

PRESENTING

The Honourable
David C. Onley

AWARD

In tribute to our 28th Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the CFPDP introduced *The Honourable David C. Onley Award* in 2014. The award recognizes examples of extraordinary service to Canadians who live with disability. This year's winner is **Tamara Gordon**, founder of the Tamara Gordon Foundation, which provides financial assistance to students with physical disabilities who are pursuing post-secondary studies.

FROM A YOUNG AGE, Tamara Gordon, founder of the Tamara Gordon Foundation, played sports with a passion, showing such promise in high school basketball that she caught the attention of U.S. college scouts. However, her budding potential was cut short in 2002, when at the age of 16, she sustained a spinal cord injury during a high school skiing accident.

The injury left her paralyzed from the waist down, with partial paralysis of her left arm.

Despite the setback, Gordon graduated on time from College Street Secondary as an Ontario Scholar with a 91% average and went on to earn a degree in Administrative Studies at York University. While there, she headed the student caucus for undergraduates with disabilities and served as the student undergraduate representative for Access York.

It was her time as the undergraduate rep at York that led to the idea of providing scholarships to post-secondary students with physical disabilities.

"I would hear from the students about the challenges of having a physical disability on campus," said Gordon. "One of the things many of them told me was that they were struggling with funding."

The cost of schooling can be higher for students with disabilities because they may need to pay for extra services and, if their disability requires them to carry a lower course load, it can take longer to graduate.

"The wheels started turning in my head," said Gordon, who herself required six years to complete her four-year degree.

In 2013, with her mother, Marcia Gordon, serving as executive director, she established the Tamara Gordon Foundation. The foundation provides scholarships of \$750 to \$3000 to students with physical disabilities studying



at an Ontario university or college.

The scholarships are awarded by a Selection Committee that takes into account an applicant's grades, needs and volunteering activities. The financial awards are granted on an annual basis, and recipients in good standing may re-apply in subsequent years.

"Our first year, we gave out, I think, six scholarships, and this year we gave out 30," said Gordon.

Currently, the Foundation operates only in Ontario, but Gordon says the need exists everywhere, and she hopes to expand Canada-wide in the next few years. "One day,

I would love for the Foundation to be Global," she adds. "Wherever in the world a student with a physical disability needs assistance, I'd love to be able to help them."

Gordon credits her mother with instilling in her a commitment to giving back to her community. Following her accident, she created an annual back-to-school event for her neighbourhood, with activities for kids and school supplies handed out for free. She also arranged BBQs and dinners at Thanksgiving and Christmas for seniors and people with disabilities living in her building.

"I have a really strong backbone, and my mom backs me in everything that I do," Gordon said. "When you have people in your corner who believe in your vision, it makes trying to achieve things a lot easier."

Tamara is the proud recipient of more than 60 Academic Scholarships and Awards of Distinction, including the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal and the Planet Africa Nelson Mandela Humanitarian Award. As well, she was elected as an Advisory Council Member of the Prince's Trust Canada and has been recognized as one of Canada's 150 Black women who have made a place in Canadian History.