

# THE TRADITION CONTINUES

## MEET THE CANADIAN DISABILITY HALL OF FAME 2020 INDUCTEES

*This year's Hall of Fame inductees continue a great tradition of athletic excellence, advocacy and leadership.*



### MARTHA SANDOVAL GUSTAFSON *Athlete*

Few athletes have had as long a career as Martha Sandoval Gustafson. Born in Tampico, Mexico in January 1950, she began training in her mid-20s after being inspired by a group of people playing wheelchair basketball.

"I was taking some secretary courses at a rehab centre," says Gustafson. "I saw people playing basketball in old chairs and it just caught my attention. I thought, how can they play in a wheelchair like that? So, then I started being involved in sports in Mexico City."

She continues, "They encouraged me, and I became involved in the team slowly. I started training in 1974, for the whole year, but did not compete. In my mind, you have to train before competing. In 1975, I started competing in nationals, and then they chose me to go to the [1976 Summer Paralympics] in Stoke Mandeville, England." Gustafson took home three gold medals that year, and won a total of 12 Paralympic medals for Mexico.

The talented, multi-sport competitor has come a long way since then, moving to Canada to get married and raise a family. All that time, she continued training and competing – this time wearing the maple leaf. Gustafson admits to getting chills when she thinks about how she is representing her new home country. Among her notable accomplishments, she won six golds and one silver for Canada at the 1984 Summer Paralympics.

In total, Gustafson has 200+ medals from international, national, and provincial events across a range of sports, including track and field, swimming, and table tennis. She is ranked as Canada's second most-decorated Paralympian with 19 medals, 12 gold and seven silver. This ties Gustafson with Yukon swimmer Stephanie Dixon, and is just two shy of Quebec's legendary wheelchair track athlete

Chantal Petitclerc. Seemingly with no limits to her abilities, Gustafson even once participated in a swimming event when she was five months pregnant with her son, Chris.

At the 2011 IPC Athletics World Championships, Gustafson won bronze in shot put and set a championship record. That same year, she won gold in the shot

put at the Canadian Track and Field Championships. In 2019, not long before her 70th birthday, she was the oldest member of the Canadian Parapan Am team in Lima, Peru. And to this day, she remains an active para-sport athlete.

"I get [teased] about my age sometimes," she says. "Just recently, a woman who was starting on my team, said, 'Why are you still competing? You have so many medals?' I said, 'It's not because I have medals, or I don't have medals; it's because I want to do it for myself. And I want to compete, to always try harder, because I represent our country.'"

As a still young septuagenarian, Gustafson stresses the importance of staying active as one ages

– and at any age. On cold winter days, she can often be found in a curling rink.

As for why it is important to showcase athletes with disabilities, Gustafson emphasizes that we all feel better when we are active and doing things with family or friends. "I try to encourage people to do something that they like, any kind of sport; [it could be] table tennis," she says.

Showing few signs of slowing down, Gustafson has turned her attention in part to a new sport, and it is one she invented herself.

"It's called Race Wheels," she says proudly, explaining that it is kind of like race walking for able-bodied people, only this is for people who use a manual wheelchair, and they can only use one hand at a time. "They also have to wear a helmet, just in case," adds Gustafson.

As an international competitor, Gustafson has met many



interesting people and travelled to places she might never have seen were it not for sports. She beams with pride over photos of herself with Prince Charles and Sir Ludwig “Poppa” Guttmann, the founder of the Paralympic Games and a pioneering neurologist who transformed the way patients with spinal cord injuries are treated.

Like so many others, both athletes and fans, Gustafson is now eagerly waiting to travel to the Tokyo Olympics which, unfortunately, were postponed until the summer of 2021 because of the pandemic. But, in the meantime, she is excited about being inducted into the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame.

“My God, I can't believe it! It is like a dream,” she exudes. “I am so happy, but I never expected this.”



### **TIM CORMODE** *Builder*

**W**e've all heard of people who have an “aha moment,” which has been described by Merriam-Webster as “a moment of sudden inspiration, insight, recognition, or comprehension.” Such moments can change one's life and even make the world a better place.

When Tim Cormode was 28 years old, he took a three-month outdoor leadership program at the Yamnuska Mountaineering School in Canmore, Alberta. It was there, on the side of a mountain, that he suddenly realized exactly what he wanted to do with his life.

“I wasn't sure where my life was going, and I just suddenly thought how cool it would be to help all the people I had worked with experience the benefits of the outdoors, as I was doing right then and there,” he recalls.

Up to that point, Cormode had spent considerable time working with young adults with disabilities, both in a community-based summer program when he was still in high school, and at a group home throughout his university years.

He knew his dream was a big one, but he did not hesitate to pursue it.

Not long after experiencing his “aha moment,” Cormode maxed out his credit card to get a flight to Colorado, where he spent two weeks volunteering as a camp counsellor at the Breckenridge Outdoor Education Center. At the time, Breckenridge was a one-of-a-kind facility providing outdoor education and accessible experiences for people with disabilities.

As an outdoor enthusiast himself, Cormode saw an opportunity to combine nature with adventure to help

people of varying abilities build confidence, make connections, and achieve their dreams. With a small government grant, and after his time in Colorado, Cormode founded Power to Be, a non-profit organization that helps people who are facing cognitive, physical, financial, and social barriers to access nature.

“I came back from Breckenridge and started the business with the passion, the understanding, and the inspiration to get it done,” he says.

Cormode continues, “It's not just about having an opportunity to kayak for the first time and then building that skill to potentially independently kayak on their own, or going camping on their own. Those would be some of the outdoor skills [that participants

learn], but I think the other skill is an understanding of perseverance. I think that when you get out for the first time or continue to participate in these types of activities, you start to feel confidence in yourself. You really start to see what's possible versus what's not possible, and a little activity can go a long way in someone's life.”

Twenty-five years after Cormode's visit to Breckenridge, Power to Be is about to build its own \$14-million, world-class facility near Victoria, British Columbia to further enhance the experiences it already offers.

“Power to Be is really about what the magic of the outdoors means to all of us and its importance to our society,” says Cormode. “I'm so driven by spending time in the outdoors. I think Power to Be represents the evidence-based results of the amount of time I've spent in nature, and the ideas that I've generated to help make this possible.”

While Cormode's own enthusiasm tends to keep him in the limelight, he humbly acknowledges the help and dedication of those around him, including the entire Power to Be team, the program participants and their families, as well as his own parents, who served as early role models working in healthcare.

“My parents taught me the value of giving back,” he says proudly. “That inspires me to work harder and do more to help others, but we would not exist today if it weren't for the many volunteers and staff who have put so much energy and time into this organization. They bring passion and create a really caring environment. You might say that Power to Be is itself a family, a place where people feel they belong.”

To date, Power to Be has helped more than 8,000 people belong, empowering them to learn new skills and

reach their full potential through a variety of adapted outdoor activities.

“Power to Be has been my life project,” says Cormode. “It has brought me joy and inspired me to go out and do good things every single day. But I just can't echo enough that this award really is not just for me and my team; it's really about and for all the participants who have come out, put their best foot forward, and inspired us to do the work that we do.”

## MEENU SIKAND

*Achiever*

Since an unexpected spinal cord injury during surgery left her paralyzed at the age of 22, not long after emigrating to Canada from her native India, Meenu Sikand has dedicated her life to helping people with disabilities, both at home and abroad. It is not a life that she expected or planned for, but it is one that she has embraced with her whole heart.

“I remember waking up one day in the hospital and thinking ‘I'm going to be a burden on everyone,’” says Sikand. “I was not sure what a person with a disability would aspire to, what a life with a disability would mean.”

For Sikand, it turned out to be a life filled with what she calls accidental advocacy.

“I think in exploring and setting a vision for myself, I realized the barriers I was facing were not unique to me; they were experienced by others as well. Therefore, I decided not only to speak for myself but to speak for those whose voices remain silent due to systems perpetuating discrimination and oppression. I have multiple identities. I am a South Asian woman, an immigrant, a parent, a caregiver, a person with a disability, and a professional. So, I wanted to make sure that I use my privileges to amplify the missing voices in these categories, and the collective gains we make, benefit all of us, without excluding some.”

Today, Sikand is an award-winning international disability rights advocate and a sought-after speaker who has travelled the world providing education on disability-related topics ranging from mental health and cultural competencies to parenting and race.

“I think that inclusion, acceptance and respect for differences is so important for us as individuals and as a society,” she says. “If we are privileged enough to be in a position to make that happen for others, we should make sure we are an ally and amplify the voices that are missing. At the same



time, we can work on creating the space for those missing voices so we are not only speaking for those who are absent but we are actually actively promoting those voices to become engaged and speak for themselves.”

When she is not on the road championing accessibility and inclusivity, Sikand serves as the executive lead for equity, diversity, and inclusion at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto. She is also the founder of Accessibility for All, a non-profit organization that works to identify, address, and meet the needs of marginalized communities.

“I wanted to create an organization where we could talk about accessibility for all, without any exceptions, without any exclusion, and raise the voices of those whose voices are not around the table or not heard,” she says.

While Sikand works on behalf of all people with disabilities, she has a special interest in issues that are specific to immigrants and persons of colour.

“I think at the beginning, when I started to join others in the disability community, I realized that they really did not understand the issues that were specific to immigrants or persons of colour. There were silos, but in my own community there is cultural relevance and a sensitivity to my own cultural-based needs. To this day, I go to large events and I am the only one who is speaking as a person of colour. I want to see that changed. I want to see young people and women with disabilities who are also persons of colour or minorities or immigrants as part of this conversation because they have a lot to offer. We all come to this country, we have something to offer, like our family network, our culture, and our own understanding of what it means to have a disability.”

After three decades of working to improve the lives of people with disabilities, Sikand is thrilled to be inducted into the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame.

“It's good to be recognized for the work that I am so passionate about and thinking that we are finally at a stage where we're not excluded because of our differences. We are celebrated because of our differences. I think that is a lifetime dream for me, when inclusion is celebrated. This honour is a validation. I am proud that my homeland sees me not as a burden, but as a contributing member of society who has helped make my adopted country a better place. That is truly an honour.”