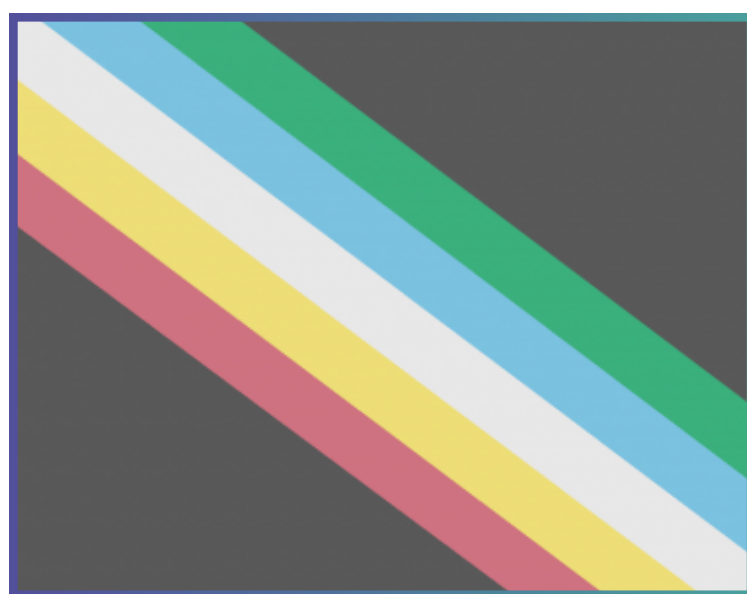


CERC IN HEALTH EQUITY AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING *PERSPECTIVES*

CELEBRATING DISABILITY PRIDE MONTH: ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPROVEMENTS

By Yasmeen Aslam

In 2022, 27 percent (8 million) of Canadians aged 15 or older identified as having a disability (Government of Canada, 2022). In 2023, Ontario created Bill 128, the Disability Pride Month Act, which proclaims the month of July as Disability Pride Month (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2023).



The Disability Flag (Ann McGill)

During this month, we celebrate persons who experience disability, their positive contributions to society, and their identities and cultures. In 2019, Ann Magill designed the Disability Flag, with each colour having its own meaning. All six of the colours represent that disability spans borders between nations, and the black background represents mourning for victims of ableist violence and abuse.

For the six colours, the meanings are: Diagonal band: cutting across the walls and barriers that separate disabled people from society; red stripe: physical disabilities; gold stripe: neurodivergence; white stripe; invisible and undiagnosed disabilities; blue stripe: psychiatric disabilities; and

green stripe: sensory disabilities (Canadian Association for Supported Employment, 2023).

Across Canada, there have been many achievements and improvements for people with disabilities. The *Accessible Canada Act* was introduced on June 20, 2018, with a goal to make Canada barrier-free for people with disabilities by January 1, 2040 (Government of Canada, 2020). The purpose of the Act is identifying and preventing barriers in priority areas, such as places of employment, public spaces, buildings, communication, and transportation (Government of Canada, 2020).

The Act also implemented principles, which includes treating everyone with dignity, everyone being able to participate equally in society, and persons with disabilities must be involved in the development of laws, policies, and services (Government of Canada, 2020).



Terry Fox during his Marathon of Hope (The Globe and Mail)

This month is a time to celebrate the achievements people with disabilities have accomplished. Canadians with disabilities have achieved extraordinary milestones across sports, human rights, the arts, and public service. A household name in Canada is Terry Fox. After having his right leg amputated due to cancer, he began the Marathon of Hope to raise money for cancer research. Even after his passing in 1981, his legacy lives on, with people

taking part in yearly runs across the country in September (Terry Fox Foundation, 2021). As of February 2026, the Terry Fox Foundation has surpassed \$1 billion dollars raised for cancer research (Johnstone, 2026).

Rick Hansen is another Canadian who has achieved great milestones. On the way home from a fishing trip in 1973, Hansen was involved in an accident at 15-years-old when the pickup truck he and his friend were riding lost control. He sustained a spinal cord injury, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

However, this didn't deter him, as he went on to establish himself as a successful athlete, winning 19 wheelchair marathons, three world titles, and 15 medals (six at the Paralympic Games and nine at the Pan American Games). He was also named Canada's Disabled Athlete of the Year in 1979, 1980, and 1982 (Rick Hansen Foundation, 2023).

In the arts, Michael J. Fox, a Canadian actor best known for the *Back to the Future* films, has also persevered while having Parkinson's disease, which is a nervous system disorder that affects movement. After being diagnosed in 1991 at age 29, Fox continued acting, and in 2000, he launched The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research. While acting in supporting roles throughout the years, Fox incorporated his condition to the



Michael J. Fox in *Back to the Future*
(Universal Pictures)

characters he played, and earned multiple Emmy nominations for his work (The Michael J. Fox Foundation, 2019).

Other accomplished Canadians with disabilities include Carla Qualtrough, Beryl Potter, and Steven Fletcher. Carla Qualtrough is a successful lawyer and Paralympic swimmer, and served as the Minister of Sport and Physical Activity from July 2023 to December 2024. Qualtrough has been visually impaired since birth, and in 2015, she was appointed the first-ever minister responsible for persons with disabilities in Canada (Robinet, 2021).

Beryl Potter was an activist and a triple amputee wheelchair user with a visual impairment. She advocated for accessibility in transportation, organizing a volunteer service of wheelchair accessible vans to provide transit for disabled persons. She lobbied for the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) to take over the program, and it turned into the WheelTrans program (Galer, 2024).



Beryl Potter (The Walrus)

Steven Fletcher is a former politician who played a central role in shaping the framework for key economic and social programs. A C4 quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down, Fletcher became the first quadriplegic elected to the Parliament of Canada and the first person with a visible disability appointed to the Federal Cabinet. He was a core member of decision-making during the 2008 financial crisis, where he

ensured the continuation of essential services and national infrastructure (A Seat at the Table, 2016). These Canadians and countless others have shaped disabilities in remarkable ways and have paved the way for future generations.



Image from @katierainbow via Canva.com

However, while there have been many achievements and success stories, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. More than 1.5 million people with disabilities in Canada are living below the poverty line, and the employment rate remains significantly lower than that of the general population (Canadian Labour Congress, 2025). People with disabilities also receive lower quality healthcare, attributing symptoms to the disability rather than identifying separate conditions (Able Canada, 2025).

As we celebrate the achievements Canadians with disabilities have accomplished throughout the last few decades, we should also take the time to notice and reflect on what is missing. It should be a national goal to ensure every Canadian living with a disability does not feel marginalized and isolated in a place they call home.

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