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MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2022



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## All Things Accessible & Adaptive in Niagara

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*Messages from  
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*Nothing for Us Without Us  
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# WELCOME

*"A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats."*

– John F. Kennedy

*It's an exciting time in the Niagara Region. It is a particularly exciting time for the region's disability community. As you pore over the pages in this issue, you'll see why. Indoors and out, inclusive and accessible places and spaces are more abundant than ever from Grimsby to Fort Erie.*

This issue is dedicated to sharing and celebrating Niagara's excellence, from its municipal leaders to its sports and recreation, and health and education pacesetters. As you'll see, from farms to fairways, trails to tracks, courts to canals, there is a wealth of opportunity in Niagara for play for everyBODY!



The Canada Summer Games legacy contribution to the region's residents with disabilities is already on display in the form of Canada Games Park and other venues. Yet, the Games' incorporation of accessibility as a priority pillar for the event may be even more significant.

I arrived in Niagara over 30 years ago to begin a career in the social service sector with the Ontario Brain Injury Association and finish one as I prepared for my third, and my last, Paralympic Games. And with the end of that 12-year athletic career came new places to play on Niagara's soccer fields and bike paths and waterways.

Now, I'm pleased to lead ParaSport Ontario's work in the Niagara region as its managing director of special projects. In partnership with the people and programs that are leading the way, the support of an Ontario Trillium Foundation GROW grant is helping us promote their work and the continued growth of adaptive sport and recreation for all.

Collectively, as you'll see in our Around the Region section in this issue, Niagara is establishing itself as a model region of inclusion with respect to adapted sport, recreation and physical activity. And that's something that ParaSport Ontario is very excited about sharing with other regions across the province to promote participation for everyBODY there too.

Jeff Tiessen  
Managing Director, ParaSport® Ontario

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# ParaSport® MAGAZINE

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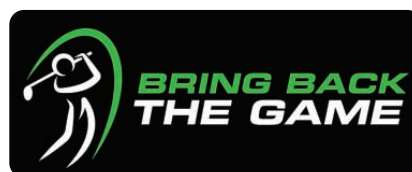


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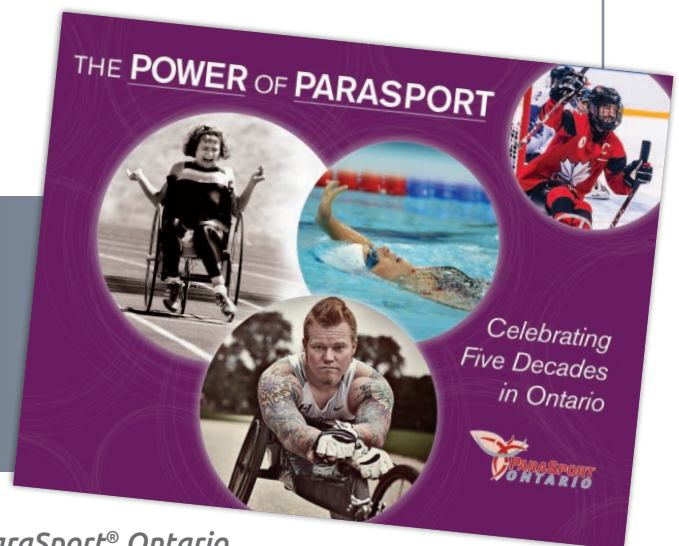
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*– Faye Blackwood, Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries*



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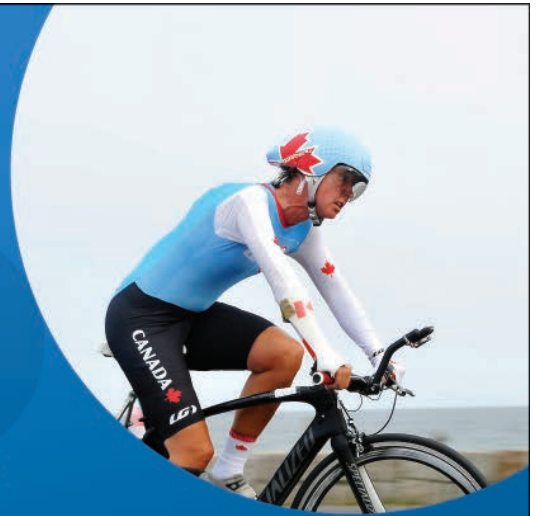
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## Meridian and ParaSport Ontario MOVE FOR A MILLION

**Earlier this year, ParaSport® Ontario welcomed Meridian as the organization's first Premier Partner. The credit union's sponsorship represents the largest single contribution to ParaSport Ontario in its history. And the partnership benefits the Meridian family as well.**

In August, ParaSport Ontario reciprocated by supporting Meridian with a significant contribution to the health and wellness of the corporation's employees and Members.

"ParaSport Ontario is all about wellness and physical activity for our members," says Jeff Tiessen, the organization's Managing Director of Special Projects. "We know that wellness is really important

to Meridian for its employees and Members too. We rely on volunteers and supporters, and Meridian celebrates volunteerism and community support."

In that spirit, together, Meridian and ParaSport Ontario created a fun, one-of-its-kind, month-long physical activity and fundraising event for Meridian's employees and Members and their friends and family too.

The Meridian Million Minutes Activity Challenge ([www.millionminutes.ca](http://www.millionminutes.ca)) invited the financial institution's employees and Members in branches across the province to take the Challenge to be more physically active throughout the month of August. "We're encouraging the Meridian family to run, walk, wheel,

skip, stretch, swim, cycle – you name it – their way to one million minutes of physical activity together!" shares Tiessen.

The Challenge is about community too. "It's about helping people with physical disabilities in their own communities to be more active as well by providing the adaptive sports equipment they need to do just that," Tiessen explains.

ParaSport Ontario does that through the Meridian Play to Podium Fund. "Participating in track and field for some athletes calls for more than a singlet, shorts and shoes," says Tiessen. "It means a \$3,500 racing wheelchair. For others, a \$5,000 sports wheelchair to play basketball or tennis, or a \$1,000 sledge set to play hockey."





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Tiessen adds that Meridian's support is not just measured on courts and tracks and rinks. "It's about inclusion and participation for all. It's about building community."

"ParaSport Ontario's commitment to communities, and its fundamental belief in its role in empowering members and community well-being, resonates loudly with Meridian," says Ian McCann, Manager, Community Investment & Partnerships at Meridian. "And we too look to develop

community programs and partnerships that engage, educate and empower!"

Whether you participated in the Meridian Million Minutes Activity Challenge or not, visit [www.millionminutes.ca](http://www.millionminutes.ca) for some fun activity ideas and fitness tips to get you motivated and on the move anytime.



## Meridian's First Fund Recipient

**The Meridian Play to Podium Fund** helps ParaSport Ontario support members of the disability community in playing their sport through adaptive sports equipment. For some, playing basketball comes with the need of a sports wheelchair. Playing hockey... a sled. Biking with friends... a handcycle. The Fund helps aspiring athletes with a disability "get in the game."

Meet the first recipient of adaptive sports equipment from the newly-branded Meridian Play to Podium Fund: Julian Caverley. Julian began playing wheelchair basketball at age 11 with the Brock Niagara Penguins. Recently, he found his passion on the ice. He joined ParaSport Ontario's new Niagara Sledge Hockey League.

From day one, despite needing help to move his sled around the ice, he knew that this was the sport for him. He practiced relentlessly. He came to every game. And by season's end, he could skate alongside his fellow teammates! He'll be rejoining his teammates in St. Catharines for his second season with the league.

"We're so pleased to be the title sponsor of the Meridian Play to Podium Fund," said Wade Stayzer, Meridian's Chief People & Culture Officer, in his presentation of an ice sled to Julian. "The Fund is for Ontarians with physical disabilities who want to be active, or play a sport, but need adaptive sports equipment to do that. This is why I am proud to present Julian with his very own sled as the first recipient of the Meridian Play to Podium Fund."



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## THE TOWN OF LINCOLN

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The Town is committed to promoting and facilitating a barrier-free municipality for citizens of all abilities, including persons with disabilities.

Together with Council, the Town's Joint Accessibility Advisory Committee shares a commitment to facilitate the identification and removal of barriers to people with disabilities, promoting equal opportunities to citizens of all abilities.



## DIVERSITY EQUITY INCLUSION



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Photo by Jack White, Elite Virtual Photography



Empire Sportsplex Grand Opening at WIFC © Anthony Gallaccio

# EMPIRE SPORTSPLEX LEV

*By Dave Johnson, Tribune Reporter*

**Empire Communities sees a responsibility to build up municipalities outside of the borders of its developments, says Mark Tutton, Empire’s president of Low Rise.**

“This is just the sort of thing that can happen. We make every community we build in better and slowly, piece by piece, make the world a better place,” he said. He made the comments before the official opening of the new Empire Sportsplex in July.

The sprawling sportsplex, adjacent to the Welland International Flatwater Centre, is home to multiple courts that can host pickleball, tennis, basketball, volleyball and more.

It’s also home to inclusive courts built by Canadian Tire Jumpstart and Empire, which can host a variety of sports for people of all abilities.

“I haven’t seen anything like this anywhere else,” said Tutton. “There’s nothing on a scale like this, and open to as wide a number of users. This is a first for us,” said the housing developer who has built golf courses and community amenities throughout his career.

“This city [Welland] had a desire to put this facility in place. They asked us to devote some of our parkland contribution to this effort, and we happily agreed.” Tutton said, that while built for Welland residents, he can see broader use of the facility because of some of the built-in aspects, such as the accessible courts.

Scott Fraser, president of Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities, said one of the organization’s big



# Carrying the Torch for Para-Athletes

The way Marilyn Abbs sees it, being a torchbearer for the 2022 Canada Summer Games held in Niagara was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that she simply couldn't pass up.

The para-athlete, who belongs to the Brock Niagara Penguins parasport club and the South Niagara Canoe Club, was one of 10 people chosen to carry the Games' torch in Fort Erie. And she relished every moment of it.

"It is a huge honour representing the town, the region and the Canada Games coming to our little part of the world," the Stevensville resident said. "I can't be more proud." A similar sentiment was echoed by others with disabilities who carried the torch in their municipality as well.

Elizabeth Grimmond, a member of the Summer Games board, said the flame was lit in Ottawa and its arrival via ship down the St. Lawrence Seaway is the culmination of years of work for Niagara to win the right to host the Games. She had a message for the torchbearers gathered together: "Cherish the moment with the Canada Games torch."

*As reported by Niagara journalist Paul Forsyth, Fort Erie Post.*



## ELS THE PLAYING FIELDS

pushes since being founded in 2005 is inclusive play. "When we found out about this opportunity here, we realized what a great opportunity it would be for us to provide additional resources for children," said Fraser. "To have accessible areas to play basketball and tennis and use the court spaces in whatever way they could."

"We want to promote the importance of getting out and staying active. Every child deserves a chance, and great things can happen if they get that opportunity," said Fraser.

Jeff Tiessen, Managing Director

at ParaSport Ontario, said the importance of the inclusive courts is that they were not an afterthought. "It was built as part of the design, with everyone in mind. That's design and desire. That comes with the feeling of belonging and community," said Tiessen, a three-time Paralympian.

Tiessen and his team of more than a dozen staff and para-athlete ambassadors were on hand at the facility's Grand Opening to showcase five different parasports throughout the day, including wheelchair basketball, wheelchair

tennis, boccia, sitting volleyball and sledge hockey. "People with disabilities want to be active too, and the Empire Sportsplex is a welcoming place to make that happen."

Rob Axiak, Welland's director of community services, agreed, emphasizing that the Sportsplex will bring the community together. "The accessible and inclusive aspect will be a regional draw for people with varying interests and abilities."





# CANADA SUMMER GAMES



## NIAGARA 2022 *Sets New Standard in Games Accessibility*

Photos courtesy Canada Summer Games

*In its presentation to win the bid to host the Niagara 2021 Canada Summer Games (rescheduled to 2022), Niagara's committee pitched four initiatives – legacy, sustainability, Indigenous inclusivity and accessibility. And with accessibility as a priority, it may make for a new trend in provincial and national sporting events in Canada.*

While the Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games program includes only three sports for athletes with physical (parasports) and intellectual (Special Olympics) disabilities – athletics, swimming and sailing for para-athletes only – these games are the only multi-sport event in the world that has Special Olympics, parasports and able-bodied athletes competing at the same time at the same venue.

Considered Canada's largest multi-sport event, the Canada Games has included athletes with disabilities since 1993. Over the better part of

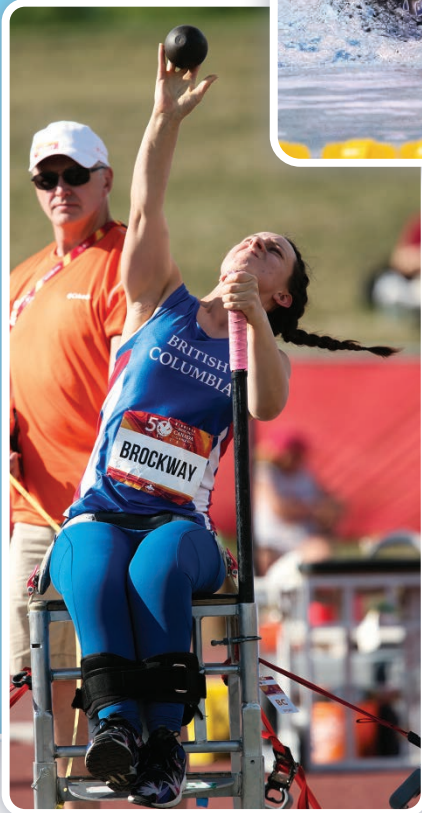
the last 30 years, both parasport and Special Olympics athletes have competed in select sports in both the Summer and Winter Games. The Canada Winter Games program includes wheelchair basketball, para-nordic, para-alpine, and figure skating for Special Olympics athletes.

The emphasis on accessibility as one of the Games' four pillars extends beyond the sports program however. "We needed to make sure all of our venues are accessible for all athletes," stated Karen Natho, Niagara 2022 Board member and former executive

director of the Brock Niagara Penguins parasport club.

"We wanted to make sure athletes with physical and intellectual disabilities had every opportunity to go to every sports and social event to cheer on their team and participate in all that was happening," she explained. "We needed to think about everyone who requires accommodations coming to Niagara to participate in all aspects of the Games."

But not just physical accessibility. "I'm talking about alternative formats for information, signage, website



design and transportation too," Natho emphasized. "We've made the Games more AODA (Accessibility Ontario Disability Act) compliant in the long run." And not just for athletes. "The Niagara community – our visitors and spectators – has accessibility needs as well," she added.

To support its mission of accessibility, the Niagara 2022 Host Society welcomed Accenture as the Official Diversity and Inclusion Partner in 2021. Accenture supported the Games in creating a welcoming environment for all, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, gender expression, age or disability.

"Sport is one of the most powerful vehicles to cultivate change in the

community and our larger society because it teaches us to respect and value one another," said Rachel Stuchberry, a managing director at Accenture in Niagara. "By partnering with the Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games, we're supporting an environment where everyone can be their authentic selves and where we will also celebrate our diversity in Canada."

Natho is working with Games Accessibility Committee chair Jane Arkell, a Grimsby native with a rich history of working with people with

disabilities as executive director for the Active Living Alliance for Canadians Living with a Disability. Arkell put together a team of individuals with lived experience and expertise in the disability community to be advisors at each venue and event.

"When everybody leaves, [we want to ensure] Niagara is... truly a better place for people with disabilities to live, learn and play in," Arkell shared. "This is the first Games where the whole area of inclusivity was on the agenda in a big way. Niagara 2022 will set a new standard in accessibility."

*Adapted from a report by Bill Potrecz.*

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# Message from the Mayor on *Physical Activity and Accessibility*

*ParaSport® Ontario's Managing Director of Special Projects, Jeff Tiessen, had the privilege to meet with Niagara Region Mayors to talk about adapted and inclusive sport and recreation, and accessibility, in each of the 12 Niagara Municipalities.*

## Welland Mayor **FRANK CAMPION**

*“Activity is good for me and good for the community. I like to walk and kayak – we have a recreational canal here. I am a scuba diver and I do a bit of weight training.*”

Welland's Merritt Island has a long stretch of pathway in a naturalized area, a great place to wheel and walk for people of all abilities. Along the recreational canal, walkways are very accessible. And of course, now our fully accessible multi-use Empire Sportsplex with volleyball, pickleball, tennis and boccia courts and the Jumpstart basketball area. It's right next to the Flatwater Centre, which has an adaptive kayak and canoe program. We are an inclusive community here. We want everyone to be able to participate in physical activity. Kayaking, swimming and even scuba diving... Mother Nature is inspiring here in Welland.”



## Grimsby Mayor **JEFF JORDAN**

*“The Town of Grimsby is committed to creating an inclusive, accessible, barrier-free environment.*”



Photo by Metroland

We were so pleased to be part of an exciting venture this past winter in bringing inclusive sport to our community.

We are so proud of our Grimsby Sledge Hockey Team that is part of the Niagara Sledge Hockey League. Hockey is truly a sport for everyone, and the Town of Grimsby made sure that hockey in our community included players with disabilities. We had the 'where can I play' solution for this first-of-its-kind community sledge hockey league right here in Niagara.

Another great place to play is our Southward Park, a fully accessible complex for sports, leisure, and community activities. You'll find a lot of accessible features there, a walking path, playground, multiple sports fields and three boccia/bocce courts for all to enjoy.”



## Lincoln Mayor **SANDRA EASTON**

"I live on a farm and there's always quite a lot of work to do. We prepare wood for the winter. Splitting and stacking wood is a lot of physical activity, and a good family activity. And being on the Bruce Trail, there is no shortage of trails for us to hike.

For physical activity for those in Lincoln I recommend Kinsmen Park because it has a nice flat access. All the trails are asphalt and quite extensive. Nearby, Louis Park is very accessible, with surfaces that are ideal for wheelchair users. The swings are modified for children with disabilities to enjoy too. The splash pads are great for kids who use wheelchairs. Rotary Park has gone through massive upgrades as well. And we can't forget Charles Daley Park, with two great beaches there that are accessible.

*I think it's so important for communities to keep up with providing possibilities for everyone. Our town motto is Grow, Prosper, and Belong, and that means everybody."*

## Pelham Mayor **MARVIN JUNKIN**

"Living in the country, my wife and I do a lot of walking. That's our primary mode of exercise. I used to play a lot of hockey. In my youth I did distance running, probably 100 kilometres a week. A big part of being physically active is to find something you like. You don't have to be good at it, as long as you like it. That'll keep you going.

Here in Pelham, we're really proud of at least two great accessible venues for walking or wheeling. The Steve Bauer Trail is now paved. It's a beautiful natural path. And the Meridian Centre in Fonthill has a second-floor walking track accessible by elevator.

*In this age of inclusivity we're listening to what our disability community wants and needs. We're taking steps but have a lot further to go. Let's work together as a team and get out there and participate. Have the courage to start and the heart to finish."*





## Thorold Mayor **TERRY UGOLINI**

"I'm a big sports guy. My wife and I walk a lot but cycling is a big passion of mine. I like riding out on the country roads. The Niagara Circle Route runs through Thorold and has a multi-use path that is excellent for cycling too.

The Lake Gibson Conservation Park has a lot of excellent paths. It's an outdoor experience that is really popular. And a big one for accessible sports and recreation is the Canada Games Park facility at Brock University. We're really excited about that.

Our role as community leaders is to lead by example. The City of Thorold's priority is being diverse, inclusive, and a welcoming community, free of discrimination. We are a member of the Coalition of Inclusive Communities.

***Let's come together as a community. Find an activity that interests you and pursue it, and if it's more than one activity, all the better. We're committed here in Thorold to promote an active lifestyle, and make sure that our facilities and outdoor amenities are inclusive."***

## Port Colborne Mayor **BILL STEELE**

*"I try to keep as fit as possible, especially as I age. I play in a hockey league for older guys like me. It's great exercise and a lot of fun."*

Port Colborne has been fortunate over the past number of years as Council has taken efforts to make our trails and parks more inclusive – we're always trying to be better at the things we do. One of the biggest initiatives was at Nickel Beach where we now have beach mats so wheelchair users can access the beach and an adaptive beach chair for water use. Our parks, especially Lakeview Park, have beautiful trails for walking or wheeling. There's workout equipment there too that is accessible for people with a disability. Sunset Park has accessible playground equipment. And we're home to the Niagara Thunderblades sledge hockey team.

That's how we as a community move forward... areas for everyone to use, to be inclusive. Our staff really works hard at this. Get out there. Get active. Let's play together. No one should sit on the sideline because of their disability."





## West Lincoln Mayor **DAVE BYLSMA**

*“There’s no doubt about it. Activity is so vital to good health. I’m an old school guy and put a lot of stock in staying active. In the winter I enjoy skiing, skating, and hockey. With my family, we like to hike sections of the Bruce Trail. I also enjoy camping and canoe trips.*”

West Lincoln is a small municipality but we are trying to incorporate more accessibility as our community grows. We have an extensive network of trails that is accessible for those with physical disabilities. The new West Lincoln Community Centre is fully accessible, including the rink for sledge hockey. It has a track around the arena and a beautiful connector trail around the outside. We’ve tried to make this facility a place for full enjoyment for every member of the community.

Part of good mental and physical health is doing activities together. That’s very important in our municipality. We want no obstacles for people to walk or run together, and enjoy sports together. Accessibility is paramount for us and our Council.”

## St. Catharines Mayor **WALTER SENDZIK**

“I am a runner and have been running now for I think 18 years and my favourite trail is 12-Mile Creek. It gives me a lot of opportunity to be around nature, forest and water. I find that running, for myself, is a really good mental and physical experience.

Another scenic trail is the Welland Canal Trail. There have been upgrades to that trail and it has a lot of flat spaces. We just invested in the resurfacing of the Burgoyne Woods Trail in the heart of St. Catharines. It’s a naturalized area of the city with a loop inside the park that is being completely paved. It is accessible for everybody. We continue to invest in accessibility in our parks. Rennie Park is another example of that. Our Accessibility Committee pushes us as a community to create surfaces and spaces that are for all abilities.

*I want those in our community who have accessibility issues to see their mayor championing that we are an inclusive community. My goal with Council is to look at what inclusivity means as well as what diversity means, and not just see our community through our own lens. We want to look at it through the disability community’s lens. That’s how we’ll know what an inclusive community that is accessible for all looks like.”*





## Wainfleet Mayor **KEVIN GIBSON**

"I strive to stay physically active. I've been involved in sports all my life. Now in my 60s, my physical activity is often a walk around the block... which is seven kilometres where I live.

For people in Wainfleet with disabilities, our offerings are more limited because we are a rural community. We have a well-known trail called the Gord Harry Trail. It's mostly gravel, and it's quite flat. It is one of our main recreational areas. We also have horseback riding. I know that there are a few programs for people with disabilities to ride along the lakeshore.

*My sister has a disability, so I understand some challenges associated with a disability first-hand. I was on the Security Planning Team with the RCMP for the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, which included the Paralympic Games. That's where I was introduced to sledge hockey and was thrilled with it. Now I represent every person living in Wainfleet regardless of physical characteristics. It's important that we all get active no matter what."*



## Niagara-on-the-Lake Mayor **BETTY DISERO**

*"I love biking. My husband and I ride our bikes to enjoy some of the great spaces in Niagara-on-the-Lake. We like walking too."*

Many of our trails along the Niagara River Parkway between the Old Town and Queenston are paved and accessible for everyone. We really want to make this town the most inclusive and we're doing that with a wellness program. It's directed by a Wellness and Inclusivity committee. It's really important to make everyone feel welcome, and to remove any obstacles to being healthy. The committee's recommendations are brought to Council and built into our strategic plans. It is not an add-on. It is a part of who we are.

Come on out and feed your spirit. Being active and getting your body moving is a great way to feed your heart, mind and soul. Feed your spirit in Niagara-on-the-Lake. As for accessibility, we are not perfect yet, but we will get there."



## Fort Erie Mayor **WAYNE REDEKOP**

“When my daughter and I are running marathons and we are getting to the end, what we hear so often is: ‘You Can Do It!’ Sometimes people just need a little bit of encouragement. We talk about how people take good health for granted until they don’t have good health. It’s the same thing with just about everything else, including recognizing the challenges being met by people who have a disability.”

*We have a very active Accessibility Advisory committee. We take the right of everyone to be able to participate in the community very seriously. It’s really important for us to encourage those with disabilities to be active. We pride ourselves on our facilities being accessible to everyone. We have the Recreation Trail, which runs all the way from Port Colborne in the west to the Peace Bridge, and we have the Niagara Parks Trail. Those are great spaces for everyone. Bay Beach is accessible. We want everyone to be included in the life of the community to the fullest extent possible.”*



## Niagara Falls Mayor **JIM DIODATI**

*“I try to do a minimum of ten thousand steps each day. I always take the stairs when I can, rather than an escalator or elevator. I like to cut my grass. I like to do physical stuff like shovelling the driveway in the winter.”*

So how do you become more active? One activity, one step, one whatever at a time. You don’t want to be overwhelmed with it. Start with little goals and a bunch of little goals makes up a big goal. And you’ll get there, we’ll all get there together. I’ve had a trampoline in the backyard for a lot of years. I absolutely love the idea of just having fun and if that means trampolining, so be it. I had cancer a couple of years ago – Hodgkin’s lymphoma – and I was told that bouncing is good for our lymphatic system. So, I try to get on it as much as I can. My neighbours probably think I’m crazy.

*One of the things that I focussed on when I first ran for mayor 12 years ago was our trails and their accessibility.*

With new sections, we pave them for accessibility. There are benches to take a rest, and shaded areas. From bike lanes to accessible playgrounds, we are always trying to be more accessible for all levels of ability. And our Accessibility Committee is great with bringing good ideas forward. We’re always listening for ways that we can make the City of Niagara Falls better.”

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# Brock Niagara PENGUINS

*After graduating with the same diploma from Niagara College's Educational Assistant program, Jim and Loretta Davis both struggled to find work in their field. The twenty-somethings also struggled to find opportunities to be physically active. That was 17 years ago, about the same time that a fledgling sports club for athletes with disabilities was founded in Niagara.*

That club, the Brock Niagara Penguins, was quick to support Jim and Loretta's interest in getting out and getting active with a wheelchair basketball program. Today, the couple are club leaders applying their education to Penguins programming.

Loretta and Jim, now 41 and 43 years old respectively, have translated their love for wheelchair basketball, sitting volleyball, boccia and handcycling into coaching and

instructor positions with the Penguins – both are NCCP-certified (National Certified Coaching Program) boccia coaches and Jim, its handcycling instructor, and basketball and Volt hockey coach.

The Brock Niagara Penguins are a multi-sport parasport club, serving up more than half a dozen adaptive sport programs for Niagara's disability community.

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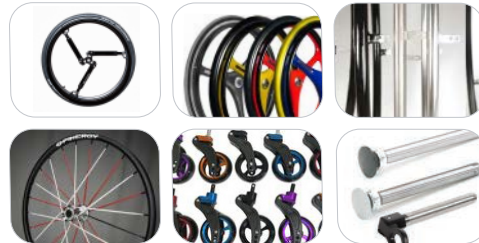
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for youth and adults with physical disabilities in a recreational setting,” explains Jim. “I started playing wheelchair basketball back in 2006. I wasn’t that good, but I really enjoyed the sport. I thought, ‘well, I’d be a much better coach than a player and that’s how I got into coaching,” he chuckles.

What he enjoys most is watching kids try different sports and find one that they really love, and might even excel at one day. “Over the last couple of years some of our athletes have shown that they might

be able to compete at an elite level. Watching them grow as people, from being a little shy to becoming leaders, is really rewarding.”

“The social aspect of our club helps our members increase their independence as well,” adds Loretta. “We hope we serve as role models for them and encourage our athletes to be independent in the community as well.”

The club, once solely founded on recreation, has grown to support its athletes on whatever their parasport pathways may be. “We still want

everybody to be able to participate, but we’re not shying away from supporting elite-level athletes,” shares Jim. “We’re here to help athletes become what they want to become. We’re open to anyone, of any ability... including someone who is able-bodied and wants to play with us too.”

And with all Penguins programs, the equipment is provided to athletes. “We don’t want a financial barrier for our athletes,” Loretta emphasizes. “Especially if someone just wants to try out a sport.”

## Penguin Programs



**Swimming...** The Penguins began as a swim program for kids. Founded by St. Catharines’s Karen Natho, it was inspired by legendary marathon swimmer Vicki Keith-Munro’s Kingston Y Penguins. The Niagara Penguins aquatic program is designed for swimmers ages 6+, and offers recreational and competitive opportunities at Brock University’s Aquatic Centre in St. Catharines. The recreational program develops basic swim skills such as floating, treading water, swim strokes, and diving. The competitive side is for athletes looking to further develop their swimming skills in a more structured program, with individualized instruction for stroke technique to ready them for competition.

**Wheelchair Basketball...** Six months after the launch of the swim program, Jim and Loretta arrived on the scene after seeing wheelchair basketball being played. Through a Ronald McDonald House Charities donation for sports wheelchairs, a new sport stream for Niagara athletes was in play. The Brock Niagara Penguins Wheelchair Basketball program is offered at Brock’s Walker Sports Complex in St. Catharines.

It’s divided into three divisions. Penguins House League is the recreational division open to individuals 10+ who are interested in getting physically active and looking for the social aspect associated with being on a team. Division 2 is the adult competitive league, open to players 16+, focused on developing skills and gaining more elite-level experience in the sport. Division 3 is a competitive league as well, open to youth under 16. The competitive and recreational teams can be mixed at times depending on the number of athletes participating and available gym time.



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**Boccia...** Next up, some years later, came bocce. “We originally started it as a recreational program for kids with more severe disabilities who couldn’t participate in other programs,” Jim explains. Loretta took on the coaching with help from the Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sports Association which is the provincial governing body for bocce.

The Penguins now offer recreational and competitive programs with ages 6+ and 10+ leagues respectively. Boccia is a sitting, but not stationary, target ball-toss sport played indoors on a court... an increasingly popular parasport at that. Each session focuses on physical fitness and skill progression, with an opportunity to grow socially and individually, and push towards healthy lifestyle choices and finding fun in sport.

**Handcycling and Wheelchair Racing...** Then came the handcycling and wheelchair racing programs, when the Penguins assumed the cycling program from the Niagara-based Shelley Gautier Para-Sport Foundation. “We felt the need for Shelley’s work to continue in the Niagara community,” Jim says. “What a great opportunity for athletes to get out on a bike.”

The handcycling program is open to those 13+ and takes place at the Haig Bowl Arena in St. Catharines. Handcycling is a great way to improve cardiovascular health and increase upper-body strength. During the spring months, the class rides outdoor trails. For the winter months, the Penguins offer indoor handcycling like a spin class where an instructor leads a program at a variety of intensities.

As for wheelchair racing, it was a great addition to the Penguins’ programming particularly for youth in high school wanting to race in track events. It’s held at the Niagara Olympic Club track in St. Catharines. It’s a team environment, with athletes propelling a high-performance racing wheelchair for speed and endurance, and competition.



## Sitting Volleyball...

Sitting volleyball was introduced as a grassroots initiative that has produced competitive players. The Brock Niagara Penguins sitting volleyball league takes place at the Port Weller Community Centre and is open to ages 8+. With a lowered net, it’s a fast-paced game but geared to players of all abilities.





**Para Ice Hockey...** Most recently the Penguins started managing the Ontario Sledge Hockey Association's Port Colborne-based Niagara Thunderblades. Now a Penguins program, athletes range in ability from newcomer to provincial and national team athletes. "One reason we were so excited to take on this team is because it used to be 'you either play sledge hockey or basketball, but not both,'" Jim tells. "That's ridiculous. We want people to know that they can play both. There is no reason why you can't. Our goal is to get as many people as active as possible."



Over the years, ParaSport® Ontario has provided the Penguins with adaptive sport equipment. "The racing wheelchair and basketball chair have helped our teams grow," says Loretta. "And we always need more equipment. Partnering with ParaSport Ontario for events like the recent Grand Opening of Welland's Empire Sportsplex and the Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games is really beneficial for promoting Penguins programs."

"That has always been our passion," explains Jim. "To spread the word about parasports and how much of a difference it can make in someone's life. It's not just the fun of playing but the social aspect, mental health, confidence level... there's a lot more to it for us than just playing the sport. We encourage people with disabilities to be active for life."

*For more information, contact Jim or Loretta at [bnpenguins@gmail.com](mailto:bnpenguins@gmail.com).*

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# Giving It a Whirl

**SHELLEY  
GILBERT**  
*is Always  
Ready to Try*

By Jeff Tiessen

*When Shelley Gilbert says she doesn't necessarily want to try ParaGolf but would like to go to a driving range and hit some balls, she's stretching to find something new to do. And when she says she'd be interested in trying wheelchair curling in the winter, it's the same story.*

*"I'll give it a whirl," she likes to say. But it's not that Gilbert is searching for a new parasport for something to do. It's that she has played so many that it's hard to find one that she hasn't done.*

Her favourite sport? It's a toss-up between sitting volleyball and sledge hockey. It's so hard for her to choose though. She's loves kayaking in the summer too. "Definitely sledge hockey in the winter," Gilbert says. "But I like indoor handcycling too." She dabbled in wheelchair basketball and wheelchair tennis as well. "Not my favourites," she confirms.

Gilbert's parasport foray began with the Brock Niagara Penguins in 2016. She was in her forties and had been into sports all her life... just not the adapted variety. She has spina bifida and about ten years ago her neurologist emphasized how important it was for her to remain active. At that time she was mobile with leg braces and canes. Then she had a knee replacement, and subsequently the nerves on the base of her spine began getting weaker, which caused problems in her legs. "The neurologist told me that if I don't keep active I might need a wheelchair permanently," she tells. "So, I do whatever I can to stay active."

Gilbert uses a wheelchair for convenience for certain things today, but with the news ten years ago she quickly found the Wellness Centre gym at Brock University (now known as Power Cord), offering fitness programs for people with disabilities. And she discovered handcycling with the Shelley Gautier Foundation. And when the Penguins assumed that program, more parasport introductions ensued.

"I was involved with Power Cord for five or six years before COVID," Gilbert says. "It's a gym supported by Brock students who help you on the machines and create fitness programs for you. The gym is totally accessible and there are knowledgeable people to set your programs for you. Everyone there has some sort of disability, so no one is staring at you."

And then she heard about the sledge hockey team in Port Colborne with Christina Picton, a member of the National Women's Para Ice

Hockey Team and now a Paralympic Nordic skier. Gilbert did that for a couple of years before hearing about para-kayaking at the South Niagara Canoe Club. "I always like to try something new. I heard about it and thought I'd give it a whirl."

She was the first para-kayaker, alongside her Fort Erie friend Marilyn Abbs, in the para program. So who was teaching who in the beginning? "They didn't know what we needed, like holding the boat when we got in," Gilbert explains. "I needed support sponges in the boat to stabilize my legs, but we figured it out together." There was no manual for first-time para-coach KC Fraser, an Olympic Kayaker. "I started with the stabilizers," shares Gilbert, "but KC told me at some point I had to take them off."

Gilbert participates in local races but for her, para-kayak is mostly recreational. Her physical activity is contributing to better independence. "I'm always doing things. I wasn't necessarily an athlete when I was young but I did a lot of sports. I can't ice skate anymore, but I love sledge hockey."

Her positive spirit, and energy, carries over into her community as well. Gilbert sits on three boards: a Soup Kitchen committee through the Saint Vincent DePaul Society, the Niagara Independent Living Centre and the Accessibility Committee for the Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games. With the latter, she's a co-lead at the Flatwater Centre for the games, making sure everything from washrooms to parking to seating is accessible for spectators with disabilities.



About the Niagara 2022 games, Gilbert says: "It's a learning curve for everybody. Maybe if people knew more about the parasports on the program there'd be more interest. There are only three parasports included I know... but still, on social media it's all about the 'regular' sports. There's not much about para-athletics, swimming or sailing."

What's next for Gilbert? "I'd like to try some different sports. But for me now, it's about getting the word out about parasports for others. People have to understand that parasport is not just for people with disabilities. Anybody can play. Someone might not be able to skate anymore; sledge hockey is a great sport. For someone with arthritis, sitting volleyball is more ideal than standing volleyball. And then there's family and friends who can play too."

Final words of advice? Gilbert says, find a sport or activity that you really enjoy. Try as many different sports as you can. You might find several that you really like. "I'm in my early 50s," she shares, "and you're never too old. At my age, I'm not trying to make a national team. I'm just going out to have fun and enjoy myself. And make amazing new friends. Give it a whirl."

# Around the REGION



Photo by spiritglobe.net

*The Niagara Region, with its extensive trail system, is a gem for accessing natural beauty. With so many accessible pathways, the Niagara Parks Commission lives up to its commitment to providing persons with disabilities the same opportunity – or reasonable alternatives at least – to access and benefit from its services in the same places and in similar ways as other visitors.*

The Niagara River Recreational Trail and the Friendship Trail are great paths for walking, wheeling, strolling or cycling. A 56-km route, the Niagara River Recreational Trail extends along the Niagara Parkway, parallel to the Niagara River from Fort Erie, past the Horseshoe Falls, to Fort George in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Along the way, you'll be treated to historic sites, wineries and restaurants, local fruit stands and the breathtaking scenery.

The Friendship Trail is also a multi-use recreational path, connecting Port Colborne with Fort Erie. Its 24 kilometres are straight with virtually no elevation change.

# Happy TRAILS

The route parallels the north shore of Lake Erie as it passes through farmland, villages, and quiet residential areas. This trail provides access to golden beaches as well.

Niagara Parks venues that are accessible to persons with mobility disabilities include Table Rock Centre, Niagara's Fury, Butterfly Conservatory, Journey Behind the Falls, White Water Walk, Niagara City Cruises, and the Floral Showhouse, with numerous accommodations in place to ensure a great experience for all.



## Here **WEGO**

Niagara Parks offers accessible transportation through the WEGO system. All WEGO vehicles provide an audible and visual announcement of the next stop. Drivers will aid with boarding and safety upon request. Service animals are allowed of course. Passengers with disabilities can board and disembark vehicles at the closest available location where the official stop is not accessible. *For questions email [accessibility@niagaraparks.com](mailto:accessibility@niagaraparks.com).*

## Grimsby's Southward Park **HITS THE TARGET**

Southward Park, located in Grimsby, is a fully-accessible park for sports, leisure, and community activities. The park features a variety of amenities, including a community building, walking path, leash-free dog area, a playground, and multiple sports fields. This wonderful facility can house numerous sports including baseball on one of its four diamonds, soccer with five full-sized fields, and boccia/bocce on any one of its three universally-designed courts. With an emphasis on accessibility, Southward Park is a facility that is worth the visit!





# Olympic Club

The Niagara Olympic Club (NOC) brings together track and field athletes in the region, regardless of ability, to experience the love of running and a higher level of fitness and competition. NOC athletes participate year-round with two or more practices each week. From December through March, athletes train on indoor tracks at Ridley College and McMaster University. Otherwise, home-base is the outdoor facility at West Park Secondary School in St. Catharines, with training in Short Hills Provincial Park and Fireman's Park in Niagara Falls too.

NOC athletes have access to long and triple jump, high jump, javelin runways and shot put/hammer as well. *To learn more, contact Sharon Stewart at [sharon.noc@outlook.com](mailto:sharon.noc@outlook.com) or call (905) 933-2762.*



# YOGA CENTRE OF NIAGARA

When Laurie-Anne Lamothe purchased the Yoga Centre of Niagara a half dozen years ago or so, her vision for the space was a place for everybody. As its visionary she turned the Centre into an inclusive wellness space. Lamothe is a life coach, inspirational speaker, workshop facilitator, Reiki master, and yoga teacher.

Her Thorold facility is wheelchair and walker friendly. The cushioned studio flooring gives her members an extra layer of support for parts of their bodies that need a little more love.

Education is very important to Lamothe. She has studied inclusivity and specialized anatomy programs and brings that knowledge and sensitivity to her accessible studio. "Our classes are adaptable for those with physical disabilities, and can have multiple variations to accommodate many different limitations including arthritis and chronic pain."

An avid supporter of the LGBTQIA+ community, Lamothe also notes that those experiencing mental health issues are supported at her Centre. "We assume we're broken and need to be fixed; yoga assumes we are whole, and need to be reminded," she says. *Learn more at [www.yogacentreniagara.com](http://www.yogacentreniagara.com).*





## Equine Therapy *for* **Everyday HEALTH**

I CAN-T.E.R. was among the first therapeutic riding places in the Niagara Region. Executive Director Karen van der Zalm has been there for over 25 years. Her program provides individualized learning plans with one-on-one lessons for fun experiences with a therapeutic result.

The benefits of therapeutic riding are undeniable, centered on physical and psychosocial growth. The rhythm of the horse (a four-beat walking gait that mimics the human gait) demands the body to stabilize, strengthening the upper body. On

the psychosocial side, it's all about improving social skills, self-confidence and well-being.

Through funding from the David S. Howes Fund grant and the Niagara Community Foundation, the program expanded its 70 acres of nature trails and built an outdoor teaching shelter for recreational activities. Year-round outdoor activities include trail riding, cart driving, hiking, biking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, sled skiing, orienteering, eco camping and environmental education.

"It's all about providing opportuni-

ties for increasing wellness benefits that come with being in nature and outdoors," says van der Zalm.

Other horse-drawn equipment, such as four carts that can attach to different pieces of agricultural gear, has been funded by Wise Guys Charity. These carts, pulled by draft horses, allow participants to manage small garden plots and maintain the 87-acre property. The horse-drawn equipment and recreational miniature horse carting is really popular for youth 8+ to seniors. *Learn more at [www.icanter.ca](http://www.icanter.ca).*

# WATER ACCESS AT BAY BEACH

The battle through the sand to reach the water's edge at Bay Beach (also known as Crystal Beach) is over for people with mobility challenges and parents using strollers. Bay Beach has undergone major modifications to include a welcoming, modern beach facility for locals and visitors. A state-of-the-art accessible wash-room facility, an accessible ramp to the beach, mats to provide access to the waterfront, a viewing deck, a new playground donated by the Ridgeway Lions Club, and a festival square for community events are among the new features.



## *Making a SPLASH* at Sugarbowl Park

The news of a new splash pad at Fort Erie's Lions Sugarbowl Park has the community excited. The Town of Fort Erie has been awarded a \$500,000 grant from the Ontario Government's Community Building Fund. The new splash pad will offer free, zero-depth aquatic experiences to people of all ages and abilities. The Sugar Bowl Splash Pad and Playground is a great example of a new recreational area designed for universal use.

And for swimming enthusiasts with mobility challenges, it just got easier to enter the pool at the E.J. Freeland Community Centre. The City of Fort Erie has installed a lift with the help of Motion Specialties, a mobility firm based in St. Catharines.



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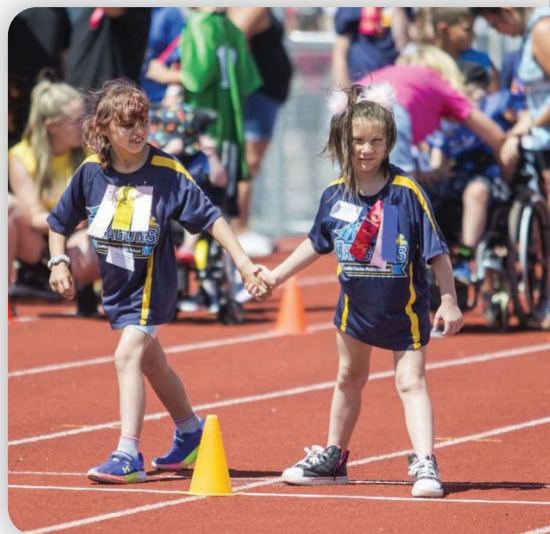
# SPECIAL OLYMPICS

## Ontario Niagara Region

Special Olympics Ontario is a volunteer-driven organization with over 18,000 athletes and 8,000 volunteers registered across the province. Athletes range in age from 8 - 80 and have the opportunity to train in 18 core sports.

The West Niagara Community of Special Olympics Ontario provides quality sport training programs and competitions for athletes living with an intellectual disability. The program began in 2008 and has grown to about 100 athletes and more than 30 volunteers.

Every facet of the organization is dedicated to enriching the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. If you're an athlete, a coach, or a volunteer, or thinking of becoming one, there are exciting opportunities in Niagara. Sports offered include basketball in Beamsville, bowling and golf in St. Catharines, curling, soccer, and track and field in Grimsby, and bocce in Grassie. *Go to [www.grimsby.specialolympicsontario.ca](http://www.grimsby.specialolympicsontario.ca) for exact times and locations. Or contact Pratima Bhatt at [pratimab@specialolympicsontario.com](mailto:pratimab@specialolympicsontario.com); (416) 447-8326, ext. 272.*



## Active Living Centre for ALL

The Meridian Community Centre in the Town of Pelham is a gathering place for residents of all ages and abilities to enjoy a wide range of recreational, social, health, and community activities and programs. The beautiful, fully-accessible 143,000-square-foot complex contains multi-purpose community rooms, a spacious activity centre with two complete courts, two NHL-sized arenas, an indoor walking/running track, concession areas, change rooms and washrooms, and an atrium/lobby area. The Centre is an Active Living Centre.





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# Niagara Sledge Hockey League

*ParaSport® Ontario launched a first-of-its-kind community sledge hockey league this past season with teams in Grimsby, Welland, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls.*



With support from Jumpstart, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Meridian Credit Union and 49Bespoke, players from across the Region hit the ice for the inaugural 20-game season. “Hockey is truly a sport for everyone, and our four host communities are making sure that hockey in Niagara includes players with disabilities,” said Jeff Tiessen, Managing Director of ParaSport Ontario.

Community and connectivity sum up the mission of the Niagara Sledge Hockey League. Niagara’s community of individuals with a disability found community with teammates with and without disabilities. And they represented their community as influencers of awareness and ability.

“It was terrific to see our players representing their town or city as they pursued their hockey goals and dreams in their sport too,” said Kevin Waters, League Coordinator, ParaSport Ontario. “Recreational sledge hockey is hard to find in Ontario, which is why we believe that the opportunity for players to play amongst their peers in their own region is invaluable to the sledge hockey community,” added Waters.

“On behalf of Town Council I want to thank ParaSport Ontario for including the Town of Grimsby in this exciting venture to bring inclusive sport to our community,” said Mayor Jeff Jordan. “This program positions Niagara as a model community of inclusive parasport participation in Ontario, providing

the ‘Niagara Blueprint’ for other regions across the province.”

***The Niagara Sledge Hockey League is open to all Niagara residents with or without a disability. Register for the 2022-2023 Season II with League Coordinator Kevin Waters: [events@parasportontario.ca](mailto:events@parasportontario.ca); 416-426-7187 x 304.***

## FLATWATER CAPITAL OF CANADA

The Welland International Flatwater Centre was part of the “legacy build” projects from the Toronto Pan Am and Parapan Am Games in 2015. With the Rio Paralympic Games the following year, and a Para-canoe athlete selected to represent Canada, the South Niagara Canoe Club worked with local advocacy groups to ensure Para-canoe became part of South Niagara’s programming.

The club benefitted from a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, among others, to acquire the adaptive equipment needed to build the program. The start-up component of the club was furthered by the efforts of two Olympic athletes, Richard Dalton and KC Fraser.

At the same time, the South Niagara Canoe Club (SNCC) was relocating to the Flatwater Centre (WIFC). Combining international-standard competitive watersports facilities with recreational and social opportunities, WIFC is set within 411 acres of parkland and 272 acres of water – a premier flatwater training and competition venue in the heart of the Niagara peninsula. The accessible facility is equipped with a state-of-the-art indoor tank outfitted for rowing, canoe, kayak and dragon boat training year-round.

“All our athletes start off using the stabilizer sets on the Sprint Kayaks to work on balance,” says para-athlete Marilyn Abbs. “PFDs come in handy at first,” she smiles. Abbs was the first para-athlete to represent SNCC at a National Sprint Canoe Kayak event... incredible strides in the few years that she and her para-teammates have been part of SNCC.



# Niagara Falls Big Centres

## BUILT FOR INCLUSION

The two largest recreation facilities in Niagara Falls – the Gale Centre and the MacBain Community Centre – provide accessible amenities for rent for community organizations' programming.

The Gale Centre, which served as a training facility during the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games, is a barrier-free facility that includes a four-pad arena with NHL-sized ice surfaces and community rooms. An accessible indoor walking track is free to use.

The MacBain Community Centre's accessible features include a pool, and outdoor spaces. Residents can take advantage of a wide range of programs and amenities at the centre. It offers programs specifically for older individuals (60+) as well, pickleball and yoga being most popular. Its indoor walking track overlooking the gymnasium is free all year. The outdoor amenities are popular too: skatepark, splash pad, and expansive playground open to children, teens, and families.



## The Legends Leads Accessible Golf

The Niagara Parks Commission's Legends on the Niagara is one of Canada's most highly-acclaimed public golf courses. It was Ontario's first golf complex to offer the SoloRider golf cart to enhance the facility's overall accessibility.

With its SoloRider, golfers with mobility challenges can play a full round at Legends. The cart has a specially-designed 350-degree swivel seat which elevates to allow players to tee off and putt. It travels on the greens and even into sand traps with its turf-friendly tires. For Legends, it's all about improving accessibility and enhancing the experience for golfers who might not otherwise get a chance to play.

*To reserve your tee-time and the SoloRider, contact Niagara Parks Golf at 1-866-465-3642 or 905-295-9595. With advance reservations, the SoloRider may also be utilized at the Commission's Whirlpool Golf Course.*



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## The Rapture of DISC GOLF



Out from pathways in the shadows of established trees and through green meadows surrounded by ponds emerges Disc Golf, striding into the mainstream after forty years of under-appreciation.

To counter recent turbulent times, many have returned to the

basics: family, friends, good health and nature. These, in fact, are the ingredients of Disc Golf (played with Frisbees®). Disc Golf is throwing a disc from a tee towards a basket pin and using strategy to become the one to reach it in the fewest tosses.

It is inexpensive to play, which can be done individually while striving for personal bests, or enjoyed in leagues and tournaments, or with friends and family. Fields and forests are always open.

Beginners are warmly welcomed. This is a sport of skill, but if you can throw anything, you can throw a disc. Disc Golf shares many traits with traditional golf. There are tees (usually concrete pads), fairways, and baskets with chain-link targets as pins. The length is typically eighteen holes. Course designers attempt to reach a balance between conflicting goals: making a hole demanding for an advanced player and enjoyable for a novice. And the sport's health advantages are abundant.

Want to give it go? There are two Disc Golf facilities in the Niagara region. Fireman's Park in Niagara Falls is accessible for the most part, but there are stairs to several areas that are limiting for wheelchair users of course. Centennial Gardens in St. Catharines is more ideal with a pathway around the entire course. *For more information contact Chris Ozolins at the Ontario Disc Sports Association: (905) 808-5993; [chris@ontariodiscsports.ca](mailto:chris@ontariodiscsports.ca).*

# Niagara Children's Centre

The Niagara Children's Centre is a rehabilitation facility serving children and youth with physical, developmental and/or communicative delays or disabilities. Among its many services, the Centre's Recreation Therapy program promotes the participation of kids with disabilities in recreational activities.

One of those programs is Challenger Baseball, a Jays Care adaptive baseball program run in partnership with Little League Canada and Baseball Canada.

It's designed to empower youth 5-18 years old living with physical and/or cognitive disabilities. Challenger Baseball ensures every athlete has the opportunity to play in a fun and safe environment where they learn to become more independent, build confidence, improve their communication skills, and set and achieve their own personal goals.

The Centre's new Volt Hockey program offers youth 10+ the opportunity to learn the foundational skills

related to the sport and the social engagement of a team environment.

Mixed Ability Sport encourages social inclusion and physical activity by welcoming players of all abilities into a mainstream sports setting in their local community to play non-adapted sports. It's a model of accessible and inclusive recreation programming. It uses sports such as soccer, curling, and dance to support the individual needs of kids with disabilities and their siblings in one program.



# Striking the Power Cord

The Brock-Niagara Centre for Health and Well-Being is home to the Power Cord program. Situated at Brock University, the Centre's mission is to promote health, prevent disease and help rehabilitate and reintegrate.

By enhancing quality of life through exercise and activity, and pursuing innovative and multi-disciplinary research, the Centre provides learning experiences for students, staff and participants alike.

Power Cord offers a wheelchair-accessible, fully-equipped gym and delivers exercise programs specific to individuals of any age with spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, or an amputation. It's an extremely unique program, not only in the Niagara Region but provincially, providing members with an opportunity to socialize and exercise in a safe space with those with similar lived experiences.

The program strives to enable individuals to be more active at home and in their communities by improving cardiovascular health and fitness, muscular strength



Photo by Brock University; brocku.ca

and mobility, and overall endurance and independence. All members receive a personalized exercise program which focuses on current health and functional goals.

Brock provides valuable education for its faculty students as well. Each semester, more than 30 students gain insight into the specific needs and challenges of those living

with disabilities by volunteering with the Power Cord program.

The participant experience is valued too. Said one member: "I tried a number of fitness clubs. A couple of times I got stuck on the machines and no one was available to help. Working with students one-on-one to practice my posture with the specialized equipment suits my needs. I live on my own now and feel more independent."

*For more information visit the Brock Centre for Health and Well-Being website at [www.brocku.ca/health-well-being](http://www.brocku.ca/health-well-being).*

Learning to ride a bike is a lifelong leisure experience that is important for so many children and youth served by the Niagara Children's Centre. The Centre's therapeutic bike program offers youth the opportunity to ride using adapted equipment that suits their needs.

And new in 2022 is the synchronized swimming program which offers youth 10+ years old the opportunity to combine their love for dance, music and swimming in one inclusive program. Youth must have the ability to swim independently (with or without a floatation device) to participate in the program.

*To learn more, contact Jaymieson O'Neill, Recreation Therapist, Niagara Children's Centre at [jaymieson.o'neill@niagarachildrencentre.com](mailto:jaymieson.o'neill@niagarachildrencentre.com) or visit [www.niagarachildrencentre.com](http://www.niagarachildrencentre.com).*



Photo by Cloverdale Reporter



The Heartland Forest features several wheelchair-accessible trails, as well as magnificent sculptures and scenic views scattered throughout the property. Caregivers and parents pushing strollers, and individuals using mobility devices, can meander through the forest without fear of becoming encumbered by natural obstructions like roots and rocks. The sanctuary was created to benefit the broader community, with a lens on genuinely being able to be enjoyed by everyone.

Since its opening, the site has evolved and extended to incorporate more accessible amenities such as a picnic pavilion, one of Canada's largest treehouses, a mini-putt, basketball courts, accessible trails of course, and much more. There's also a woodworking shop.

But the most impressive attribute is the fully-accessible, 14,000-square-foot nature centre. All amenities are available to all visitors for free, and donations are welcomed to maintain and grow the Heartland Forest.

Heartland also offers all-abilities fitness programs. The Healthy Living and Wellness Club for Active Agers 55+ welcomes people of any ability. Enjoy trail walks, seated and standing exercises and introductory yoga. Individuals with intellectual disabilities or acquired brain injury are eligible for the Club F.I.N. Adult Day Program with activities designed to improve physical fitness.

While Sydney has since passed, this lovely vision remains for locals and visitors of all abilities to enjoy in her memory.

Visit  
[www.heartlandforest.org](http://www.heartlandforest.org).

## NATURAL ACCESS *at Heartland*

*Since 2004, the Heartland Forest has served as a natural haven for both locals and visitors. Its 200+ acres, located in the southwestern part of Niagara Falls, protect a key piece of the Carolinian Forest as well as wetlands. As one of the largest remaining ecosystems of its sort, it acts as an essential shelter for many endangered species. But there's something else quite special about it too.*

It all started with Dan Bouwman. He bought the site in 1999 to save it from industrial development. It wasn't until his granddaughter, Sydney, was born that the Heartland Forest concept was sealed.

Sydney was born with lissencephaly, a rare genetic brain condition. Bouwman wanted to set up a quiet place in nature where Sydney could go to help her better manage her health problems.



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# SNAP to It

Supporting Neurodiversity through Adaptive Programming (SNAP) is an education-based movement curriculum offered to children and youth with disabilities in the Niagara region.

Formerly known as the Special Needs Activity Program, at SNAP, participants' health, safety and well-being are the program's primary priorities. Based out of Brock University's Faculty of Applied Health Sciences, trained student volunteers work with youth who require one-on-one support (and in some cases two-to-one support).

SNAP develops and enhances movement competency through play and sport. At the same time, it provides a developmentally-appropriate environment, encouraging achievement and nurturing dignity. Always in motion itself, SNAP constantly adapts based on observations for what works and what doesn't for each individual participant.



Learn more at [www.brocku.ca/applied-health-sciences/kinesiology/snap](http://www.brocku.ca/applied-health-sciences/kinesiology/snap).

## MAKING STRIDES. *Changing Lives.*

In 2009 a small group met at Angie Ruigrok's farmhouse in South Niagara to share in her passion for service to the community. From that meeting came a common vision and Ruigrok's farm and horses have been used by EquineAbility ever since.

EquineAbility Therapeutic Riding Centre offers a rewarding experience with horses to those who, because of various mobility and developmental limitations, would probably not have that opportunity otherwise.

"This incredible program recognizes the abilities in everyone, despite challenges they may face," shares client Lianne Wyatt. "The horse, with its many therapeutic benefits, is a great equalizer. If you've never watched a child ride a horse, it's pretty amazing! They sit up taller and take in their world from a majestic new vantage point."

Recognizing that the unique needs of some of the Centre's clients prevent them from mounting and riding a horse, EquineAbility purchased a wheelchair-accessible horse-drawn cart for the farm with the help of Wise Guys Charity Fund.

For more information: [www.equineabilityniagara.com](http://www.equineabilityniagara.com).



# Accessing New Heights at PARADISAEA CIRCUS ARTS

Imagine hanging 10 feet high in the air, by only colourful fabric, and performing airborne acts with ease. And imagine doing this while leaving your wheelchair, or any sort of disability behind.

It's not just for imagining at Paradisaea, a circus arts school in Niagara Falls. Honing participants' aerial and circus-style dance and performance skills, Paradisaea offers classes in hammock, trapeze, hoop, silks and bungee fitness for all ages and abilities.

Mary Young, the studio's owner and head choreographer, explains that most of her students come to her with no experience at all.

Classes are designed for individuals to work through the skills and tricks at their own pace, building muscle and flexibility as they go. "We strive to include all abilities," adds Young. "We want an inclusive environment. We don't want people thinking,

'I can't touch my toes, so I can't do this.' We want people to perform in keeping with their body's ability."

Inclusivity has been Young's goal ever since she started the studio. "I did my training in Japan. I'm a 6-foot-tall girl, whereas most others were very petite. Some things that they could do no problem, I would struggle with. I thought 'well, why can't I do this but not that?' We avoid that in my studio. At our studio, no matter what your ability is, you can always work to your best ability."

To ensure fully inclusive programming at Paradisaea, Young and her coaches participated in Kingston Circus Arts' Flying Footless course – specialized training for circus and movement coaches to increase access for the disability community. "The workshop opened my eyes to what inclusive programming means. But even before the course, we would welcome everyone."



Help is always available for those who need it, but Young encourages individuals to do as much as they can on their own. "Everyone's body is different, and everyone's capabilities are different. We always try to find which adaptive equipment works best for every student." Visit [www.paradisaea-aerial.com](http://www.paradisaea-aerial.com).

## Serving Up Wheelchair Tennis



Wheelchair tennis is one of the fastest growing adaptive sports in the world. Just like its able-bodied counterpart, wheelchair tennis requires power, speed, finesse, precision, and strategy. What's more, it can be played with and against stand-up players, making it a fun and inclusive activity for the whole family!

The sport is open to athletes of all ages and abilities. Anyone can play recreationally, but only those with permanent mobility-related lower limb impairments can compete at an international level. There is a 'quad' division for athletes who have impairments that affect their upper limbs.

A great sport for lower extremity amputees too.

Aside from the sport wheelchair, no specialized tennis equipment is required to play wheelchair tennis. A sport wheelchair gives players greater mobility, balance and speed than an everyday chair. These chairs can be built for a customized fit.

Want to play, or even just try it out? There's plenty of wheelchair tennis being played at the Grimsby Tennis Club. Visit the website at [www.grimsbytennisc.org](http://www.grimsbytennisc.org) to learn more about the club, and visit their courts for a fun time with friends and family.



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## Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sports Association

***Sport and physical activity help people of all abilities reach their full potential in life.***

To support this philosophy, OCPASA, the governing body for the sport of boccia in Ontario, has developed the Boccia Bratz program.

Boccia Bratz is an 8-session program led by trained instructors. Teachers, coaches, volunteers or community recreation leaders can deliver this inclusive program... training session, lesson workbook and equipment kit included!

It's great for therapeutic settings, summer camps, schools, municipal programs and more!



# Boccia Bratz

***Does the Boccia Bratz program sound right for you?! Visit [www.ocpsa.com](http://www.ocpsa.com) for more information and apply to get involved!***



[Blindsports.on.ca](http://Blindsports.on.ca)



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## ONTARIO BLIND SPORTS ASSOCIATION

The Ontario Blind Sports Association (OBSA) promotes and sanctions events and activities designed to assist the development of sports programs for blind/visually impaired athletes in Ontario.

### Programs and Activities

- OBSA Summer Sports Camp
- OBSA High Performance Camp
- Regionals Open Goalball Tournament
- Provincial/Eastern Canadian Goalball Championship
- Equipment Loaning Program
- OBSA Sports Days
- OBSA Outreach Programs





# With Us AND NOT WITHOUT US

## *The Motto and Mantra of Maureen Connolly*

*Dr. Maureen Connolly is a woman of polished contradiction. From the Rock that is Newfoundland to the smooth flow of the Grand River near her home now, her character is as gritty and as steady as both. Undying patience with bodily differences, but unrelenting intolerance with human indifference. Standards but not double ones. Playful and professional. Funny yet fastidious. Casually transparent and yet protectively untrusting. A propensity for joy and delight and an admitted tendency to rage.*

All of that together makes Maureen Connolly, PhD, a sometimes contrary force in the world of academia. Conversely, she's a reassuring voice among the community of persons with physical and cognitive differences whom she supports and serves.

A long-standing Brock University faculty member, Connolly is a Professor of Physical Education and Kinesiology with her life's work recently materializing in her dream for the Brock-Niagara Centre of Excellence in Inclusive and Adaptive Physical Activity. ParaSport® Ontario's Jeff Tiessen sat down with her for a chat.

**PO:** *You manage the longest running community service program in Niagara and it's huge. Tell me about it.*

**MC:** Yes it is. It's massive. About 1,600 kids who come from September to April. And 300 volunteers. We've got schools from across Niagara participating one day a week for the academic year. One hundred kids at a time and we start with 200 to 300 volunteers.

**PO:** *What is it?*

**MC:** It's called SNAP. It's all about movement and sport. It's for school-aged kids in Niagara – four or five years old to 21 depending on when they graduate from high school – who have a hard time accessing physical activity opportunities. We have a Saturday program for young adults too. It started in 1994 as a product of an independent study by a Masters student. There was a school called Lady Spencer Churchill which was essentially a segregated school for kids with disabilities. They were our first participants. It was like a field trip for them. I made it a project for my undergrad students. I oversee it all, with help from two colleagues. I'm the faculty member who manages it. It's at Brock, but not a program of Brock. But Brock benefits from it.

**PO:** *What does SNAP stand for?*

**MC:** Now it is Supporting Neurodiversity through Adaptive Programming. When we started it was Special Needs Activity Program. That name doesn't fly anymore. Same intent. Different name.



Photo by Brook University

**PO:** *You said, “start with 300 volunteers.” What do you mean?*

**MC:** We start with a lot more volunteers than we finish with. So many think that this is what they want to do. They have a very romanticized notion about engaging with disabled kids, when really they are engaging with a wide variety of unconventional bodies. They have this poster child idea of a cute kid with Down syndrome who’s going to adore them and obey everything that they say. They’re not ready for the kid that’s going to tell them to “F-off.” They usually don’t know how to be with children, let alone children that need accommodation.

**PO:** *Who stays?*

**MC:** Those who stay are super solid volunteers. Good ones can work with two kids at a time. The ones who stay discover things about themselves that they never knew. They never knew they were patient. They never knew they were imaginative. They never knew they were playful with kids. They find out that they have a disposition that doesn’t panic, but one that finds solutions when things don’t work out. They find out that they are versatile. They consult with the participant, instead of pretending they know what they don’t know. They stop using medical language and start using community-based

language. And we know community service organizations are looking for our volunteers to work in their programs once they graduate.

**PO:** *I’d imagine SNAP has evolved since 1994. What are you doing differently today?*

**MC:** The biggest things involve research and embodiment. What I know now that I didn’t know then about research was that I believed it applied to my participants. The longer that I was in the field of adapted physical activity the more I saw some research for what it really was. Things like inclusion and exclusion criteria and funding constraints make for circumscribed research with not a whole lot of relevance for the people to whom the study really applies. Practitioners, in good faith, try to implement these recommendations but they don’t work.

A lot of funded research leaves out a lot of people. And the kind of research that works with smaller groups of people has trouble getting published. So, we have this kind of vacuum. High-level performance research, with athletes for example is good. Performance-enhancing research is great. And biomechanics research is great with prosthetic and wheelchair users. Physical injury disability research is easier than research on cognitive disability.

**PO:** *And the other big change – embodiment? What do you mean?*

**MC:** In a culture where you are given information that you are “less than” takes a toll on you even if you don’t believe it. For me, embodiment-based research is really important. More and more I realize that you cannot build programs for people. You need to build programs with people. I’m building this embodiment philosophy into all of my activity programming. Nothing about us without us.

**PO:** *You are an educator, a researcher, a program designer, an advocate, a facilitator, and you relate first-hand to the lived experience of accommodation right?*

**MC:** I do, at some level. I have peripheral neuropathy from chemotherapy. I can’t feel my hands or my feet. Our world is dominated by packaging and buttons and zippers and I can’t feel a thing. I use my visual and auditory skills and senses to accommodate. You can hear me type all over the house because I have to hit the keys so hard. I throw my laundry down the stairs because if I hold the laundry basket I can’t see my feet and if I can’t see my feet I can’t see the stairs. I don’t get feedback from anything touch-screen. It’s a small thing, but it has certainly helped me understand how people with disabilities process information. Especially when you can’t use tactility.

Another example comes from those I work with with autism. Their relationship between sensation and perception is quite compromised. A meaningful perception of what’s going on is different. They need intense experiences of sensation to reach their threshold. But if it’s too intense, it could be too much. That’s an embodied experience.

# “So many people with disabilities have to try and make others feel more comfortable with them. Why is that on them?”

**PO:** *Your influences? How did you get to here?*

**MC:** I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher. I remember using the neighbour’s house as a chalkboard when I was little. I was a varsity athlete but never that great of a mover. I had a number of people in my life who I never wanted to teach like. Influential for all the wrong reasons right?

I grew up in poverty. I never got the tennis lessons. But I have a lot of fast twitch fiber. I was a great jumper and made the volleyball team. I was like a kangaroo in volleyball. My coach in high school was really great. She knew how to make progressions. She worked with me on my raw ability. I’m not necessarily that talented, but I can outwork just about anybody.

My swim instructor Joe Lake, that was his name I swear, took me from complete fear of the water in a “pre-beginners” class to being a lifeguard, through progressions, progressions, progressions. He broke things down, and respected my fear. He told me that I would be a good teacher because I understood fear.

I realized all this progression stuff made a whole lot of sense in coaching. I wasn’t a great gymnast but I was a pretty good coach. And that became my thing, breaking big things into smaller things. Practicing skills without having to do the whole skill.

Some teachers are really good at modifying things to assist good performers to get better. But they have difficulty in helping poor performers get better. They can make things

more difficult to challenge the good performer, but they can’t simplify things for the poor performer. I discovered I was really good at breaking things down into fundamental patterns and making them simpler.

**PO:** *You mentioned poverty when you were talking about influencers. What did it give you?*

**MC:** A sense of humour for sure. But that comes naturally in St. John’s, Newfoundland, that’s for sure too. But for me it was a coping strategy that you develop in poverty. An appreciation for the absurd. My mom was unintentionally funny, which is even funnier.

**PO:** *What else do you see in yourself and your mother?*

**MC:** Both very practical. There’s no substitute for hard work, she’d say. “We have it bad, but others have it worse,” was one of her favourites. I always think about people who are more marginalized or oppressed than me. I got that from her. Do the next task like you’re supposed to do and do it well. And then do the next one. Do what you say you’re going to do, she’d tell. So many people don’t.

University is a weird place. There’s not a lot of people like me there. Most people working in a university are middle or upper class. They don’t come from my roots. There was a slight criminal element to my upbringing. When you’re poor you have to be... resourceful. Creative. Maybe that’s why yelling at me is useless.

**PO:** *Ableism. You hate it. And you’ve made it one of your fights. What is it exactly?*

**MC:** Ableism is the assumption that certain kinds of bodies are less valuable than other kinds of bodies. And, you know when you have the kind of body that is valuable and you know when you have the kind of body that is not. And unfortunately, in some ways, the person whose body is undervalued can contribute to ableism because they’re socialized that way inside this weird capitalist value system of ours. We are socialized in a world of competition, contribution and working hard. People can work super hard and not get what they deserve.

**PO:** *How do we counter this value system?*

**MC:** It’s really difficult. Look at all the words in our language that fuel it... stand by me, stand up for yourself, stand-up guy. It’s built into the discourse. And in jokes, even bad ones that are “lame”. It’s insulting. What are you deaf? What are you blind? Those aren’t compliments. So, how can you live with the body that isn’t conventional or valued and not internalize that? It’s hard.

**PO:** *For change, is there a magic bullet?*

**MC:** Yes. Here’s the magic bullet... hang out with people who aren’t just like you. So many people with disabilities have to try and make others feel more comfortable with them. Why is that on them? That’s just shitty.



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# LIFE *Way* Above PAR

## World and Community Champion Tess Trojan



By Jeff Tiessen

*To say that two-time World Games gold medalist Tess Trojan is an accomplished athlete is very true. But that lofty achievement is far from what solely defines the 32-year-old Special Olympics athlete from St. Catharines. She's a community champion too, a role model, mentor, ambassador and a valued volunteer.*

Tess is very appreciative of Special Olympics for giving her so much. Athletic hardware, yes, but she succinctly shares that it's so much more than that. "Confidence, challenges, new skills and new friends," she says, adding that giving back to the organization and community is so important to her now.

She's been involved with Special Olympics for 20 years, currently as a ten-pin bowler, speed skater, basketballer, and golfer. Tess has captured gold medals at the National Games and two World Games, first in Los Angeles in 2015 and again in Dubai four years later. Her favourite sports are golf and basketball.

"Special Olympics made a big difference for Tess," says her dad. "It gave Tess an opportunity to succeed as an athlete, and the pride that comes with that."

Inspired by their daughter's passion for golf, Tess's parents Mike and Jane, with the help of Niagara Parks' The Legends nine-hole course in Chippawa, co-founded the Niagara North Chippewa Chippers golf program for other athletes with different abilities.

# Supporting athletes wherever their dreams take them

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*“Always do your best, but to do that you need to take the time to be your best. Try and get outside of your comfort zone.”*

Tess has always been very athletic. Before Special Olympics, she was involved in all kinds of community sports, including baseball and basketball. She progressed to her brown/black belt in karate. “She played until she was about 10 or 11 years old, until it became difficult for her to keep up,” explains Mike. “She began to understand her differences and why she was starting to fall behind.”

That’s when Tess got involved in Special Olympics. “For us,” Mike shares, “it was our goal for her to be as independent as possible and fit into her community doing the things she likes to do without us hovering over her. It was important to us for her to have a safe place to go where

she was going to be accepted and treated equally... and be able to participate, develop skills and build confidence.” Special Olympics did just that for Tess. And a lengthy list of accomplishments, not just athletic, attests to that.

She was inducted as her High School’s 2016 Wall of Fame Athlete, the first athlete with an intellectual disability to be inducted. She’s a graduate of Niagara College with certificates in College Exploration and Pre-Community Services. She’s proud of her volunteer work as an usher for the Niagara Ice Dogs and the First Ontario Performing Arts Centre in St. Catharines. She volunteers in a kindergarten classroom and mentors

a young friend with an intellectual disability. She also volunteers as a “buddy” with a Brock University special needs program called SNAP which serves elementary and secondary students with a disability. Tess served on the Special Olympics Ontario Board of Directors as the Athlete Representative for eight years. And, she is the first athlete with an intellectual disability to be inducted in the Niagara Golf Wall of Fame as a contributor to the game of golf in Niagara.

Mike acknowledges that in mainstream sports his daughter wouldn’t have been able to achieve some of the successes that she’s had. “It’s hard to say with certainty, but I don’t think



During her time on the Athlete Council for Special Olympics Ontario Tess was asked to do a practicum. Hers was coming up with ways to prepare athlete reps for community councils, a first for Niagara and many other communities. Her timing was excellent as it was the Niagara Athlete Council members who led Wednesday Workouts during the pandemic. In Niagara, she's also a member of the Brock University CAPA Community Advisory Committee (newly-formed Centre for Adaptive Physical Activity).

Mike says that the friends and acquaintances that Tess has made through Special Olympics, and the benefits to them as a family, have led he and Jane to contribute and volunteer too. "To give back too," he says, "to other families like ours."

When asked what advice she'd give to others like her, Tess doesn't hesitate in saying, "Always do your best, but to do that you need to take the time to be your best. Try and get outside of your comfort zone." And with that she puts a point on the pencil with: "For me it's about leading by example. Showing my ability. Seeing my impact. I advocate for inclusivity and acceptance and participation."

That she does. And with that she is way above par.

Tess would have achieved some of the things that she has without the skills and confidence and discipline that she got from sport and Special Olympics... the confidence to complete high school and go on to community college included. I believe that the doors that opened up for her through Special Olympics have contributed to the success she's had in other things in her life."

Tess agrees. "It's hard not to cry when I think about everything Special Olympics has done for me. I just love it." But she is quick to share that her international successes were hard-earned. "There is a lot of work you have to do to get there. It takes a lot of hard work and dedication. And I was really lucky to have my dad as my caddy," she says with a smile.

For Canada's Special Olympics athletes competing internationally, qualification begins at the regional, provincial and national levels four years in advance of World Games. Athletes are selected as potential representatives and then spend the 4th year in all-around training, including a nutrition program and daily logs. "The model is athlete first, and sport second," Tess explains. "You have to be dedicated to training and being healthy and fit."

Now Tess is focused on giving back. "Now I'm an athlete representative on the Special Olympics Canada board. I'm on the Accessibility Committee and an Accessibility Lead for the golf venue for the Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games. I'm an ambassador for ParaSport® Ontario too."

And she's making quite a contribution in her hometown community as well. All the coaches of the various sports at Special Olympics in Niagara are part of a Community Council.





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**By Morgan Hawley**

*An exciting new adaptive program has hit the court at the Niagara Children's Centre. It's called Volt Hockey, a new kind of hockey here in Canada that is played in a motorized sports chair for youth with a variety of disabilities.*

Volt is a great game for players with lower and upper-body disabilities – like muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy – that make the more traditional sport of sledge hockey difficult to play. For many of these young hockey enthusiasts, it's their first opportunity to ever play on a team.

The Niagara Children's Centre is recognized throughout the Niagara Region as the provider of rehabilitation and support services to children and youth with physical, developmental and communicative delays and disabilities. The Centre's recreation therapist Jaymieson O'Neill explains that Volt Hockey offers her the ability to work on different aspects of physical recreation with her players.

Unique to Canada, the sport originated in Denmark and was brought here by Toronto-based Variety Ontario. "We're so lucky to be part of the grassroots start-up of this sport in Canada," shares O'Neill. "It's a unique opportunity for kids and it's going to be awesome. It's also great that the chairs belong to the Centre so there are no equipment fees for parents."

The specialized sports chair has a paddle on the front, which acts similar to a hockey stick. Controlled by a joystick, it can reach speeds up to 16 km/h and turn on a dime.

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*“It’s been amazing to arrive and everything is here for you, and you don’t have to purchase it or bring it in your car. We’re really thankful.”*

Like any team sport, O’Neill focuses on optimizing each player’s strengths, like passing the ball, shooting, maneuvering their chair or ball-handling, just like stick-handling. “It really is that individual experience, and the way we play together, that is so valuable for each player.”

O’Neill goes on to say that skill development is not unique to Volt, “but it’s just a really cool experience for kids with physical disabilities to have regardless of their physical capabilities.” The athlete’s trunk needs to be strong so they can sit up in their chair, but fatigue isn’t so much of a factor for them because of the motorized chair. “It’s more of a cognitive and controlled game,” she adds.

Because the sport is still very new to the Niagara Children’s Centre, O’Neill is at the recruitment phase, introducing families to the sport wherever she can. “Typically, interested families are those with a child who can’t participate in the traditional form of hockey, but are looking for something with a team environment.”

O’Neill emphasizes that the program is not about competition, yet anyway. “It’s about fun and celebration and being able to get that sense of sport and competition. These kids are learning the foundational skills of the sport. And with that comes a lot of encouragement and praise. And expectations too.”

Feedback from parents has been supportive. “Mostly,” O’Neill says, “families couldn’t imagine hockey being something that their child could participate in. Beyond that, the environment isn’t cold which is important, the stimulation of just six players on the court instead of 10 is beneficial, and the equipment being adaptable, are all pluses.”

Jenn, a parent of one of the stars of the Volt program explains: “My son Will has a very rare condition called Generalized Lymphatic Anomaly. What that means is that his lungs fill with lymphatic fluid, so he’s unable to breathe when they get too full. He doesn’t have the lung capacity that other children might have. With this condition he’s not able to run or do any physical exertion like ice skating and hockey. Volt Hockey is perfect for him. He used to play hockey and it gets him back into the sport he loves.” Jenn adds, “he loves, loves, loves coming every week. It’s so special to him. He tells all his friends about it and loves playing on a team.”

Jenn also notes that Volt is her family’s first experience with an adaptive program and is unsure if they would have been able to participate if the equipment wasn’t provided. “It’s been amazing to arrive and everything is here for you, and you don’t have to purchase it or bring it in your car. We’re really thankful.”

One of O’Neill’s challenges in the program is accommodating the range of disabilities among her players. “It’s a learning process. As a recreational therapist I have clinical experience working with kids of various abilities and knowing when an environment would be conducive to many. Our coaches understand our expectations for the program and ensure that the athletes are participating within a space where they can work together.”

The Niagara Children’s Centre often runs events where anyone can come and try any of the sports they offer, including Volt Hockey, to see if it’s something that works for them. Currently, the program is open for youth ages 10 and above. Kids with an interest in a fully-adapted and accessible sport can sign up or choose from the Centre’s list of other programming options. *For more information, contact Jaymieson O’Neill at [Jaymieson.oneill@niagarachildrenscentre.com](mailto:Jaymieson.oneill@niagarachildrenscentre.com).*





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