

A Walk In The Park

This past weekend while enjoying a leisurely walk around Town Centre Park, my attention was drawn to the colorful international flags hung on the Coquitlam Tennis Club's fence on Pipeline Road. The curious sight of wheelchairs on tennis courts led me to discover that Coquitlam was host to handicapped athletes from around the world; paraplegics, one and two limb amputees, competing in the BC Wheelchair Tennis Festival as part of the national championship. This ballet on wheels was an inspiration.

Jerome Bouvier is the Tournament Director and is the Program Director of the PoCoMo Youth Services Society. 2007 marked the 10th Anniversary of the BC Wheelchair Tennis Festival in Coquitlam and attracts participants from across Canada, the US, South America, Europe and the Far East. Jerome points out that "it dispels the perception that people in wheelchairs are not capable of having a productive, active life."

Bouvier, a paraplegic himself, suffered a life threatening water-skiing accident at age 24, crushing his spine and leaving him paralyzed from the chest down. He brings a passionate enthusiasm to this wheelchair tennis festival and to his work as Program Director of the local Youth Services Society.

Bouvier is constantly looking for ways for young people to contribute and not just fill a token role on an advisory committee. "A recent survey of Grade six and seven students found as many as 80% of the kids didn't feel connected, had no sense of belonging, value or purpose. How have we alienated our young people so much? We can say they are our most valuable natural resource, but we don't act like it." Ten years ago he put out the word for young people to organize the BC Wheelchair Tennis Festival and was overwhelmed by the response. They do everything from recruiting volunteers, cooking and running the festival.

In tennis, this is a deuce (a win/win).

Jerome says, "the inspiration of seeing people with disabilities, competing, sends a quiet little message that says you can do anything you want to do if you put your mind to it. The kids get the satisfaction of making choice, of contributing to the success of an event involving 40 participants; a banquet, shopping, preparing food, everything except refereeing. They get the satisfaction of being able to run an international, professional tournament and the recognition of the players."

Its ironic that two stigmatized groups can come together to dispel pre-conceived impressions.

According to Jerome Bouvier, it's as easy as taking a walk in the park.

By Peter Slack
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