



# LADY OF THE LAKES

## *Vicki Keith Munro*

### *Now Resides Poolside*

*With Jeff Tiessen*

***Sisters Natalie and Jenna Lambert head off to swim practice together. A normal occurrence in many families, but something that is not always possible for families with children with physical disabilities. This was especially true for a region in eastern Ontario infamously known as the “Black Hole” because of its lack of sports opportunities for youth with disabilities. But that’s changing thanks to the Kingston Y Penguins; Y as in YMCA. Now Natalie and Jenna can train and compete together, and participate in an experience that helps them grow as sisters and friends.***

Founded by world renowned marathon swimmer Vicki Keith Munro, and named after her Y Knot Marathon – an 80-kilometer (50-mile) marathon swim event completed with her husband John Munro – the Y Knot Abilities Program was created to provide children with physical differences and disabilities a place to play, learn and explore the joys of a healthy active lifestyle.

Keith Munro is no stranger to challenges. She was described as an unlikely athlete, not apt to succeed in any sport. But she refused to accept the negative comments made about her abilities. Today, she is the most successful marathon swimmer in the history of the sport, holding an unprecedented sixteen world records. Her most recognized accomplishments include becoming the first person to swim across all five Great Lakes and for being the only person to complete the 104-km double crossing of Lake Ontario. Vicki shares stories of trials, tribulations and triumph in open water and on the pool deck as a coach and advocate for swimmers with a disability.

**Why is the Kingston Y Penguins program so important to you and the community?**

For the first time in many of their young lives these kids are free to explore and focus on their abilities, not their disability. That’s what our program is all about. The young people

participating have proven over and over again that nothing is impossible. When faced with a road block, or hurdle, our participants now know that they can overcome it. Where some people might see something as impossible, our participants are learning to see the possibilities. They are learning to strive and set goals. They are exploring their own limits, pushing beyond past expectations and taking on new challenges.

**What’s your biggest challenge as a coach of swimmers with disabilities?**

Attitude. I understood early in life that with a positive attitude and belief in yourself, you can follow your passion and be successful through sheer determination. We have kids come in that have been told they won’t be able to learn to swim, or family members with preconceived ideas that because they have a particular type of disability that they won’t be able to swim or float. It doesn’t take long to see that they can do it, and they see others doing it too. Kids see other kids with disabilities that are just like theirs and they help each other and teach each other.

**How does inclusion fit in with the mission of the Kingston Y Penguins program?**

Inclusion is incredibly important. But we can do it differently in different situations. Our thinking is to include family members. Give the kids a chance to learn a new skill without being self conscious, in a safe, secure environment.

**What was your motivation for creating this program?**

I loved working with young people with disabilities at Variety Village in Toronto. I saw kids with a disability stop seeing limitations. They will develop a great work ethic early. They set goals. They know what they want to achieve. And they work their butt off to get there. I really respect that. Kingston has been called the “Black Hole” for sport for kids with disabilities. In other words, nothing here. I realized that there

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are probably a lot of places with little or no opportunity for sports for kids with disabilities in Ontario. My husband and I agreed to move to Kingston and start our program. I started this program without a pool, then just one lane and now 40-some swimmers. There was a lot ahead of me. I knew I'd be able to do it. I love working with kids, I love to coach, but I'm not an organized person. I just did it with my heart. I want to expand this program to YMCAs all across Canada. I need this to happen. Every small community is a "Black Hole." We need these opportunities across the country.

### **Why did you choose to dedicate your second career, the first being a marathon swimmer, to kids with disabilities?**

I didn't start life destined to be a marathon swimmer. My life started as a young person who was kicked out of ballet, who was poor at every sport I participated in. I was always picked last for team sports. But I loved the YMCA. I hung out there all the time. My mother was always very determined to get us involved in volunteering. When I was 10 and volunteering at the Y in Ottawa, I was working with a young person with a disability in a pool class. I remember taking this young child into the pool. I observed that on land he needed his wheelchair, but in the water he moved independently. Water was his freedom. At 10 years old I understood how important water was for him.

### **Is it empathy that draws you to swimmers with disabilities?**

I think I can relate to these kids because I've faced challenges in my life. But I don't think I can compare my story of not being good at ballet with these kids' stories. I think I can understand, on some level, the challenges they face on a daily basis. I don't think any of us can completely understand what these kids go through. They walk through life every single day being different. I worked with a 13-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who had spent his entire life trying to look able-bodied. It took him a whole year to accept that he was different... that it was okay to be different.

### **What lessons have you carried over from marathon swimming to coaching?**

When I think of my marathon swimming career I faced a lot of challenges. I was told that a double crossing of Lake Ontario was impossible. But I'm most proud of the 80-km butterfly swim in Lake Ontario. Huge three-metre wave swells left the crew sick. I swam from three a.m. to six in the morning vomiting the whole time. But I couldn't let myself give up. Sunrise always made me feel better. I knew I could make the right decision about continuing or stopping then. The weather report was bad. We needed a new plan and came up with a solution how to finish the fundraiser for the Y Penguins a different way. I climbed into the boat with this lesson learned: never make life-altering decisions when you are at an emotional low. I learned a lot from all those swims that I can use to help young people apply to their lives. Number one: Why not try?

### **There are "Hockey Dads" and "Soccer Moms". What are your "Pool Parents" like?**

I find that no matter how parents react to a situation, they are always doing it with the right intentions. When I see a parent who is stepping in and really concerned about their child in the pool I try to understand where they are coming from as a parent with a child with special needs, or a child who hasn't fit in elsewhere. But I don't believe in putting limitations on abilities. What I do for them is show them that their child is safe, their child is happy, their child is welcome in this space, and their child will be provided challenges that are appropriate for them at that time. It's fun to watch those parents realize that it will be okay, and that they will achieve more than they realize or that they were told they would achieve. Parents are my greatest asset. They support and help each other.

### **How about a defining moment?**

Every child is an opportunity. There is a story for every kid in the pool. How it has given them independence, confidence and made them stronger. But the one that comes to mind didn't even happen in the pool. Two boys were walking back to the change room – one with crutches, one without – talking about hockey. There was no hesitation as the able-bodied boy held the door open. No awkward moment. No break in the conversation. Just two boys talking hockey after swim practice at the Y.



**PARASPORT ONTARIO MISSION:** *Providing support to all members of the disability community – regardless of age or stage in life – to find, connect with, and participate in competitive and recreational sport programs and activities of their choice to enhance physical function and quality of life.*