

Anything is Possible

How the Whistler Adaptive Sports Program turned a life around proving it is about far more than just sports

by Dorothy Raffo



Sarah Colpitts

"I want to be a cartoonist," says Sarah Colpitts as she drinks her hot chocolate. Her parents, Greg and Jill Colpitts, smile and nod, but their eyes are tired. Like most parents they want their child to reach her goals, but they know it's going to be a tough ride. Sarah was born with an undiagnosed cognitive disorder, which in very broad terms means she has mental developmental issues. In addition to this, three years ago, Sarah suffered from mental health problems. This meant she had a dual diagnosis that fell outside the conventional realm of most health care providers. Sarah was unable to function in the world around her and her parents didn't know where to turn.

Today she has a regular job in a local cafe, is an artist, an athlete, and a valuable member of Whistler's community. So what happened in those three years that turned tragedy into triumph?

In simple terms the Whistler Adaptive Sports Program (WASP) helped Sarah get her life back, and while the story of every person WASP helps is unique, it is also a story about how the organization took an idea before it's time and turned it into a tale of success for the community of Whistler and beyond.

It's a story with many happy endings not least of which was the opening of the Jeff Harbers Adaptive Sports Centre just weeks ago at the Olympic Station on Whistler Mountain. This finally gives WASP a permanent home for both the people behind the organization and all the equipment, which help dreams come true for so many people.

The building will support the program's winter and summer curriculum. With a growth rate of 30 per cent per a year, and interest specifically doubling in alpine activities, this facility was desperately needed.

Jeff Harbers was a former Microsoft

executive and president of the American Friends of Whistler. The Harbers family left a bequest to the Whistler Blackcomb Foundation for \$300,000 of which \$150,000 was granted to the Jeff Harbers Adaptive Sports Centre. The American Friends of Whistler donated a further \$117,000 (including \$17,000 from the Anything's Possible Program that was initiated by the American Friends of Whistler's Bill and Barbara Norman) and the Whistler Blackcomb Foundation this fall made a further donation of \$27,000 to the new incline platform lift that is arriving this month. The September donation of \$50,000 by the Harbers Family Trust brought direct funding to \$200,000.

WASP had 12,000 lesson days last winter, seeing around 400 people. The interest in Nordic activities also quadrupled, from 30 lessons in 2009, to 120 last year. In the summer it facilitates around 700 lesson days, with participants doing a higher volume and range of sports.

International visitors come from as far afield as South Africa, Australia and the U.K. And there is no doubt that these groups are having an impact on room nights, with Great Britain only just behind the U.S. for groups coming to Whistler. Britain's "Battle Back" injured soldier program, came to Whistler last year to take part in the nordic and alpine activities and are booked in again for this year.

"Whistler is fast becoming one of the most accessible places for these specialist groups to visit," says Chelsey Walker, WASP's executive director.

"With fully accessible housing available at the Athlete's Lodge, an accessible village to explore, accessible sightseeing on the Peak 2 Peak, and a whole host of activities, groups are booking return visits and staying longer."

One example she gave was a group from Prince George who came in 2010, staying just a couple of nights and trying bungee jumping. They returned last summer and stayed for four days, five nights and took part in kayaking, gliding, sightseeing on the Peak 2 Peak, and hiking — all through the Whistler Adaptive Sports Program.

Along Came Chelsey

The Colpitts met Walker through the Special Olympics back in the winter of 2008/09. Walker grew up on the slopes of Whistler; her grandfather was the general manager of Mount Tremblant in the 40s' through to the 70s' so the

resort lifestyle runs in her blood. She studied history at the University of Victoria and after graduating became a natural history interpreter for Parks Canada. She also became a certified heli-ski guide, but after sustaining injuries moved back home to the Sea to Sky corridor. The job of executive director of the WASP came up while she was at home and she jumped at it. "The idea of working in sport within my own community was beyond belief," she says with a smile. "My grandfather was a great role model for me growing up, he was visually impaired, but this didn't stop him becoming a leader in sport."

Growing up and attending several sports academy programs herself, Walker quickly realized that the model could also apply to adaptive curriculums. She realized that WASP could be so much more than just sports. For people like Sarah, says Walker, the structure provides support, a community of peers, self-esteem building and life skills development. These are key components in life and are skills Walker wants to give the young adults she meets — it's about the earning power and freedom that most people take for granted.

"I wanted to develop a structured training environment that would support every aspect of an athlete's life, which includes life skills and vocational training. This would mean when the athlete decided to exit competitive sport they have employability."

So in the summer of 2010 Walker launched the Sports Academy Program. Young adults who sign up for the program have to volunteer a portion of their time before they get to take part in the sport sessions. "The young adults start with basic skill training like cleaning, doing the mail and equipment maintenance, but they soon progress," explains Walker.

"We have update forms that they fill out with their parents each semester, which detail their vocational and recreational goals. We then try and match them with the appropriate volunteer job. For Sarah she wants to become a cartoonist, so it was her job to design and make the table markers for our gala event in Vancouver."

Both Walker and the Colpitts can't believe the change in Sarah since she started the program. When Sarah's mental health issues started to develop back in the fall of 2008 she became uninvolved with everything around her, unable to participate in life. Seeing her child shrink in front of her Jill called the

medical centre, the mental health hotline and a psychiatrist, but no one knew where they should send Sarah. Eventually they saw a specialist in Vancouver, but the medication was only part of the solution. "Sarah's social stigmatization is doubled because in addition to her intellectual disability, she suffers from a mental illness," says Dr. Doug McKibbin, Sarah's psychiatrist from the Developmental Disabilities Mental Health Services, Fraser Health.

"Her participation in the Sports Academy has been instrumental in assisting her recovery from the so-called deficit or negative symptoms of her illness, such as amotivation and social withdrawal. These types of sports programs also help correct societal misperceptions of intellectual disability and, or, mental illness and consequently help such individuals integrate into the 'mainstream' in communities. Furthering these efforts benefits everyone."

Sarah and The Gang

Sarah is 23 years old, is a bit of a comedian and an avid athlete. When she started the Sports Academy Program her initial goal was to lose weight for her brother's wedding and she set her sights on training for a triathlon. Working towards this goal has helped Sarah to focus. Her trainer, Chris Kennedy from Black Diamond Fitness, is a volunteer with WASP. He trained with Sarah and "The Gang," an affectionate term for Sarah and her group of friends, three times a week as they prepared for the triathlon. There were six of them in two teams with each athlete doing one section of the race.

Originally from Nova Scotia Kennedy went to the University of New Brunswick to do a degree in Kinesiology. Like many, he felt drawn to the West Coast and has been in Whistler for the past three years. He contacted Walker last summer and has since then been doing a wide range of activities with WASP including seven weeks of training with Sarah. "She started training in early spring and was doing three sessions a week switching between running, swimming, biking and strength training," explains Kennedy.

"We also spoke about nutrition and how that is important to any athlete. In the end I hope to educate them enough so that they can train independently from my sessions."

"The Gang" is now doing one session a week with Kennedy and one on their

own time. This is part of the academy's goal; to help these individuals become self-dependent, giving them confidence and pride in their abilities. "Programs and achievements like this mean that young adults who were previously unemployed are now getting jobs with their disabilities," says Bianca Matheson, who is on the Board of Directors for WASP and owner of Back In Action Physiotherapy.

"After completing the triathlon training and the continuing with the Sports Academy Program, Sarah is now getting around more independently, which has increased her quality of life."

Small goals are now being supplanted by larger and more challenging aspirations. The triathlon came first, then the 5 Peaks Run, Xterra, and Whistler Spirit Run. Looking ahead to next year Sarah and "The Gang" are gearing up for (among other things) the Scotia Bank Half Marathon, which is a fundraiser for the Whistler Adaptive Sports Program. This is exactly what Walker had hoped for; that short-term goals would be exchanged for long-term ones with lasting effects.

Sarah is learning skills that are helping her become more independent, which translates well into a work setting. She started working at Delish Café in Function Junction in November 2010, and anyone who speaks to her is struck by her sense of humor. "Sarah's going great and she's having fun," says Sandra Cameron, controller for Delish and the Whistler Grocery Store. "She comes in and has set duties with the bakers twice a week. We enjoy having her as part of the team, she brings a smile to everyone's face."

Walker is fostering a set of athletes that are encouraged to give back. They earn their sports time in exchange for work hours, but they also volunteer extra time. She believes that funding is not a one-way street; it's an investment. Sarah is an avid artist with some of her work displayed around the village as part of ArtWalk. She donates a portion of the profits from her art to WASP and other community groups. There is an understanding that if she is one day to be a "famous cartoonist" this will only happen if there's a support network and structure to get her there.

Sarah has also already signed up to be a Harbers Centre volunteer building host. "She will be earning a Whistler-Blackcomb season's pass as part of her volunteer commitment," says Walker.

"We worked with Whistler Blackcomb on the placement, as we wanted to

increase the volunteer opportunities for Sarah and "The Gang." Her new position will continue to build on her vocational training and develop her leadership skills. "The Gang" will be using the Jeff Harbers Adaptive Sports Centre for their race program training. This will include doing video analysis and some dryland components with their coach. The equipment maintenance room will also act as a tuning centre for them to work on their own ski equipment."

The Need for Support

After leaving high school, young people like Sarah find themselves heavily dependent on family members. In school there is a support system, which includes aid workers and counsellors, but once they graduate some feel the support and structure falls away. Sarah had the same aid worker for eight years, from kindergarten to high school, and a number of other aid givers through high school — but suddenly they were gone. Not only was this hard for Sarah but obviously daunting to take on as a parent. Whistler is still developing the support system these young people need in order to positively contribute to the community they live in. Jill and Greg would like to see more employment support, life skill training, and programs for assisted-housing being considered in Whistler.

"Like everyone else they don't want to live with their parents forever, they want to be with their friends and experience the world around them," says Jill. "They have career aspirations and dreams."

She goes on to explain that even though she is a part of an educated group of parents they have come up against many brick walls when pushing for extra services. Government bodies turned to for support, funding, and advice are constantly shifting making it difficult to find the right resources and available funds. The processes were also frustratingly slow. Parents of three children, Jill and Greg hold down full time jobs whilst trying their best to research what they can do for Sarah. "It was suggested that we should take Sarah to Squamish to get the employment and life skill training," says Greg. "But how was she going to get there?"

"She was too young for the bus, which didn't stop anywhere near the facility, it was an unrealistic solution. Anyway, Whistler is her home."

In response to this growing need Sea to Sky Community Services recently

developed the Mentorship Employment Program, in addition to its other services. It should be noted that Sea to Sky Community Services has been providing Life Skill and Community Access services in Whistler since 2000, and although the demand has increased for employment-focused support for youth transitioning from high school to the working world, the funds are hard to find. "We have increased services in Whistler whenever possible, which is inevitably tied to funding," says Nancy Thompson, Acting Manager of Community Living Services.

"We can't provide quality, staffed services without funding. The government ministries responsible for providing the bulk of such funding have been undergoing their own budget constraints, which have inevitably effected our service provision. That being said, we have and continue to seek alternative funding services to provide what I know are very essential services to the citizens of the Sea to Sky Corridor. We are fortunate to have Vancouver Foundation financially support our Mentorship Employment Program, and assist in providing these essential services for people with developmental disabilities."

The program has guaranteed funding for 2012, with the opportunity for continued funding after that, although Thompson adds cautiously that it "depends on a number of variables." The Mentorship Employment Program provides adults with developmental disabilities support in the growth of their career goals by assisting them with hands-on placements in local businesses.

"The development of the Mentorship Employment Program was a direct result of our recognition of need for more supports for people with developmental disabilities in Whistler, and our efforts to gain more funding," says Thompson.

The program also aims to break down misconceptions about the process of hiring and working with someone with developmental needs, and for business to see the benefits of a workforce that is truly reflective of the community. "This is about getting a job," says Faye Wightman, president and CEO of the Vancouver Foundation. "A job is so much more than just a paycheque. It's an important source of self-esteem, of satisfaction (in a job well done), of ongoing education, of growth, of interaction with other people, and the community at-large. It's also a measure of achievement. Young people with

developmental disabilities face huge barriers to employment. Anything we can do to help increase their chances of getting a job is worthwhile. That's why we're proud to support Sea to Sky Community Services, and their Mentorship Employment Program."

Sarah and three of her friends are part of this new program. "I think it is a fun activity, it helps me with my goals in life," says Sarah. "I want to get faster at ski racing! I want to go to school and work as an artist and move out!"

Added Thompson: "I believe the Life Skills and Community Access and Mentorship Employment Programs we offer to people with developmental disabilities in Whistler and throughout the Sea to Sky Corridor are essential and must continue to develop."

"People with developmental disabilities are often some of the most marginalized in our communities. When the majority of us graduate from high school we follow what we believe is a natural progression, sometimes including higher education, always resulting in employment. For many people with developmental disabilities this progression isn't so 'natural' or easy to follow. People with developmental disabilities often require additional supports after their school years have ended, supports that may continue to be required throughout their lifetimes. Without appropriate support services such as SSCS's Life Skill and Community Access and Mentorship Employment Program people with developmental disabilities often face the risk of falling through society's cracks."

Walker welcomes the program as well: "We are super excited to have the mentorship program. We offer as much as we can at WASP, but we have a sports based mandate. Having a secondary program like this means that individuals, like Sarah, can reach the goals they set and further their vocational training beyond what we can offer alone.

"For Sarah she has now become a volunteer building host and that's been made possible by both us and the SSCS's new program. We have already identified other young adults who will be leaving high school, and having this program in place will mean their transition will start them on the right path. The mentorship program is integral to providing the support for the growth we want to see for these young adults in our community."

What's Next?

So what's next for the Sport Academy athletes? They will be entered into weekly Kokanee Races and the Rotary GS and SL in April 2012, right here in Whistler, as well as the Special Olympics and cross-country ski events. Alongside the racing they will continue their strength training, nutrition education, spin classes, and new this year — yoga.

Whistler is in its infancy when it comes to dealing with the needs of such a diverse community. Jill and Greg are grateful to the people who have helped them get this far, but it's still a challenge. The Sports Academy Program helps to bring people together — the young adults who are taking part in the courses, and also the families themselves have become a network. Both Walker and Jill talk about "The Gang" and how they have enriched the lives of those around them. This has given them a sense of belonging but it needs to be even more far-reaching as the Whistler community develops. Services and support need to grow in order for the academy and other programs like it to develop to their full potential.

Walker's dream would be to have a Centre of Excellence right here in Whistler. "We live in an amazing community, filled with so many highly skilled professionals," she says.

"If I could capture their skills, the sky would be the limit as to what we could achieve with this project."

You can of course get involved and here's how:

The Whistler Adaptive Sports Program needs more funding and volunteers to assist with all their programs. Get in touch with them today to see what you can do: 604.905.4493, or for more information visit their website: www.whistleradaptive.com

If you are a person with a developmental disability who is 18 to 30 years old and interested in increasing your job skills and experiences, you can apply to take part in the Mentorship Employment Program by contacting Sea to Sky Community Service's Manager of Community Living. If you are a local business owner or manager looking to invest in a young, excited, dedicated workforce, and are willing to host a supported work placement for 8-10 weeks please contact the Manager of Community Living to see how you can take part.

The Sea to Sky Community Service's Manager of Community Living can be

contacted at 604-892-5796.

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