

Date: 05/29/2015

Event: CPD Active Together: Sport and Physical Recreation conference

Morning Keynote by Alec Denys, visual description by Teresa Kuszuba

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- >> CART Provider: On stand-by for microphone to be placed near speakers.
- >> Alec: That was a longer introduction than my whole speech is going to be.
- >> Teresa (slide description): Living life inspired, a beautiful mountain vista (audio cutting out) imagine the journey through life. Several racing [indiscernible] racing in the same direction.
- >> Alec: Imagine the journey of life bobbing on a boat, going along the wind where the currents take us. Once in awhile we hit a patch of rough weather that tosses us around and throws us off track but soon things return to normal and we continue on our unremarkable journeys. Now imagine that the perfect storm hits.
- >> Teresa (slide description): So the sailboat in very stormy seas.
- >> Our boat is swamped and sinks and you find yourself in the icy cold waters of the very hostile ocean.
- >> Teresa (slide description): A partially submerged sailboat in an empty ocean.
- >> Alec: This is what it feels like when it's traumatic injury like paraplegia occurs. Until the age of 29 my boat bobbed along quite nicely.
- >> Teresa (slide description): A farm country scene with farms in the background.
- >> Alec: I grew up on a farm with six siblings, went to a 1-room elementary school, went to high school then onto university, graduated with a degree in forestry, got a job with the ministry of natural resources and three years later I was married.
- >> Teresa (slide description): A beautiful forest scene from in the forest.
- >> Alec: I left my job as a forester in tweed. I got to spend a lot of time outside. I loved sports as well and I played soccer, hockey, baseball and I earned a brown belt in karate. In November of 1979 I decided to take up bow hunting and on my second outing my perfect storm hit.

I was claiming on a tree stand when the branch under my foot broke and fell I was only 7 feet up by I suffered a compression fracture of my spine. For the longest two hours of my life I lied there on the cold wet ground with excruciating pain in my back. I couldn't move. [off microphone] and I remember the sound of chainsaws, a tractor and a wagon [off microphone] out to the road to the waiting ambulance. And then the best moment of my life. At least it felt like it at that time and that was a shot of morphine in the ambulance. Then later that night I was transferred to the hospital for emergency surgery. I was in the emergency department lying face down on the stretcher that I was told on the surgeon that was about to do surgery that I would never walk again. Over the next few weeks while lying in a hospital bed in a full body cast I had lots of time to ponder my new reality.

- >> Teresa (slide description): A man in a wheelchair sits at the end of the dock looking over a lake.
- >> Alec: I was 29, just starting my career in forestry, newly married, ready to start a family, active in all kinds of sports and I could no longer walk. Yes, my boat had sunk and I was truly in a hostile ocean. After several weeks on the ward where my physical injuries were dealt with, I was moved to the rehab department and there I was one of eight persons with a spinal cord injury. Over the course of four weeks rehab I observed how people faced with incredible adversity and challenge reacted to their perfect storm. So let's go back to that ocean and that sunken boat. There's an old saying about adversity that you either sink or swim. What I saw in rehab was three basic reactions that I'll describe as sink, float and swim.

So option one, to sink.

- >> Teresa (slide description): A hand under the water reaches up towards the surface.
- >> Alec: Sometimes the icy water, in this case the full realization what paraplegia entails, is so overwhelming one just gives up. This is what happened to Marty, a young man who suffered a broken neck in a touch football game. Marty was young and athletic. He defined his work through his wholeness. Without functioning legs he no longer saw himself as a whole person and he became very deeply depressed. He hated being in a wheelchair so he stayed in his hospital room and stayed in bed most of the time. A year later Marty was admitted to the chronic care unit of the hospital, never to leave.

In adversity we must be prepared to accept our new reality and to reinvent ourselves in line with that reality in order to avoid sinking into despair. The second option is to float.

>> Teresa (slide description): A relaxed woman lying on her back floating in the water.

>> Alec: It's like holding onto a piece of wood in the water and waiting to be rescued, hoping for the best. Wayne could have been described as a floater. Wayne was mountain climbing when he fell and broke his back. He saw himself as a crick Tim of circumstance, bad luck. He felt he was owed something for having gone through such a tragic experience. Wayne chose to float, waiting for others to rescue him. As a result he grew increasingly dependent on others for anything and everything. I remember him calling out to the nurses at all hours of the night for simple things such as to scratch an itch. He eventually went home but he was always angry and bitter and he demanded that others wait to him. It was too much for his wife and children to handle [off microphone] so Wayne belt with his storm by getting bitter instead of getting better.

Option three is to swim.

>> Teresa (slide description): A person swimming under the water with fish.

>> Alec: On the second day I was in the hospital I remember waking up to my older sister saying what have you got yourself into this time? It was not the first time obviously I had done something. For some reason what she said stuck with me and then I realized that yes, I got myself into this mess and it really was up to me to find a way out. Even though life looked a lot different now than what I had envisioned my goals, which were to work at a job I love, to start a family, to be involved in sports, to be involved in community, to be healthy, those goals were still the same. I made a conscious choice to swim my way out of this mess and to see the road ahead as full of possibilities rather than limitations. I love the saying that it is only after we have lost everything that we are free to do anything. On the road to overcome be adversity and riding out my perfect stormy discovered a sport for persons with a disability.

>> Teresa (slide description): Several pictures of Alec hand cycling, gardening, sledge hockey, curling can be skiing, in a sit ski, jeez.

>> Alec: Sports has been the foundation of my life as a person with a disability. It really has been. It has provided challenges and

accomplishments, self-esteem and confidence. I have realized the awesome transformation that was possible for me through training and playing sports and becoming strong and healthy again and to have a quality of life I would otherwise never have known. My life in sports in my brief five-of-year career has been truly exceptional despite my disability. Because of what I learned through sports I have challenged those who thought me incapable and I challenged myself to be exceptional.

On the road through life I've learned and embraced some simple rules that I would like to share with you. The first rule is to swim. And what I mean by this is to accept responsibility for life, and that's what the slide is saying. Know that it is you who will get you to where you want to go. No one else. You cannot wait for others to plan or life for us. Einstein said, I am thankful to all those who said no to me because of them it is that I am doing it myself. And I am thankful to my sister who bluntly reminded me that it was my doing and therefore my responsibility.

My second rule is to refuse to be limited by the expectations of others. You don't know what I can do.

>> Teresa (slide description): The sign said danger, expectations.
>> Alec: Because of the high level of my injury I was told flat out in rehab that I would not be able to use crutches and braces to walk, that I would be confined to a wheelchair. I remember the doctor actually refusing to prescribe braces so that I could learn to walk. But I was persistent and with temporary braces made out of plastic, I learned to walk in a new way. I walked out of the hospital using leg braces and crutches three months later and I continued to use them for the next 28 years. Others' expectations of what I was capable of didn't stop there. I returned to work four months after my fall but was told by my boss that I couldn't return to my old job as a or if sister. You can't possibly walk in the bushes he said. Instead a job had been lined for me at the tree nursery. But I saw the situation in a different light. Not as a problem but as a challenge. I needed to find a way that I could travel through the bush so I could continue to do my job. Not I can't but how can I.

By-refusing to accept my boss' beliefs of my limitations, I was able to keep my old job. And now I didn't walk through the bush but I drove

an all terrain vehicle. Every one of us has an experience of someone telling us you're too small, you're too old, you're too whatever or it's just not possible. Don't limit your potential by succumbing to these expectations that others have of you. Put aside all the reasons it won't work and believe in the one reason it will.

My third rule is to push yourself to step out of your comfort zone.

- >> Teresa (slide description): A beautiful toddler, wide-eyed with some expectations possibly down's syndrome. The quote says did you know I've got way more abilities than disabilities.
- >> Alec: I clearly remember the day that I was released from rehab and sent home. It was a day of unbelievable mental contrast. On one hand I was happy to be well and ready to get back to living a normal life. On the other hand there it was a real fear and uncertainty. A sense of danger. I was leaving the safety and comfort of the hospital and stepping out into a strange new world, a world designed for the able bodied and I was a person with a disability. It took tremendous courage to step through those doors and it was the first time through my accident that I had suffered through a period of significant depression. I worked through that by cultivating a sense of progress, by setting daily goals to myself and celebrating every small win. Challenges are what made life interesting and overcoming them is what made life meaningful.

When I was transferred to Sault Ste. Marie it was one of the snowiest winters on record. I had already been an active outdoor person in winter. With my injury I assumed that that was one of life's changes that I had just had to accept. But then in a magazine I saw a person being pushed along a cross-country ski trail in a sled like a bike with two skis. At that moment I discovered cross-country skiing for the disabled, sit skiing.

- >> Teresa (slide description): A picture of Alec sit skiing with his able bodied friends on trail.
- >> Alec: Sitting in a sled with two poles using poles to propel myself forward. With the help of some mechanical prints I [off microphone]. Now 25 years later you will find me going along north trails two or three times a week in exactly that same sled. There's something also about the raw power of the chainsaw coming through a big [off microphone] and the smell of fresh wood that I love. [off microphone]. It sure changed when I went to the university when I found out one

rule about cutting wood. Anyway, again this was something that I assumed was lost in the aftermath of my accident.

>> Teresa (slide description): A logging truck unloading a large pile of tree length logs.

>> Alec: When I was transferred to Peterborough in 2005, the home that I had purchased there was heated with wood. It was all the reason I needed to try cutting my own firewood again. I got a tandem load [off microphone] with a chainsaw and a wood splitter. It was certainly a challenge and at the time I had no idea if I could do this but with perseverance and experience I learned and adapted to the point where now it's something I actually look forward to doing. As some of you know, I was at spinal cord Ontario and [off microphone] challenges of living with a spinal cord injury. One of these folks that I'm working with lives up in Drury falls and he told me that he wants to join me cutting wood this summer so I'm going to have some help now. So now I can tell my mom, see, I'm not that crazy after all. But actually I know what she'll say. She'll say your both crazy.

[off microphone] and being able to do both again after having them thought to be impossible after my injury was a great boost to my counsel and self-esteem and it motivates me to continue to push my limits to accomplish even greater things in life. I am in pursuit of awesomeness and excellence is a minimum I will accept. [off microphone]

>> Teresa (slide description): A picture of Alec shooting had I bow in forest quarter finals at Sydney 2000 Paralympics.

>> Alec: I'm a strong supporter of the Paralympic movement. I think it's gone a long way toward changing perceptions of people with disabilities. [off microphone] during those years of competing I've met some incredibly inspiring people. Take Vivian Forrest for example.

>> Teresa (slide description): An image of paralympic blind skier Vivian Forrest skiing with her guide.

>> Alec: At the Vancouver games in 2010 Vivian skied her way [off microphone] at speeds of 110 kilometers an hour, guided from behind and receiving instructions with a 2-way radio. This to my way of thinking is not a person with a disability.

>> Teresa (commentary): My gosh.

>> Teresa (commentary): Did I miss something?

>> Alec: No, it's like really fast.

- >> Alec: That's my way of thinking, it's not a person with a disability but rather a person with an amazing ability. How many of us would like to try skiing blindfolded down a hill with somebody guiding us? They would be a good friend, right? That's what the paralympic movement is all about. It's really about changing our focus, seeing and appreciating the ability in disability. Kids often come up to me and say that it must be awful to be in a wheelchair. But it isn't. The wheelchair just takes the place of my legs. I want to change that attitude and perception and show that persons with disability can and do lead normal lives. In my 35 plus years as a person with a disability I've even some huge changes in the physical environment like ramps, curb cuts, accessible washrooms. Yet there are still many attitudinal barriers that we need to overcome.
- >> Teresa (slide description): A woman holding her hand in front of her as to moment "stop."
- >> Alec: The notion and belief that a person with a disability are dependent, they are sickly or in poor health, that they make inferior employees. For example, a study conducted by DuPont, 80% of the respondents agreed with the at the same time that a person with a disability is less likely to be hired for a job than a person without even though they are equally qualified. Perhaps this set reason why 50% of people with disability looking for work are (audio cutting out).

Attitudinal barriers. Not long ago I was standing in the line to cash a check. Before I could say anything the cashier looked over my head and asked the lady standing in line behind me if I wanted the money deposited in my cash or checking account and she assumed that the person standing behind me was my caregiver. How could a person with a wheelchair be out by himself? This year municipal council, not in this area but close by turned [off microphone] that would have made it accessible for persons with disability [off microphone]. The proposal was turned down because it was thought there was insufficient persons with a disability to use the facility for the amount of money that would be spent. And this is so wrong. Do you see why? Because it denied the person with a disability the same opportunity to use public facilities of somebody that doesn't have a disability. And that's just not right.

These attitudinal barriers are engrained in many of us older adults and for this reason that I organized a disability awareness event called

Time in My Shoes, for students in elementary schools. This evolved from a program held in the city and that's run by [off microphone].

Both of these programs provide the opportunity for kids to see and understand a bit of what life is like with a disability. In my program we divide kids into groups and throughout the day the kids get to play hockey, baseball, through an obstacle court in a wheelchair.

>> Teresa (slide description): A picture of Alec in his wheelchair helping a student also in a wheelchair navigate a wheelchair barrier.

>> Alec: They also get to experience visual impairment and through the use of special glasses. By the end of the day the students have gotten over their timidity [off microphone] and have a greater understanding of why [off microphone] are so important for those with a disability to get around and lead a normal life. A neighbor recently brought her grandsons over while I was out cutting wood. I just wanted him to see this, she explained. And I have come to realize that I inspire people not because I shoot arrows accurately. No, I inspire people around me simply by living a life as a person with a disability with abilities, not the disabilities. I am making a positive change in the way my neighbors and my community see persons with disability.

The fifth rule is to focus on my abilities and strengths and not to dwell on weaknesses but faced with a physical disability it is crucial to focus on the parts of the body that still work. Steven Hawking is on the screen, he's an amazing example of living this rule. In life we are not all created equal but we all have talents. Some realized and others waiting to be discovered. Get comfortable with yourself, flaws and all, and if we spend our life wishing we were someone else we'll end up deeply disappointed. I've always wanted to play a musical instrument and after several events of trying to learn to play guitar, I learned I was tone deaf so now I focus on listening to music discovered by others.

On the other hand I discovered four years ago that I have a talent for curling and I made it to the national championships with my partner Carlo there in 2011 and again this year so talents certainly discovered late in life.

Charles Darwin said -- and this is on the screen -- it is not the strongest or even the most intelligent that survive but those that are most able

to adapt to change. Think about that. All of us have an amazing ability to adapt but how often do we [off microphone] and fail to adapt. That's a critical key to living life successfully. Remember how Marty was unable to adapt to his reality? [off microphone] I can do just about anything I could do before my accident. I just need to find a different way of doing it. I can split and cut wood. I do it now sitting on the ground. I can play hockey and ski and now do it from a sled.

A good friend and pair Olympian [off microphone] he used to say you don't flow a life away just because a body gets busted up a bit.

My sixth rule is that life isn't fair, so get over it.

- >> Teresa (slide description): Two professional basketball players, one is extremely tall and the other one almost comes to the tall man's waist.
- >> Alec: Is it fair that a drunk driver hit the cyclist and she ends up disabled for life. Is it fair that a five-year-old boy develops cancer [off microphone] and losing his sight. It wasn't fair that a branch broke and that I fell and became a paraplegic. The fact that life isn't fair means nothing. It's just a fact. How we choose to respond to what happens around us and to us determines our quality of life, now how fair or unfair life has been. It all begins in our mind. What we give power to in our mind will have power over us if we allow it. If we constantly focus on the unfairness all around, then we [off microphone]. There are many people I've met with disabilities who have [off microphone] complaining about unfairness and have achieved great things in their lives. Gary fox and Rick Hansen come to mind and are on the screen. They did not dwell on the unfairness of their situation. Instead with a can do attitude [off microphone] significant impact on the lives [off microphone]

My seventh rule is that no one climbs a mountain alone.

- >> The fact that life isn't fair means nothing. It's just a fact. How we choose to respond to what happens around us and to us determines our quality of life The quote no one climbs a mountain alone. Be strong enough to stand alone, smart enough to know when you need help and brave enough to ask for it.
- >> Alec: Recently I saw a documentary about a man in a wheelchair who climbs a mountain in Africa, mountain Kilimanjaro. Through incredible perseverance he made it to within a few hundred meters of the summit. [off microphone] he was totally depressed having come

so far only to fail. Was then that one of guides said to him, no one climbs a mountain alone and they carried him to the summit.

This rule is about putting aside our ego and learning to ask for help and accepting help from others. After my accident I went into a state of absolute and total dependents on others in every aspect of my life. Every day I struggled to be a little less dependent on others. I remember great milestones like being able to turn myself in bed, sitting up by myself, transferring into a wheelchair, moving independently, washing, toileting, all the things that we take for granted. After leaving in rehab I overcompensated for this period of dependence by refusing help even when it made help at times to ask for assistance. It's not easy for anyone to admit they need help but I have learned that asking for help does not make me any less strong or capable. I've learned over the years that my goals seem to help others do so. We all benefit from a balance that is created.

And the eighth rule is to stay healthy by eating well and being physically active. Without our health we have nothing.

- >> Teresa (slide description): Alec in his wheelchair shovelling the snow. Also a sleeping baby and a bounty of fruit and vegetables.
- >> Alec: I know that being a high performance athlete has everything to do with how successful I've been in life and realizing my life goals, to having a great job, to having great relationships, to participate in sports, to be involved in community and to have a healthy full life. As a person with a disability I demand extraordinary effort from my upper body to compensate for the paralysis in my lower body. Participation in sports [off microphone] and focus on nutrition and health to meet that physical demand. But there's so much more that sport provides. Mental benefits like building self-esteem and self confidence, life skills such as team work, problem solving, accepting and learning from mistakes, commitment, dedication and striving for excellence.

Each and every one of us can realize these benefits so get involved in three, four or more sports. The ninth rule is to be happy, to have patience and to use humor.

- >> >> Teresa (slide description): We have snoopy giving a raspberry. It says every time you find some humor in a difficult situation, you win.
- >> Alec: This is where I get to tell my humorous little story. Awhile back I had a friend, we met in Kingston. It was a nice spring day so we

decided to go for a walk. So coming back on the trail there was a bit of a steep hill coming back in the parking lot so I got up through that and she said to me, that must be hard to do that. I said would you like to try it? So she did. She's a good sport. I transferred off my wheelchair and she took the wheelchair down the hill and started trying to come up so she was struggling mightily. She's not one to give us very easily. She's struggling just trying to push and push that chair. In the meantime a lady comes out of the parking lot, an older lady with two little dogs on the leash and she stands at the top of the trail and she can't go down because Cathy is blocking the trail. I'm sitting there hands behind my head, feet crossed and some lady looking at this poor woman trying to get up the hill in a wheelchair then she glares over at me. You know what she's thinking, right? I don't make eye contact. I sit there and eventually she clears her throat and looks at me again so I knew I had to say something so I said to her, I know, she's so damned slow I just get so tired of waiting for her all the time. One time I was going to use that for another rule that what you see is not what you get but I already had ten rules and I didn't want to go to 11 [off microphone] so I wasn't going to.

So being happy doesn't mean that everything is perfect. It means that one has chosen to look beyond the imperfections in life and to accept them. We live in a world with expectations of instant gratification. How many of us have been frustrated and impatient and we have to wait more than a few minutes at the drive through. Or others that honk their horn at the car in front of us when they didn't respond instantaneously at a green light. Patience has certainly been my best friend in coping with the frustrations of living in a world designed for the able bodied. I have adapted fully to using this wheelchair and I have come to realize that it's not so much my physical condition that is disabling but instead it's the full environment surrounding you that is disabling. By not being able to attend a meeting because there no ramp but only stairs. So patience and good humour goes a long way toward being happy and our hustle, bustle world.

Finally the tenth rule is simply that the meaning of life is to give life meaning. So the meaning of life is to give life meaning.

>> Teresa (slide description): Alec is on a hand cycle on a country road. The quote says a man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life. Charles Darwin.

>> Alec: Sport and physical activity are the means that enable me to give meaning to my life, to be independent, to make social connections, to have the courage to take risks and to accept the challenges to step through these doors. My being here today with you gives meaning to my life.

In summary --

>> Teresa (slide description): The slides go over the summary. Swim, take responsibility for your life. Don't be limited by others' expectations of you. Avenge yourself. Live the change you want to see. Focus on abilities not inabilities. Life isn't fair. Get over it. No one climbs a mountain alone. Be healthy. Be happy. Patience and humour. The meaning of life is to give life meaning.

>> Alec: Several years ago marked a significant milestone in my life. I was almost 30 years old when I was injured and now 30 plus years later I've lived the other half of my life as a disabled person. So the question that I ask myself often and that I leave you with is this. Is it possible that my life has been richer, fuller and happier because of that devastating injury 30 years ago?

>> Teresa (slide description): A picture of Alec with his son Nick and his grandson Owen, age six months.

>> Alec: Thank you.

[Applause]

>> CPD host (Stephanie): What a wonderful way to start our conference. Thank you. I challenge each of us if you can leave here today, use one of Alec's lessons, how will that change our next chapter for each of us so that is something to leave you with. It's a small token but thank you.

>> Alec: Thank you.

>> Everybody should make their way to their workshop that will start at 11:00. Thank you.

[Applause]

[End of session]

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