

## **I CAN Games Release**

**June 7, 2009**

I had gone to Dorintosh to report on an awards ceremony at a track and field event. Four people were to be given plaques to commemorate the parts they played in the establishment of the ICAN Games ten years ago.

I had thought that it would be an easy assignment: check out the awards, interview the people, watch a bit of the games, head home and write the story, but it wasn't that simple.

You see the I Can Games are a track and field event for kids with special needs. Ninety-five kids with special needs. Kids in wheelchairs, kids with walkers, kids with single disabilities and kids with multiple disabilities. Funny kids, happy kids and beautiful kids. Kids who are coping, and kids who are being helped to cope.

Kids from kindergarten to grade 12 from all over northwestern Saskatchewan. Children from Neilburg and Hillmond, and from Paradise Hill and Pierceland. Kids from Turtleford and Patuanak, and students from Dylan and Meadow Lake and Glaslyn and Marsden and all points between. Ninety-five children and young adults from twenty-two schools.

The idea for the games came in 2000 when three people, Brenda Neufeld, Dawn Kurjata and Sandra Bannister stood talking in a doorway in Dorintosh School and wondered how their school's Tri-meet could be made more successful for students with special needs. So they met with then-principal John Carr, and the Assistant Director Leona Coté, and then with other Special –Ed teachers and they came up with a plan for a games day that would feature both traditional track and field and fun events. Games that would, in the words of John Carr, "give these kids a chance to show what they can do." Then they brought in Elaine Yaychuk to make sure that every child would be able to stuff hotdogs into their mouths and grin big watermelon grins.

And now, ten years later, I'm standing watching as Brenda, Dawn, Elaine and John receive their plaques. I watch and listen as Carolyn Forsey, the Superintendent of Student Services, thanks the parents for "sharing their beautiful children with us." And afterwards I listen as Brenda tells me "it was the highlight of my teaching career."

At first, when you watch the I Can games, and move from event to event the differences aren't obvious. The parade of athletes is heartwarming and happy, all banners and enthusiasm. Then, as you move across the field, you see the high jumpers jumping, the shot-putters putting, and the javelins zipping through the air as you would at any track meet. The younger kids are chucking beanbags and softballs and running relay races and inside the gym the wheelchair athletes are swerving through the slalom course and running the relay. All things I expected to see.

But then I noticed more: I saw the community support and the trimmed grounds, and I noticed the volunteers, the people from the school and the town, the Lion's Club and the Northwest

Regional College. I noticed that all kinds of people who wouldn't normally have interactions with special needs kids were getting that opportunity and they were loving it.

Then I went to the Duck Hunt.

There's a kid in a wheelchair holding a water gun. A powerful water gun. In front of her on a table there are ducks. Bright yellow, happy ducks (as happy as plastic can be anyway). The kid holding the gun has a very serious look on her face. Big Robert Kahanapace, a volunteer from the Northwest Regional College, and the guy in charge of this particular event has a serious look on his face. And then the group leader Gary Mamer from the Lion's club of Dorintosh, a man who also has a serious look on his face, says "go!" and he begins quacking like a psychopathic duck on laughing gas. In the kid's ear! And then she starts to shoot and the ducks, not so happy now, begin to fall. And the crowd cheers the kid on until there's only one duck left, and Gary's still quacking, only louder now, and with eyes narrowed and focused and teeth gritted the kid takes dead aim and the last duck falls and the crowd of spectators goes NUTS and the kid, smiling and laughing, finger still pressing the trigger looks around at the crowd and they go even more nuts because now the gun barrel is pointing where she's looking and the crowd has some funny aversion to being cleaner and damper than they were a second before.

Then I went to the beanbag toss and the high jump, and the meaning of the games shone through, as clear as the deep blue skies of sweet summer.

Picture, if you will, the Olympic games. The high jump. An athlete runs, jumps, and either pumps their fists if they make it, or walks away head down if they didn't. Alone. Got that image in your head? Now picture the same Olympic games, the same high jump, and this time, imagine that when the competitor from Sweden starts her run up all the other competitors are cheering her on like crazy. And, when she makes the jump, they go nuts, with high fives and hugs. Then, when the next competitor starts their run up, all of the athletes cheer that person on. And so it goes until the end of the competition when it's congratulations and smiles and laughter all around. That's the ICAN games difference.

You see, the athletes at the I CAN games, they understand. They understand that its not about the 'me' and its not about the 'my school or my nation is better than yours' because on this particular Wednesday one athlete managed to jump 1.5 cm higher than all the others. They understand that each jump, successful of not, is a small triumph for humanity and for the human spirit, and as such, is something worthy of genuine and warm appreciation and applause. They understand that every time a person tries, every time a person says I CAN, they make a statement to every other athlete and every volunteer and every parent and spectator present. A statement about life and hope.

So if you have to choose between a day at the Olympics and a day at Dorintosh at the I CAN games, pick Dorintosh. At the Olympics all you get is the drama of sport. In Dorintosh you get the drama of sport, and the power of love.

And that's a beautiful thing.