*

Roan. 10 years. Curious boy with a learning disability. He likes to swim and to wander around. Roan started walking when he was five. Focus is always an issue for him. Every gesture has a certain meaning, yet it is almost impossible to understand it. Between body, verbal and non-verbal language there is a paralanguage, a mix of gestures and facial expressions that are difficult to translate and to interpret as actual needs. It is hard to get his attention and to keep it in one place.

Roan does not talk, but screams and makes other noises to draw attention. He often comes here after school and spends the rest of the day doing playful activities.



Graham, Roan's instructor is always there for him. To work in that field you have to adjust your own timetable to others' needs, because most of them often work from nine to five and have time to exercise only in the evening and on weekends.

Or like Roan, they spend all their free time in the Village, waiting for their families to pick them up after work.



What does 'normal' mean anyway? A person without legs or arms is no less normal than any other, yet we call them 'disabled', only because there are certain things they cannot do.

Well, believe it or not, but there are things we will never understand or learn how to do, only because we were lucky to keep our body parts.



*Jason & Cameron in the Cardio Room*



Why are people with learning disabilities considered being 'not normal'? They will find their way of learning common things eventually, so why keep them behind a closed door. The sooner you show them the world, the faster they will develop their own way of connecting things together.



'Smile' is the universal language here. Everyone smiles. The staff, the members. More than others smile people with disabilities. Which was a striking surprise for me, who happened to come from a country, where no one really cares about such people, and they live a very miserable life.

*Genevieve*



Members of Variety Village prefer not to limit themselves and often pick several programs to exercise within. I met the same girl at least three times during my shoot one day. Her name was Sophia. Initially shy, she gave me a smile eventually, but we never had a chance to talk, because she was so busy exercising, and I had no intention to break her routine. First, she was exercising in the Cardio Room, then running on track, and at last – swimming in the pool. I learned that she achieved her Food Handler and WHMIS certification just a few weeks after I took pictures of her.

I believe we have something important to learn from some of Variety Village members. No matter how difficult life is for them, they get up each day, go out and push, push, push, as hard as it takes. They achieve greatness and demonstrate strength, even when it looks like it is impossible to change anything at all.

The staff of Variety Village does an amazing job. It is not just about body workout. Mending souls and minds is what they do best. The place is open all day long, to anyone. All sorts of activities for old and young. It is truly amazing. But each day here is different. After a while, I started to feel attached to certain people and faces. The ones I saw more often. And the ones that returned my smiles.







*Cindy, fitness instructor*



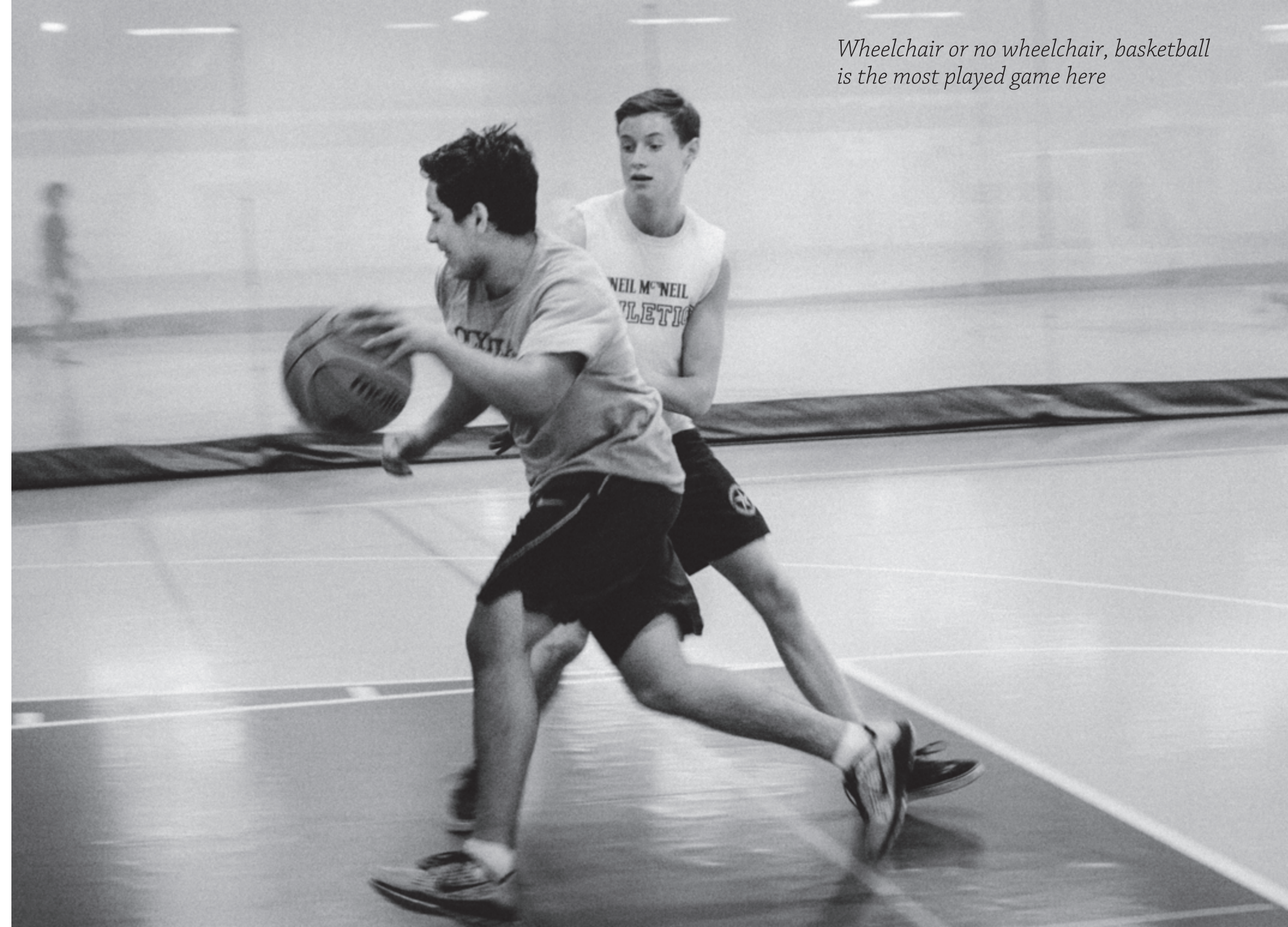
# Cardio Room





People not always enjoy their picture being taken. Despite the fact that I have been shooting for several weeks here, some still looked at me with distrust. One day a woman asked security to check my credentials, saying, "Why is she taking pictures here? Better chase her out". Well, that sounded a bit harsh, but I understand. It took me quite some time to explain who I am even though I had a photo release and a visitors tag on me.

*Wheelchair or no wheelchair, basketball  
is the most played game here*





I have seen so much and got to know so many beautiful and kind people. Yet I have this feeling of bittersweet sadness in me.

I admit to being tired, and still I get this itch for going back, to meet more people, to hear their stories, to capture their smiles.


The world inside Variety Village is so much different from everything I ever encountered.



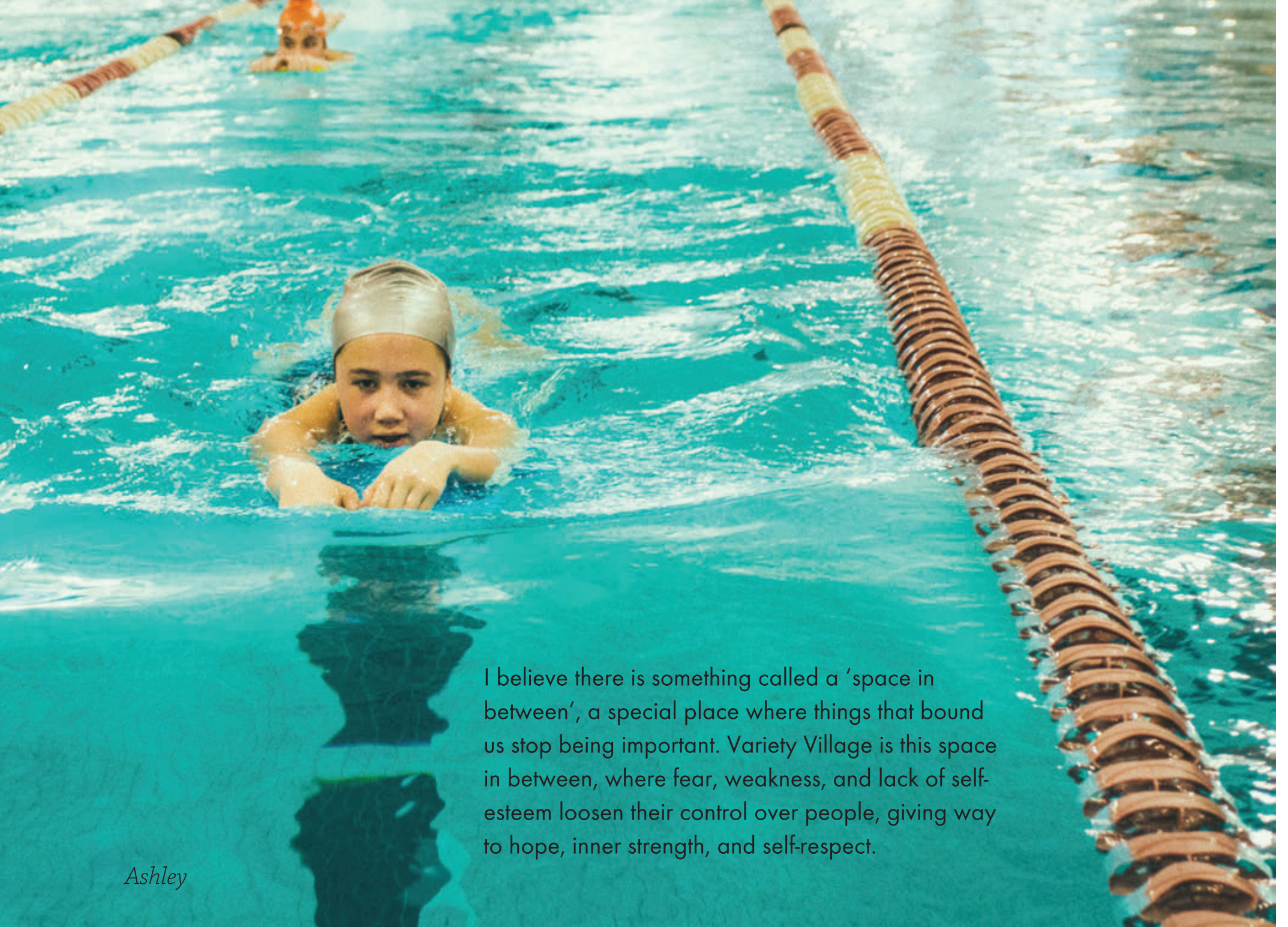
Things are different here. These people are at home and feeling comfortable being around others.





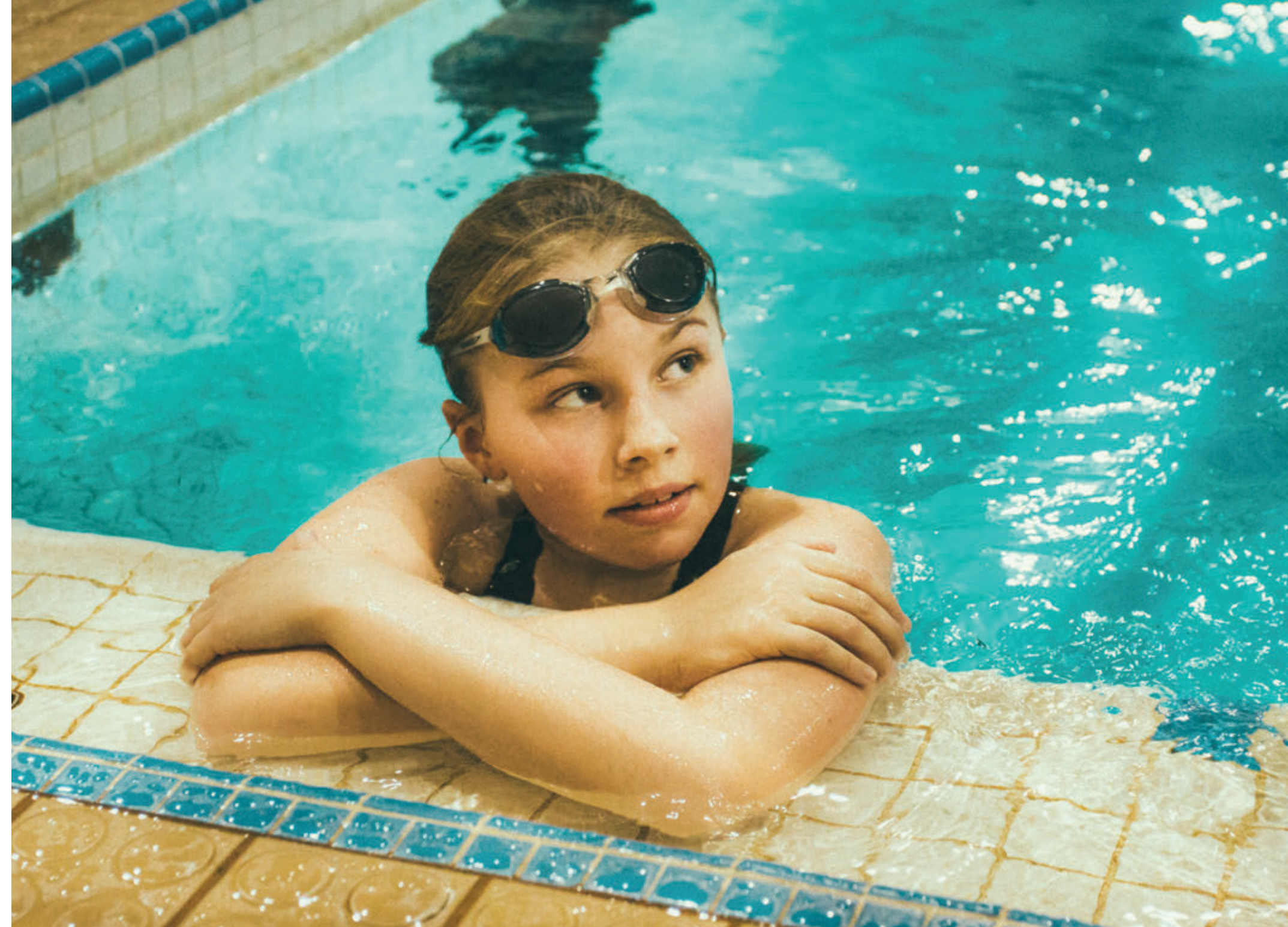


We live our lives in constant fear, wishing for bad things never to happen. But they do happen a lot despite everything we wish for. Here, in the Village, some people already had their 'bad things' happen to them, others have a gift of not knowing how those 'bad things' look like. Both can find content and happiness in Variety Village. Both choose to enjoy life, no matter how difficult or different it may be from what we are used to call 'normal'.



I believe there is something called a 'space in between', a special place where things that bound us stop being important. Variety Village is this space in between, where fear, weakness, and lack of self-esteem loosen their control over people, giving way to hope, inner strength, and self-respect.

*Ashley*





*Member of the Junior Aquatics Program with his attendant*

I wish there would be more places like this, helping those who are in need of guidance and support, regardless of whether they are physically challenged or completely healthy, cheering up those who had a bad day and listening to those who simply want to share their achievements. A place where everyone is just a bit friendlier. And happier.





## **Thank You**

Variety Village

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