

THIS TEXT represents the idea that the word refers to, in dead form.

VOLUME 14 NUMBER 27 NOVEMBER 30-DECEMBER 7

The Coast

HALIFAX'S WEEKLY ALLEGORY



LOWEDOWN

Lezlie Lowe explores the culture of disability.

More than able

SACHA VAIS IS ON THE PHONE AND HE IS SAYING one of the most poignant things I've heard all year.

"When you shine a little bit of light and dignity on our hardest moments, it *does* something."

He pauses.

"I don't know what yet."

The something Vais is talking about is something good. Something positive. He's sure of that much. And Vais is out to prove his theory with his online magazine, *Irked*.

Irked (irkedmagazine.com) launched last September. It's an exploration of "disability culture"—or, at least, that's one of the ways editor-in-chief Vais describes the catch-all collection of stories in the magazine.

"Everybody has got something," Vais says. "The franker those of us who have the disabilities that are invisible are, the easier it will be for everybody."

Vais is talking partly about his own invisible disability, agoraphobia.

Since you're wondering, yes, he *does* leave his house. I asked Vais to describe his condition in relation to something I could understand, like grocery shopping. He usually goes late at night when there are fewer people around and, preferably, with his girlfriend: "I know that if I get anxious and want to leave I can, without abandoning my cart full of items or making a spectacle of myself."

The disabilities featured in *Irked* run the gamut—a photo essay about cold-turkey narcotics-kicking, a suicide-information slideshow and a song from *Thalidomide!! A Musical*. There's a cancer column, Tumour Humour ("because fuck cancer, that's why"), and a featured portfolio of the writing of Lewis Schofield, a 10-year-old boy with Asperger's Syndrome, which is similar to autism.

"The nutshell version of our mission state-

ment," Vais says, "is that people improve when they know someone's paying attention. And we're trying to work with people to tell their own stories. That's what it's about."

For his part, Vais says, "It's way more easy for me to tell my own story this year than it was this time last year. And next year should be even easier." (A profile was written about him in the *Montreal Gazette* in May and he could only bring himself to talk to the interviewer by means of email. Lucky for me, he got on the phone.)

Vais started the magazine during a stress-related break from Concordia University where he was finishing a degree in communications and media studies.

It flourished. He jokes that he was so busy putting it together, he didn't notice he was feeling better.

Vais hopes for the same bolstering effect for readers of *Irked*. Or writers.

Irked's music critic is Joci Caven—13 years old and deaf with a cochlear implant. For her next column she's covering her first-ever concert.

Vais says when he asked Joci to write the column she wrote back saying she'd be delighted and, by the way, her sister might also be good because "she's even deafer than I am!"

Vais says, "That was a remarkable turning point for me. For a brief second this thing that had probably been negative for her whole life in some way, shape or form—even though she's a really cool kid—was all of a sudden her most valuable gift."

More writers are coming online, too, joining Vais in his web of "disability culture."

"This is an ongoing thought," he says, when I press him to define that tag. "We're gathering our identity."

So is it true that people improve when they know someone's paying attention?

"Get back to me in a decade."

Maybe by then—or even long before—he'll be able to tell me in person. 

