

Unstoppable Tracy proves 'anything is possible'?



By Brock Weir

Whether it's tying your shoe, rising through the ranks to become a World Cup sailor, or climbing the Himalayas, Tracy Schmitt has dedicated her life to proving anything is possible.

The Canadian woman who was born a four-way amputee has shared her inspiring message alongside the likes of Jane Fonda and shared her story with Oprah, but Ms. Schmitt got up close and personal with some of Aurora's youngest residents, speaking before kids at the Aurora Children's Centre over March Break on Thursday.

'I was lucky enough to be born a four-way amputee,' Ms. Schmitt shared with The Auroran ahead of meeting the kids. 'Every time people say, 'Oh, I don't think you can do that,' I learned to shut that down. I thought, 'I can eat with a spoon. Of course, I can go play on the lawn with those kids.' Everyone was saying, 'I don't think you can do that,' or, 'I'm not sure, it might be hard,' or, 'You have no hands, how are you going to use scissors?' I learned that because I was born with no hands or legs that I had to not listen to those things.

'If I wanted to do it, I had to make it happen because everyone around me was going to be loving and careful and want to set me up for success by avoiding failure, but that doesn't work because you have to fail to figure it out. A success is just someone who didn't let failure stop them, someone who just tried one more time. I was just lucky to be born limb-itless. It gave me an advantage - it gave me a leg up!'

Indeed it has - from the earliest age, Ms. Schmitt has been dedicated to proving the naysayers

wrong. Standing at the head of the gym on her prosthetic legs, she said she wanted to have some special time with the kids before she began her talk, conscious, she said, that some kids might be initially afraid of what they saw.

There didn't however, seem to be any trepidation in the dozens of young eyes that the Unstoppable Tracy kept transfixed as she told them of taking her first strides as a young student, defying the expectations of her principal, and going from strength to strength.

In some ways, these early experiences set something of a tone.

Born with a love for the sea, Tracy did everything she could to be in the water.

In addition to mastering scuba diving and learning how to waterski on a knee board, she had a particular love of sailing.

When I started, I was always falling out of the boat, but I just kept getting back in, said Ms. Schmitt, who was born with legs that stop just above the knee and arms that end just below the elbow. It never entered my mind not to be sailing. I knew how to sail, I just didn't know how to stay in the boat! Once I learned how to balance, the rest is history.

That might be something of an understatement, as this history is quite a storied one.

Harbouring a Paralympic dream, Tracy decided to load up the car and head to Miami. Her goal was to meet Olympic Gold Medallist Magnus Liljedahl and learn from the master on the road to the Paralympic Trials.

At first, Magnus didn't know what to do with her as, one, sailing was a very male-dominated sport and, second, she was a four-way amputee.

I figure who you surround yourself with is who you become, so I wanted to surround myself with Gold Medal-winning able-bodied Olympians and really fantastic sailors, she said. Many of my competitors in the Paralympic world have disabilities, but they were sailors in the able-bodied world first. Very few of them were born this way like I am, so I thought if I am going to beat them I have to surround myself with what's an even further stretch.

It was a tough road, however. To prove to Magnus that she wasn't just a flash in the pan she did a lot of the grunt work associated with the sport, including cleaning the boats, to prove

that she wouldn't be disillusioned.

After three months of sleeping in my car, eventually something came up on the dock and I was 'Tracy to the Rescue' and Magnus could finally see I could sail. Because of Magnus' distinction, we ended up touching every single boat in the Olympics and the Paralympics in London 2012, and Rio 2016. I supported him in my administrative support in getting Paralympic Sports Club status. We became Paralympic Sports Club status Team Paradise. We supported all sailors with or without disabilities for the Olympics and the Paralympics. It wasn't my known journey; I went out there because I wanted to represent Canada and, instead, I ended up supporting Magnus and all sailors growing into this Paralympic Sports Club that was international, and we supported Olympic sailors too. I didn't make it to the Paralympics. I did make it to London's and Rio's trials and I made it to World Cup regattas where I sailed against 27 able-bodied men and only three girls, and I was the only one with no hands and no legs. It was a great journey, but my journey was bigger. It wasn't 'Unstoppable Tracy', it was 'Unstoppable You.'

I went down to be with Magnus and everything blew up massive. I just wanted to be a sailor, but what I didn't realise is the impact it has on others. It is not inspiration, it is more than inspiration because it is life-changing, actionable. People listen, they hear it, they go away and sail the race of their life, but a child thinks, 'I can do this! I can tie a shoelace! I can be a ballerina even if I am super-tall. I can be a basketball player even if I am tiny. It doesn't matter if I am black or white. It doesn't matter if I am lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, it doesn't matter if I have a disability or not, it doesn't matter if I am a female in a male-dominated sport.'

The message is simple: Nobody left behind.