

Brock Webinar Encourages Conversations on Adaptive Sport

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By Colleen Patterson



Though she was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth, Jess Silver has never let the condition define her.

The Founder and Executive Director of Flex for Access Inc. pushed to train at a high-performance fitness level, and eventually developed and successfully achieved the goal of becoming an adaptive personal trainer.

Silver shared her story and adaptive training tips during a webinar Monday, Sept. 27 hosted by the Brock-Niagara Centre of Excellence in Inclusive and Adaptive Physical Activity.

A recording of the live presentation, “Creating a Shift in Social Awareness and Opportunity for Physical Fitness, Sport and Human Potential,” is now available on the Centre of Adaptive Physical Activity (CAPA) website.

“This webinar with Jess kicked off a monthly series of presentations CAPA is planning to offer this fall and winter,” says Centre Director and Physical Education Professor Maureen Connolly. “The work being done by Flex for Access

Jessica Silver, Founder and Executive Director of Flex for Access Inc., presented virtually to a group of Brock University students and community members Monday, Sept. 27.

to raise awareness of cerebral palsy, other disabilities and fitness and sport promotion aligns closely with our mission. This successful event was a positive step forward to further developing the relationship between our two entities.”

CAPA aims to promote and enhance awareness and development of inclusive and adaptive physical activity programming and to engage in research, scholarly activity and knowledge translation about inclusive and adaptive physical activity and its associated socio-cultural affordances and constraints.

“We all encounter and share adversity,” says Silver, a best-selling author, fitness enthusiast and advocate. “For some, that adversity manifests in more obvious ways and is apparent physically, for others it is apparent more in an intellectual or emotional manner, but we all experience different types of adversity and challenges and are shaped through and by it.”

More individuals who are disabled by the physical environment need to be given the opportunity to engage in training in a gym, Silver began a social media awareness campaign in 2015 that encouraged participants to post selfies of themselves flexing their muscles on Twitter and Instagram, tagged with #FlexforAccess. The campaign gained international attention, with athletes from Canada, Brazil, Israel and the U.S. joining in.

“One of the reasons why Jess and I connect is because we are both advocates for accessibility and adaptive personal training,” says Connolly. “The more we collaborated, the more I realized Flex for Access would make a great organizational placement for student experiential education opportunities at Brock.”

Flex for Access Inc. acts as a pathway for individuals who experience disability to engage in training sessions, yoga, boxing classes and other sport programs by facilitating the sessions and classes, and purchasing adaptive exercise equipment, like resistance bands, with funds raised through the non-profit organization.

“Speaking with the Brock community about how I envision societal perceptions of disability evolving was very exciting,” says Silver. “Often those with physical disability or limitations avoid exercise because it can be uncomfortable to engage with folks in the mainstream. Facing these obstacles have made me stronger and I hope to empower individuals to overcome their limitations and engage in conversations that encourage greater understanding.”

Connolly also points out, while some members of disability communities may be afraid to enter a gym, “simultaneously, many in the general public are simply not used to seeing disabled people occupying the same spaces as they do.”

“This can lead to comments that are meant to be thoughtful but in fact further marginalize these individuals,” she says.

“One solution,” Silver says, “is for more trainers to be educated in adaptive fitness.”

If gyms do not have in-house expertise, they can hire consultants like Silver, who are grounded in redefining the way people understand and engage in disability, she adds.

Silver’s webinar presentation aimed to amplify the conversations universities are having with respect to accessibility and disability, adaptive sport in the mainstream and how it challenges fitness and sport. She also focused on how Flex for Access Inc. started as a social media campaign and grew into a non-profit, future initiatives, being an adaptive personal trainer, and more.

A recording of the event is now available on the CAPA website.