



THE PRINCE OF PLAY

Archie Allison Rules the Court of Inclusion

By Jeff Tiessen

As a teenager, the idea of working with kids with disabilities was never part of Archie Allison's career plan. It took a fortuitous high school co-op placement, just across the parking lot from his Scarborough, Ont., school, to change that. Just one week in the company of the staff, students and participants at world-renowned Variety Village and he was hooked. He knew what he wanted to do with his working life.

Archie was instantly motivated by the infectious spirit of his future place of employment, its welcoming charm and character, the abilities of its participants and their tremendous desire to be involved and active. That was 26 years ago. Even as a teen, he explains, it was easy to see how Variety Village transcended stereotypes, prejudice and segregation. He was inspired.

The student became the teacher. And when it comes to inspiration, Archie has done more than his fair share of it for others. He has tirelessly pushed, pulled and challenged parents, kids and visiting students and educators alike, all in the name of play. Inclusive play that is, where all kids can join in sport and recreation activities with their peers regardless of ability. As a teenager, the idea of being inducted into the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame one day was never part of Archie Allison's career plan either.

P2P: You started at Variety Village as kind of an all-around sports and rec instructor-coach-counselor-mentor person. Today you are the Director of Access and Awareness at what many global activity leaders consider the best inclusive family-friendly fitness, sports and life skills facility in the world. How has your role changed at the Village over the years.

Archie: Honestly, it hasn't much. I'm still promoting opportunities for people of all abilities. Now I'm mostly doing that through education and outreach. I work with schools,

community groups and organizations and teach courses in adapted sports and disability issues at several local community colleges and the University of Toronto. Where I used to work more with our next generation of activity enthusiasts with disabilities, I'm now reaching out to our next generation of educators and sports and rec professionals.

P2P: You also oversee the facility's Cooperative Education and Ability in Action programs, right?

Archie: Yes, they're both really important programs here too. The Ability in Action program sees over 8,000 participants – students and teachers – come to Variety Village each year for an introduction to adaptive sport equipment and the importance of inclusion in play, recreation and sport. The program is open to students with and without disabilities, encouraging greater awareness of inclusive activities. But really, at the end of the day, we are promoting a sense of belonging for all.

P2P: At the heart of the matter it's all about inclusion, correct?

Archie: It is. We see a lot of kids who don't participate in physical activity often enough because they lack the confidence to join in, or feel they don't have the skill set to play, or who just are not aware of the opportunities that are out there for them. By introducing them to sports like wheelchair basketball, or goalball, or rock wall climbing, or synchronized swimming, or power wheelchair hockey, for example, we show them that it is possible to participate with their peers.

P2P: What's the overriding message for those who come to the Village as students or teachers... those without disabilities?

Archie: We try to impart upon them the understanding that everyone has a role in inclusion in our communities, be it at school, in community programs, or at home. Inclusive

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programming doesn't have to be that difficult. It is often a misperception of what inclusion means that holds people back, particularly those involved with coaching or programming. What happens here at the Village is that those students or teachers who get to know participants with special needs become more comfortable with the concept of inclusion. Like most things in life, it comes down to personal relationships that prove to be most effective in making changes, or making a difference in others' lives.

P2P: How about for those with disabilities?

Archie: It's so important for them to believe in themselves, and believe in their right to participate in inclusive sport and play opportunities. That always seems to be one of the key ingredients in the recipe for success.

P2P: How does Variety Village facilitate those ingredients?

Archie: We provide an atmosphere of belonging, of safety and security here, where families with children with disabilities who are here for the very first time immediately feel welcome and included. We bridge a gap for these families from limited opportunities to plenty of physical activity for their kids.

P2P: The Village doesn't discriminate against able-bodied people... your doors are open to all members of the Toronto community, and beyond. But clearly this facility made provisions for those with disabilities first... I think what some call "reverse integration"?

Archie: People get caught up in terminology. I look at what I do as providing an opportunity for everyone to play together and enjoy the benefits of inclusive activity. We all have varied skills and abilities and experience. When you create a venue that understands these differences it creates access for everyone. We have over 6,000 members here. The doors are open to all members of our community.

Even the word "disability" conjures certain profiles in the minds of most. When we ditch the terminology, and the accompanying labels, people are people. Really, we all want the same things. We all want to be welcomed and accepted. We all want to be included and be active and have fun.

P2P: Your favourite part of your job?

Archie: Hands-down it's hands-on... the practical application when I'm working on the floor with participants. It's really rewarding to see the confidence swell in people when they gain knowledge and understanding of how sport can include everyone – particularly when students or professionals understand how they can be an important part in inclusive programming in their communities. It's amazing to witness how audiences are captivated by our participants' personal

stories, totally inspired and motivated to share that message and advocate on behalf of people with disabilities.

P2P: How about frustrations?

Archie: Lack of funding inherent in sport and nonprofit organizations. It comes down to lack of education and awareness. I've seen dramatic changes since I began here in the mid-'80s. We've moved away from telethons to more mainstream media images of people with disabilities, but not enough. There are incredible educators or advocates in the disability community who have made significant differences – like Rick Hansen, Terry Fox, Jeff Adams, Tracey Ferguson, Adam Lancia and Chantal Petitclerc, for example.

P2P: It seems that it's always remarkable athletes from the disability community who are getting media recognition. What about lawyers or entertainers or professionals?

Archie: The athletes' message transcends sport. It carries over into other areas and levels of daily life like employment, transportation, or accessibility, for example. Things are definitely changing for the positive; I mean, look, the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, David Onley, is a person with a disability. Rick Hansen is another good example. Now 25 years after his Man in Motion tour, his 25th Anniversary Relay speaks to the power of one individual, and how one individual can affect so many communities and an entire country in fact.



P2P: *Let's talk about parents of kids with disabilities. Studies have shown that at times, these parents can prove to be one of the most handicapping conditions for special needs kids when it comes to taking risks, like getting involved in sport maybe. Is that your experience?*

Archie: Some parents of kids with disabilities may lack the education, resources and support that they need. But once those parents or guardians bear witness to the opportunities and resources that are out there, or other kids with disabilities who are thriving in physical activity, it changes everything. The parents become more motivated to be active and proactive and become better advocates for their kids and push those kids forward into inclusive opportunities.

P2P: *Advice to parents?*

Archie: Ask questions. There are no bad questions. Other parents are your greatest resource. Be open-minded. Allow yourself to look at things differently. Get to know what resources are available to you. Let your kids try. Try not to limit your expectations based on your own notions of what they can or can't do. Let them play. Let them experience or get exposed to a new sport. Be there. Stay and watch the great things that are happening. Talk to the coach or program leader about how you can be involved.

P2P: *How about for parents who don't have access to Variety Village?*

Archie: Call us. Ask us for advice. We have fielded calls from across Canada, across the U.S. and as far away as Japan. We have partners in other regions that we can direct parents to. Come visit us and take part in a program to learn more about how you can help your child in your community. Networking is key for both parent and child.

I've met so many kids who inspire me by doing things every day that I wish I could do. If there's one commonality between these kids, it is parents, or a parent, who have supported them all the way. But these parents started like any other parent of a child with a disability with a lack of resources or information. But they educated themselves, advocated for their kids and now are big fans.



P2P: *Is sport and recreation truly an aspect of life where "no one needs to be left behind"?*

Archie: I believe that any sport can be adapted. No one, regardless of level of disability, needs to be left on the sidelines. Too often parents or program leaders get stuck in the notion of the traditional way the sport is played. Kids just want to play and I believe any sport can be adapted so kids can play with their peers. It comes down to the willingness to try different activities. Sports like boccia and power wheelchair hockey can accommodate participants with varied abilities. It's important to remember that sport for kids is also about the chance to make friends and have fun. If there is an interest, there is an opportunity.

For more information visit www.varietyvillage.on.ca.



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.*