

York recognizes athletes during Access Awareness Week

By Jeff Doner

As part of National Access Awareness Week, York Region showcased some impressive local athletes and celebrated the work that is being done to make programs and services more accessible for people with disabilities at the Administrative Centre recently.

A big part of the event was to acknowledge the importance of sport, with inspiring words from Special Olympics silver medalist Ryan Damiani and Canadian Paralympic rower Victoria Nolan and also a beautiful rhythmic gymnastics performance by Special Olympics athlete Sarah Lisi.

Damiani, who is also a staff member for community and health services for the Municipality of York, has participated in 13 Special Olympics, with his career highlight taking place this year with a silver medal for floor hockey in South Korea.

"It was really neat playing against all the different countries," he said, explaining that the gold medal winning team from Bangladesh was a great opponent.

Damiani offered some words of wisdom in relation to his love of sports.

"It's not about winning or losing, but about playing your hardest and trying your best."

Victoria Nolan, a Canadian Paralympic rower, inspired a few goose bump worthy moments during her speech, telling her own story about how her life changed as she slowly lost her vision.

"Teachers didn't know I was going blind, they thought I was clumsy," she explained. Nolan was officially diagnosed with retina pigmentosa when she was 18 and now at 38, with two young children, only has three per cent vision.

But the point of Nolan's speech was that of inspiration and about overcoming obstacles, which she did in helping to lead her team to two International Paralympic World Championship medals - gold from 2010 and silver from 2011.

Nolan recently retired after the 2012 Paralympic Games in London, but was clear about how important rowing became in her life.

"I needed to find something to get me out of the house and help keep me independent - that became rowing. In a boat I was totally safe and free to move as fast as I wanted," she said. "I took my disability and I beat it. Now I know that when you're down, you just keep getting up until you're where you want to be."

An incredible public speaker and teacher, Nolan often speaks to students about dealing with a disability and the importance of creating awareness for accessibility.

"When you're talking about accessibility in changing buildings and changing transportation that all takes time and money, but awareness is something we can do right now and that doesn't cost anything," she said. "If I can get my message out, the more people I can talk to the better and it's not just the people who are here today, because those people will go out and share our stories."

Adelina Urbanski, community and health services for the Municipality of York, said National Access Awareness Week is crucial for getting the word out.

"The most important part about it is the awareness right now and if you can make it fun and interesting and share stories about people's journeys - every year we've had someone talking about the journey that they had in trying to overcome and manage their disability and it's always humbling just to listen to it and think of how you would react if you were in those situations. They always leave us a little wiser and a little smarter and give us a little insight on how to make our community more inclusive."

She also expressed excitement over the Special Olympics, which will be hosted in York Region this July.

"The support for the Special Olympics really has grown and we're really thrilled that this time we'll have venues and events taking place in York Region."

* National Access Awareness Week was established in 1998 in response to a request from Canadian hero Rick Hanson following his Man in Motion Tour. Its aim is to bring together, in a spirit of partnership, people with disabilities, organizations who serve them, businesses, labour and governments to affect meaningful changes in the daily living of people with disabilities.