

OPINION-EDITORIAL

EXCELLING BEYOND BARRIERS – BRITISH COLUMBIANS WITH DISABILITIES

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Dec. 3, 2006
(697 words)

Ida has been looking forward to this evening all week. Geared with both her video and digital cameras, she is determined not to miss one moment of her nine-year-old granddaughter's acting debut as the princess in the school's winter play.

A couple of blocks away, a group of young professionals have gathered at a trendy new restaurant to celebrate the recent promotion of a co-worker. They've chosen the perfect place. The atmosphere is electric and full of the cool sounds of a popular local jazz player. The food is delectable – some of the best they've ever tasted – prepared by a chef with a reputation as being one of B.C.'s finest.

If asked, could you tell me which of these individuals has a disability? Is it the grandmother, granddaughter, the recently promoted co-worker, the jazz player or the chef? The fact is it could be any one of them.

Today, in British Columbia, there are approximately 570,000 people with disabilities – 13.4 per cent of our population. They are parents, children, neighbours, friends and co-workers and they are an integral part of our community.

To recognize and celebrate the important roles, contributions and achievements of people with disabilities in our communities, the B.C. government is proclaiming December 2006 as Persons with Disabilities Month.

This proclamation is to honour the 25th Anniversary of the United Nations' Year of Disabled Persons – a year that emphasized full participation and equality of persons with disabilities through increasing public awareness, understanding and acceptance. It is also in acknowledgement of Dec. 3 as International Day of Disabled Persons.

Since the United Nations declared 1981 as International Year of Disabled Persons and established International Day of Disabled Persons, we have made tremendous strides in increasing our awareness and understanding of people with disabilities and making our communities accessible.

Still, there's much to be done. It's time to think beyond accessibility and move towards full inclusion of people with disabilities. That's why it is the priority of this government to build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities so that they are able to participate in every aspect of our communities and reach their personal best.

To this end, we invest significantly in services for people with disabilities – spending more than \$3.6 billion each year to fund about 80 major programs. These programs include enhanced health and dental supports, social housing, home supports and residential care programs as well as income, employment and transportation supports.

To achieve full inclusion we need to enhance opportunities for people with disabilities to participate and contribute in their local economy. The majority of people with disabilities in British Columbia are working-age and many want and are able to work. Many of them have the same education as those without disabilities. Thirty-four thousand have college diplomas, 30,000 have trade certificates, and 28,000 have university degrees – yet people with disabilities only have a 44 per cent employment rate.

To address this imbalance, the government has introduced a full range of employment and pre-employment services including job training and placement, the provision of technical equipment and adaptive accommodations and follow-up workplace support.

These programs are only a start. Through the Minister's Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities, we have introduced a number of innovative projects to further improve employment opportunities. Most recently we issued the 10 by 10 Challenge aimed at increasing employment for persons with disabilities in each community in B.C. by 10 per cent by 2010. That's another 13,000 people with disabilities sharing in the rewards of our booming economy.

To succeed in this challenge we are seeking the participation of business and community leaders across the province. Meeting this challenge is our opportunity to build on our achievements and assist people with disabilities to excel beyond barriers they still face. Business and communities can sign on to this challenge by registering their participation on the 10 by 10 Challenge website at www.eia.gov.bc.ca/epwd/10by10.

Our ultimate goal in this challenge – as with our provincewide Disability Strategy – is to establish British Columbia as the leading place in Canada where people with disabilities can live the life they choose. Working together, I am confident that we will attain it.