

9 Lives Adventure

by Dorothy Raffo



"I would rather die than be paralyzed." This is what Karen Darke thought the night before falling off a cliff at age 21 and becoming paraplegic with no feeling from the chest down. If we are honest, this is the attitude most of us would have, but read on. This story highlights the determination, ambition and downright refusal to live life at anything less than full throttle.

I met Karim Ladki at the end of June at Whistler's Trade Show, where local businesses and organizations were exhibiting their summer adventure products. His t-shirt was the first thing that caught my eye, a distinctive cat emblem with the name "9 Lives Adventures" across the front. Immediately I was intrigued. As he shook my hand he started to explain the logo and his reason for coming to the adventure mecca that is Whistler.

9 Lives Adventures is the brainchild of Ladki and best friend Matt Thola, rooted in an adventure of Ladki's own.

Like most people the travel bug had become an itch they just had to scratch and these boys had their sights set on Africa. The only consideration they had was that Matt is in a wheelchair. Back in May 2006 he was involved in a car accident that resulted in a spinal cord injury that left him unable to walk. Even though they shared the same sense of adventure and ambition, the thought of pushing a wheelchair through villages and on dirt roads depressed them both.

"I will never forget the day I told my friend Matt Thola I was going to Africa. He was genuinely happy for me, but you could tell he was eager to propose that he come. Instead, he replied 'I wish I could go'."

When Karim returned his head was spinning. Although it would have been a tougher journey he believed that the idea of Matt joining him would have been totally realistic. With an enthusiastic partner the cogs started to turn on an idea that would hopefully pave the way for more disabled travellers searching for the same excitement and adrenaline rush that

these two were after.

"We are here to open up the world to every able person who has a strong mentality and has a will to fight for more in life. Together we will explore a path of adventure, excitement, and stimulation best fit for different individuals and different disabilities."

After meeting Karim, a quick search on the net revealed similar stories of grit and determination in overcoming disabilities. His statement reminded me of a quote that I had read from Karen Darke's website, which is the perfect example of making what seems an impossible task just another adventurous challenge.

"Someone once said to me, 'Disability is a state of mind not a state of body.' That's a notion that relates to us all, regardless of whether we have a physical disability or not. Our own mind is our biggest obstacle to living and achieving our wildest aspirations. What is life if it isn't an adventure? I'm constantly amazed by what can be achieved if we set our heart and mind to it. It's all about finding belief, confidence, motivation and commitment. And of course, friends. Then there are no limits."

When I started writing this article I was worried about the term 'disabled,' perhaps thinking that it is a far too broad a term to cover the intricacies that it tries to convey. However, I think Darke knocks it on the head – being disabled is a state of mind and more of us suffer from that than I think we realize. Overcoming our disabilities is a constant battle and simply part of life.

While researching, I came across another inspirational athlete that really threw my sheltered view of "disabilities" out the window. A few years ago I read *Touching the Void*. Written in 1988 by Joe Simpson, it's the tale of two climbers who have a series of accidents, which leads to the heartbreaking decision to leave a man behind. However the injured climber makes it back to base camp after dragging himself down the mountain and back to safety – a tale of pure human determination to survive.

BUT just imagine the strength of mind it would take to START by dragging yourself up the mountain and knowing that was the only way you were ever going to do it. Warren MacDonald has traveled around the globe, summiting Cradle Mountain and Federation Peak in Australia, Africa's Mt. Kilimanjaro, and America's tallest cliff face, El Capitan. What might surprise you is that at age

31 he was trapped under a one-ton boulder after a freak rock fall in Northern Queensland, Australia. His legs had to be amputated mid-thigh. You can imagine the possible responses to this situation (and Matt Thola and Karen Darke would have faced the same life changing moment). However his positive attitude was unwavering. The doctor had said he obviously wouldn't walk again and here was his response:

"I don't recall him saying anything about cycling, kayaking or climbing mountains..."

Karen also sees no limits. She is hoping to be part of the British Para Cycling team and is also preparing for a expedition to the South Pole in 2012. The team is called "The Pole of Possibility" (visit the links at the end of the article to see what it takes and donate to help her get there).

"Nothing is Impossible when we are prepared to face our fears, and believe in ourselves" – Warren MacDonald

With no limitations other than those we place on ourselves, adaptive sports have come a long way in a short space of time, the epitome of "if there's a will, there's a way."

After being in town to witness both the Olympics and Paralympics I was stunned by the courage and determination of both the able and disabled athletes. Canada came away with ten gold medals, five silver and four bronzes at this year's Winter Paralympics.

Canada's "Golden Girl" Lauren Woolstencroft contributed five of the ten gold medals in the alpine ski race events, setting a new Canadian record. Lauren was born missing both legs below the knee and her left arm below the elbow, but this BC Hydro electrical engineer has never let it stop her. She began skiing at the age of four, and has now set a benchmark of excellence for all her fellow athletes to follow, becoming a national hero in the process.

"If you can hear the crowd," she said, "then you're going way too slow."

Our first Canadian gold medal winner in the Paralympic games was Whistler's Stacy Kohut in Lillehammer, 1994. He broke his back in 1992 but continued his career in action sports – he just happens to be in a wheelchair.

"Society sure has a very, very rigid view of what someone like myself can do. I take a much broader, rounder approach to what I can do and that's my job. The people in wheelchairs and people with disabilities can do whatever they want. Just give us the ball, we'll run with it."

Kohut owns a bike called a Fourcross, which is a four-wheel downhill mountain bike. His stunts and athleticism are amazing, but he doesn't see it that way. While he acknowledges that disabled people are inspirational, when you're an athlete you're just another competitor wanting to be the best – and that's the pure entertainment value.

"These things, these wheelchairs, four-wheel mountain bikes and sit-skis, you know what they are? They're wings. I put these on and I get a set of wings and I can fly anywhere," says Kohut.

When Karim began to talk about his adventurous friend I started to wonder just what was out there for disabled people, how far they could push themselves and how much companies can facilitate and adapt to be inclusive of all abilities.

The Whistler Adaptive Sports Program (WASP) works hard to make alpine recreation accessible to everyone and is a centre of learning and sports excellence. It encourages independence, self-confidence and self-motivation for all participants. Chelsey Walker, WASP's Executive Director, said that when they initially started the program in 1999 they were delivering approximately 50 ski lessons per season. Now, that figure is up to 1,400. She anticipates a 300 to 400 per cent increase in summer activities, moving into canoeing, kayaking, hiking and biking.

"Hosting the Paralympics in Whistler created tremendous awareness in the disability community as to the services that the Whistler Adaptive Sports Program had to offer," said Walker. "In 2005, the Whistler Adaptive Sports Program created a vision document that outlined our want to lever the most we could out of being the local Adaptive Sport Organization in the host mountain resort. This vision, along with initial funding by Scotiabank, allow us to hire a full time year round executive director. Their mandate was to create a Whistler Centre for Adaptive Sport which would directly benefit from Games Legacies. I am happy to say that we have been successful in achieving that vision and now operate ten sports/programs on a year round

basis."

WASP is a registered non-profit charity with funding from the Resort Municipality of Whistler, foundations, fundraisers, donations and private corporations. With no guaranteed funding, finding donations is a task that Walker is continually working towards.

Adaptive sports are not cheap; a handcycle can set you back \$3,500 and a sit-ski from \$2,500 to \$5,000. These sports are made accessible to the average participant by WASP subsidizing the cost of participation to a more reasonable level.

So what's next for WASP?

"We are working on a capital project, the Jeff Harbers Adaptive Sports Centre," said Walker. "The initial funding for the project came through a bequest that Jeff made to the Whistler Blackcomb Foundation. We have since received funding through Scotiabank, the American Friends of Whistler, the Pan Pacific and Dubh Linn Gate, the Delta Whistler Village Suites and the Troustmen Club of Leisure. We are very close to finalizing the fundraising aspect of the project and anticipate completing the building in 2011. The Jeff Harbers Adaptive Sports Centre will be located at Olympic Station on Whistler Mountain."

I had the opportunity to head out with Canadian Snowmobile Adventures with Karim and Matt on their single track ATV tour "Call of the Wild." As the name suggests, Matt wasn't taking things slow or easy; I was in for a ride!

We meet at the Carleton Lodge; they're early and keen. I haven't met Matt before but before I know it he's shaking my hand and we're talking about the trip. He has no nerves or worries and his excitement is contagious as we head over to the bus.

This is our first hurdle; Karim had explained that Matt's attitude was if he wants to do it, he will. Karim lifted him in as his other friend Alex Relf, folded down the wheelchair and got on board. That was it; no drama, no fuss. We had a 20-minute drive out to the Callaghan and Matt's already chatting up the ladies who are up on a girl's weekend away. I ask Karim what they need to think about each time they do a trip like this and he explains it's all about preparation. He laughs as he says that Matt and himself aren't the best at being organized, but they're working

on it.

They bring a backpack, which contains necessities such as catheters, gloves and different medications. He has to try and keep himself and the medical supplies sterile to avoid infection. I look at the dirt and dust as we pull into Canadian's base in the heart of the Callaghan; Matt follows my look and grins.

We are anxious to get out on the trails, Liz, our guide has promised us some gnarly single track and we're pumped. We skip taking Matt up to the cabin; the winding staircase puts us off, and besides that he's already heading over to the ATVs, lined up ready to go. As I pass him a helmet Karim offers to help him on, but as he says it Matt has already hopped onto the machine and is settling himself in. His upper body agility is amazing and we joke about his "guns," which like many wheelchair athletes are pretty impressive. As the others head over to their machines I mention I'll be at the back to stay out of the way. I only hope I can keep up.

Out on the trails we do a mixture of tree covered singletrack, open rocky vistas and dusty logging roads, which we really push the speed on. As I predicted I am finding it hard to keep up but the frequent stops for photo ops mean that I don't have to panic too much. I am watching Matt from behind and on the bumpy sections finding it hard to contemplate how that would feel if I could only use my arms to steady my body. My heart leaps as he slides dangerously to one side; he quickly rights himself but has come to a stop. I assume he wanted a break, however he just asked me to move his foot back into place, after that was done we were off again.

Liz takes us to some amazing spots where we look over the entire valley; we can see Black Tusk in the background and around the corner is a waterfall pounding at the rocks below. It is truly amazing.

Back in the village we decide it's time for a drink. However, Matt is so pumped he is watching the mountain biker's head down the hill and contemplating his next adventure. People stare at us as we enter the bar; we are covered head to toe in thick dust, apart from the band around our eyes where the goggles were. Now we have bonded over a three-hour ATV

tour I feel I can ask some more serious questions.

Matt was the passenger in a car that hit a lamppost at 180 km per hour and Karim dived from a boat into shallow water, landing headfirst. Both broke their seventh cervical vertebrae and both are lucky to be alive. This is what inspired the name "9 Lives Adventures" – they had a close brush with death and used up a life, and now the question is what to do with the rest of them.

Karim and Matt only met each other a year ago but I feel as if I am amongst brothers. Karim saw Matt struggling with groceries when they were both over in Victoria and after having a chat they both hit it off and with their shared experience and common ground. Now they are sitting in Whistler, B.C. hitting us up for all of our adventure sports. The week's agenda includes bungee jumping, jet boating and rally racing. They have just come from Ucluelet where Matt tried surfing and kayaking.

He really feels that there are no limits. He admits to having had some dark moments but it's hard to imagine that now; he's so full of life and a smile is never far from his face. They are off to Australia and New Zealand for their next set of adventures (you can follow their blog to keep up to date).

As I say my goodbyes I hope that I will remember this experience for the rest of my life. When faced with adversity they have conquered it and come through on top. I can only hope that if it is something that I ever have to deal with that I will have the courage, grace and determination that all these people have in abundance.

"We are alive. We are individual. We are able." That's the 9 Lives Adventures slogan.

www.9livesadventures.com

<http://www.karendarke.com>

<http://www.warren-macdonald.com>

www.whistleradaptive.com