

Haberer keeps her eyes firmly on the pool after four-medal win in Vancouver



By Brock Weir

Aurora's Mary Haberer admits to having a bit of nerves as she got into the pool for the first of her many races earlier this month in Vancouver.

But the Special Olympian forged ahead, getting over her nerves by sticking to her personal motto: "Just keep swimming."

It was a strategy which paid off as the local athlete returned to Aurora last Monday four medals richer, bagging two silvers and two bronzes in the Special Olympics Summer Games. Facing off against competitors from across Canada, Ms. Haberer picked up a silver in the 100m, a silver in the 50m Freestyle Relay, a bronze in the 200m freestyle, and a further bronze in the 25m butterfly.

"It was very exciting," says Mary of her time in the pool. "I beat my personal time, I think! I was nervous. I just kept swimming [to get over it] and it was all about practice. Last fall I joined Fitness Clubs of Canada and that helped.

"I swam against all new people and made lots of new friends who came from all over Canada."

The Special Olympics Summer Games ran in Vancouver from July 8 to July 12. Billed as the largest-ever games adding three new sports to the mix, it was very much a family affair for the Haberers as Mary, and her parents Sally and Thomas, each visited the Pacific coast for the very first time.

"They had swimmers grouped by province in order to accommodate that big a crowd into the pool, and I am sure it was a challenge to know where everyone was at all times," recalls Sally. "Security was really, really tight. In fact, we almost couldn't get into the pool to watch her compete. We registered early on but they decided after the opening ceremonies on the Tuesday night that there were too many parent observers to safely fit into the viewing stands by the pool.

"We were met at the top of the stairs and they said, 'You may not be able to get in and watch Mary swim!' but Karen Richards from York Regional Police came to our aid and they gave us badges for everybody. It hadn't occurred to them to check out the human limit of the venue, but it all worked out all right."

And how! With four new medals under her belt, Mary has now outgrown the shadow box she has for her medals that decorate the downstairs landing, something Thomas dubs "Mary's Ego Wall."

While they were thrilled being able to look out their windows every morning to see the mountains, take in regular whiffs of the ocean air, take a trip up to Whistler, and an eye-opening trip to Wreck Beach, a week on from the actual games, it's still clear that the

real thrills took place in the water.

"I was thrilled," said Sally. "And I was also relieved because everyone said, 'Show us your medals when you get back!' and I thought, 'I hope she gets some.' I think Mary was a little nervous about the 'What if I didn't get a medal?' It was, number one a relief, and, number two, we were really proud of her. They had podiums?"

"Teeny weeny ones," interjects Mary, with a laugh.

But the Haberers also enjoyed the chance to talk to other people from across Canada who had benefited in the same way they had from the Special Olympics Program.

"When I was a kid many years ago, I went to grade school with kids who had challenges - emotional problems, learning disabilities - and they were just shuffled around," says Thomas. "There was never anything like this for them and there was never anywhere for them to go."

Mary joined Special Olympics when she was 21, first getting her feet wet in the Special Olympics softball team in Newmarket. At that point, she was already an enthusiastic swimmer, and she was spotted in the pool one day by a teacher at Cardinal Carter Catholic High School who asked if it would be okay if they asked her to join the high school team.

"I was moved to tears because she had tried out for other teams, but it had never worked," says Sally. "There wasn't a place for her and suddenly she was invited to join a team. That was awesome. Swimming was always one of her favourite things and it opened up the door a little bit for her. Special Olympics has just been amazing."

The Haberers might be modest when they say it opened up the door a "little bit" for her. Since that watershed moment, she has added basketball and golf to her swimming and softball, and also has designs of getting back onto the Special Olympics Bowling team, and trying her hand on their newly established bocce team.

"I just love meeting new people," says Mary.