

BCRPA Symposium 2009
May 29th, 2009

A few weeks ago, I was biking to my aerobics class on a Saturday morning on the bike route when fellow bikers kept coming and going, coming and going. Then I was stopped by a few friends, and we chatted, but not too long as I did not want to be late for my class. As we talked, bikers seemed to come and go. This is a picture of inclusion to me, where I was just like everyone else. It didn't seem to matter that I happened to ride an adult tricycle; I was enjoying the bike routes, and being a part of the bike community too.

I firmly believe in the benefits of recreation. I like to think that I live and breathe recreation, as it is a strong influence in my life.

From a young age, my parents had difficulty deciding whether to enroll me in community recreation, with my twin sister, like soccer, gymnastics, or anything else that our local community centre was offering. Or whether to enroll me in segregated programs which were often referred to me by my physiotherapist from the Centre of Ability. Such programs were Disabled Skiing Association of BC, Therapeutic Riding Association, or swimming with Cerebral Palsy Sports. It was always a toss up as I did not have "high" needs, and no mobility aids that made me significantly "different". But when I tried out for the local soccer team with my sister, I often felt "different" as my slowness, lack of dexterity, balance, and rhythm to kick the ball, was emphasized, and I felt left behind. I felt very disabled. When I went to these other segregated activities, I often felt it was slow for me because of the diversity of needs, and it was reported as "therapeutic". I was at times left out, because I was quite capable at doing the activities myself, as compared to the others who needed help getting in or out of the pool, support in walking, etc. In addition, if my physio didn't come with me, it was often reported as to the benefits it was doing to me to minimize the effects of my disability. The therapeutic riding helped my balance and stability; disabled skiing helped my control and balance; and CP swimming helped my breathing. There were results to look for, to report, when and where did the fun begin in recreation?

I mean don't get me wrong, there were benefits that came out of all the activities, segregated or included. I learned new skills, met great people, and built friendship – and bonus, it helped my disability. And quite often in therapeutic session, such as my skiing or horseback riding, it was me and my volunteers, I was not meeting kids my own age. But none of the options quite fit and this was a deterrent for me, Yes, I went to my ski lessons every week, but it was not a fulfillment to me. I was more wondering who would be my cute ski instructors for the season!! ☺ Hence, recreation was not a huge priority for me because nothing seemed to fit.

It was not until when I was 19, that I began my “OWN” road to pursuing my recreation needs. I was persuaded by a friend in my first year of BCIT to attend a step class. Under heavy persuasion, I gave it a try. I stumbled all over my step, fell a few times, and was very discouraged. But for some reason, I kept on going back with my friend, because I wanted to hang out with Kathy, and it gave me something to do. I finally achieved the basic step and by then classes were out, which forced me to join a community centre for the summer. Now, 13 years later, the step terminology is like a second language to me, with dancey choreography and I come out of each class feeling accomplished, sweaty and stinky, challenged in mind, body and soul. It is not segregated, okay, it is segregated into all women, but after being in a gym for nine, I have built many quality friendships through other members and instructors. We have gone together for years and now with our knees and feet giving out, our knitting club will soon begin.

That was the start of my passion for recreation. It soon led me in new paths as for schooling and career wise. I have been employed in several organizations delivering recreation for people with disabilities, adaptive kayaking, adaptive skiing, hiking for people with disabilities, or disabled sailing. With all of these “segregated” programs, I was struggling inside – why do they need to make “special” programs for people with disabilities. Are we not that good to be part of the mainstream? After I achieved my undergrad in Recreation and tourism, I went on to pursue my Masters in Human Kinetics and I looked at this whole notion of inclusion.

The step aerobics was just the beginning of my path. It gave me the confidence to push my abilities even further as I enjoy the outdoors – on a kayak trip, hiking on the weekends, biking, etc. I started my first team activity three years ago, playing with the Vancouver Ultimate League. Two seasons ago, I succeeded in a full pass and receive of the Frisbee. It was exciting for me and my team. This was not an often occurrence for me, I can't throw, run as fast for defending, or catch. But after accepting my own abilities and limits, and not looking at my disability as a disadvantage, I realized that there is something more to a team sport that I loved - the new knowledge gained and the camaraderie of a team.

I will end with this story that sums up inclusive recreation the best for me. When I was working for Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, I took people of all abilities out on a regular basis. There was one person I will always remember fondly, Rebecca. Her mother told me that it is difficult to find an activity for her as she frequently squirms and does a temper tantrum (she is non verbal). However, they thought that she would like kayaking, and boy, did she ever. When I took her kayaking, she went often with her good friend Mark, and they would be singing praises, splashing each other, and often smiling with squealing. She really enjoyed kayaking, and her family recently moved away, bought their own kayak, and enjoys this activity with her family.

What I have discovered through my years of working in the recreation and my studies emphasized this, inclusion means different things to different people. It may not mean all abilities mixing together, or it may not mean people with disabilities together. However, what I understand inclusive recreation to be – if the benefits of recreation are received, whether it is meeting new people, learning a new skill, laughing and making noises, challenging the abilities, then recreation has succeeded its function. Through my own recreation pursuits, I have learned new skills, increased my social life, and challenged my own abilities. My first “real” recreation experience was my step class and it laid the foundation to how I participate in recreation, and how I view myself as a person with a disability. This is why the importance of enhancing the accessibility of recreation, is a crucial element to the development of all people with and without disabilities. It is vital to

offer both inclusive and segregated recreational activities to enhance the accessibility and to meet the diverse needs of people with disabilities.