# Torch brings spark of inspiration to Whitby

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WHITBY -- In the photo above, Richard Watters, right, carried the torch on a sailboat in the Whitby Harbour during the ParaPanAm torch relay celebration. At right, Jessica Goad carried the torch during the celebration in Whitby beside the Abilities Centre, which is hosting ParaPan Am competitions.

JASON LIEBREGTS / METROLAND

WHITBY -- The Pan Am Games have wrapped up but cheers continue to ring out locally as excitement builds for the Parapan Am Games, kicking off later this week.

Hundreds of community members gathered on the grounds of the Abilities Centre in Whitby Wednesday, Aug. 5 to celebrate the arrival of the Toronto 2015 Parapan Am Games torch. The state-of-the-art, fully accessible, multi-purpose facility at 55 Gordon St. will host the judo and boccia competitions during the Games, which will see 1,600 of the best para-athletes from 28 national paralympic committees facing off Aug. 7-15.

"We were huge fans of the Pan Am but more so the Parapan because we have lots of accessibility challenges with our family," said Lori Galligan of Port Perry, who attended the event with her children, Anthony, 11, Austin, 4, and Kaileigh, 3.

Anthony has spina bifida and Kaileigh has a complex genetic condition that affects the muscle tone in her legs. Both rely on a walker and wheelchair to get around.

"This is an excellent way for them to see 10 years down the road who they're looking at becoming and it gives them something to aspire to," Ms. Galligan said.

The Toronto 2015 Parapan Am Games will be the largest ever held and will include 15 sports at 11 different competition venues that have been designed to operate and deliver accessible options for both athletes and spectators. All sports will be qualifiers for the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.

Earlier this week, on Aug. 3, two Parapan Am flames were lit at special ceremonies -- one in Ottawa and one in Niagara Falls -- to kick off the torch relay for the Toronto 2015 Parapan Am Games. The flames will be carried by more than 250 torchbearers who will help share the Parapan Am spirit in 12 communities during the relay's five-day journey, which will conclude on Friday, Aug. 7 with the lighting of the cauldron at the opening ceremony in Toronto.

For the Whitby leg of the relay, the flame travelled first on sailboat along the harbour and then was carried via handcycle to the community celebration by Shelley Gautier, world champion and Parapan Am silver medallist in para-cycling.

"We're all disabled people competing and seeing all the people here show their support for us is incredible," said Ms. Gautier. "It means so much."

Christine Grant of Waterloo was in town for a lacrosse tournament at nearby Iroquois Park Sports Centre when she heard what was happening next door and decided to stop by.

"We have been to lots of the Pan Am Games and we're probably going to watch some of the Parapan Am Games as well," she said. "The athletes are amazing, especially when you consider the hurdles that they have to overcome."

Jim Lawrie, chairman of the Town of Whitby's Accessibility Advisory Committee, said the Games are a perfect way to cast a spotlight on accessibility and the importance of diversity and inclusion.

"It's an opportunity to highlight a place like the Abilities Centre and the people that we have here that are focused on accessibility issues," he said.

"There are also some very good restaurants and local stores that are going out of their way to be accessible so it's a way to let businesses know there is a market for all these things. We're going to have an influx of people who need (improved) access and we want to raise awareness about how they can expand their market."

The Abilities Centre, which opened its doors in June 2012, sets new standards in Ontario and Canada for accessibility and inclusive, innovative programs that enable people of all abilities and ages to lead healthy, active lives.

Leo Plue, executive director of the centre, was one of the torchbearers during the torch relay. Earlier this year, he told This Week that Parapan Am organizers had their eye fixed on the facility as a potential venue for the Games as far back as the opening. "Everybody who's been here has been blown away by it," he said.

"The international paralympic committee president from Germany came through with his crew fairly early in the process and he told me he thought this was the most accessible sporting venue in the world for parasport."

That means when it comes to accessibility features, the Abilities Centre was "Games-ready from the get-go," he said.

"The Toronto2015 people obviously were visiting all the venues and looking at the accessibility features of them with a list of things that they needed to ensure were in place, such as ramps and so on," he said. "They come here and say, 'no action required' because it's all done."

Abilities Centre and Parapan Am volunteer Mel Clench of Ajax said he signed up to help out during the Games after spending "nine months on the couch" following his son's death by suicide last year. Shayne, 17, battled depression and social anxiety and was bullied in school.

"It was basically just to give back to the community and it also gave me the opportunity to talk to people," said Mr. Clench, revealing a tattoo of Shayne's face etched on his arm.

"A lot of times people ask me about the tattoo and I get the conversation going about mental illness."

Mr. Clench added he's proud to be part of an event that celebrates the accomplishments of athletes who've had to overcome adversity to achieve their dreams.

"I think of what they had to go through to get where they are now -- they inspire people."

Visit www.toronto2015.org for more information and to purchase tickets for the Toronto 2015 Parapan Am Games.

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