

Regional recreation network launches in Lanark, Leeds-Grenville

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Jason Dunkerley, who recently earned a silver and bronze medal at the 2012 Paralympic event in London received congratulations and applause from the crowd at the Nov. 14 tri-county Recreation Summit in Smiths Falls

EMC News - Creating partnerships and synergy for new projects in recreation is now possible in Lanark, Leeds and Grenville following the launch of a new regional recreation network, Nov. 14 inside the Smiths Falls Memorial Community Centre.

In introducing the new network and its origins with the Lanark, Leeds & Grenville Healthy Communities Partnership (HCP), Richard Kidd, member of the HCP committee, said: "They've given birth to it."

As with all new life, the network is looking for a name to call its own and attendees at this year's second annual Recreation Summit, where the launch took place, were invited to write down their name suggestions on a graffiti wall. The network itself will assume responsibility for hosting the recreation summit each year, but is also looking for other projects such as workshops and speaker series. Membership in the network will be \$15 annually with all attendees at the 2012 summit automatically confirmed as members.

The idea for a network came from discussions in the early stages of HCP when it was discovered there was no forum for recreation professionals to meet and share best practices. The ultimate goal of the network is to one day operate on its own, independent of the HCP.

Wrapping up his comments for the day, Kidd applauded those involved with recreation in the room, for their hand in positively changing lives in the area through their work.

"What you're doing is such a special thing. You do recreation but it effects people," Kidd said.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Nobody in the room knew these effects better than Paralympic athlete, Jason Dunkerley and Jennifer Jeffrey of Young Advocates Across Ontario whose medical condition leaves her with physical disabilities. The crowd erupted in applause when Dunkerley's achievements in running were outlined, including his 2012 Paralympic medals: a bronze in the 1,500 metre and silver in the 5,000 metre races.

"On behalf of everyone congratulations," said Ian Pearson of Perth who attended the event.

When asked how it felt to have a medal put around his neck, the blind Ottawa athlete replied: "It's a pretty incredible feeling for sure. There's nothing really like it."

Dunkerley shares these awards with his guide runner, but tells the audience his athletic journey didn't begin at the Paralympic track. Rather at his school for the blind many years earlier where he was able to build his skills and develop a love for the sport.

"I sort of started to catch the bug a little bit," he said.

Having programs that catered to his blindness was the first step in putting Dunkerley in a position to develop his love of running by giving him positive sports experiences to encourage him to do more. Today he is a member of the Active Living Alliance. This national organization works to link people with any form of disability to recreation programs in their communities. It also offers a Youth Ambassador Across Canada program that encourages youth to tell their personal story of fitness and inspire others.

Jeffrey is an example of teenagers stepping up and inspiring others with disabilities and communities to make sports programs available to all. She's a Grade 10 student in Ottawa and knows first hand the social, physical and emotional benefits access to sporting programs can have. The Recreation Summit was her first public presentation.

"It makes you feel like you're a part of something," Jeffrey added. "It also means (the opportunity to have) friends."

This is important, as attendees heard that one in two children with disabilities report having no friends. She would like to have sports programs for those specifically with disabilities and the opportunity to take part in programs that are inclusive and welcome abilities of all types.

"It's both very rewarding," Jeffrey said.

She currently takes part in an inclusive track and field program where she often runs with five-year old able-bodied athletes. Jeffrey sees this as an opportunity to educate a younger generation about the abilities of those with one form of disability or another.

"It's good because it gives them a chance to get used to it (individuals with disabilities)," Jeffrey said.

At the same time she likes the peer support and ability to push herself in an environment that is safe and encouraging, such as programs designed for the less able-bodied.

It was the support of Dunkerley's school track program where all participants were blind that gave him the confidence to move on in post-secondary to the University of Guelph track team. There he qualified for his first of four Paralympic competitions.

"I think recreation is sort of where it all begins. It definitely is where it began for me," Dunkerley said.

He underlines any activity must be meaningful in order to have the positive impacts outlined above. The Active Living Alliance (ALA - www.ala.ca) offers a resource kit to help athletic organizations adjust their programs to be more inclusive. At the presentation, Dunkerley had these tips to pass along:

- When using pinnies in sport, purchase ones with bright colours to help those with visual impairments.
- For those who are deaf, waving a flag at the start and end of a play may be all the cues they need to play inclusively on their team.
- Use a lighter or softer ball to slow down the play and allow those with disabilities a chance to use their skills.
- Tie a plastic bag around the soccer ball so those who are visually impaired can hear it coming towards them.

"You can get creative with it. There is no script or right or wrong," Dunkerley said.

The ALA welcomes calls from organizations (1-800-771-0663) that have questions on how they can become more inclusive.

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