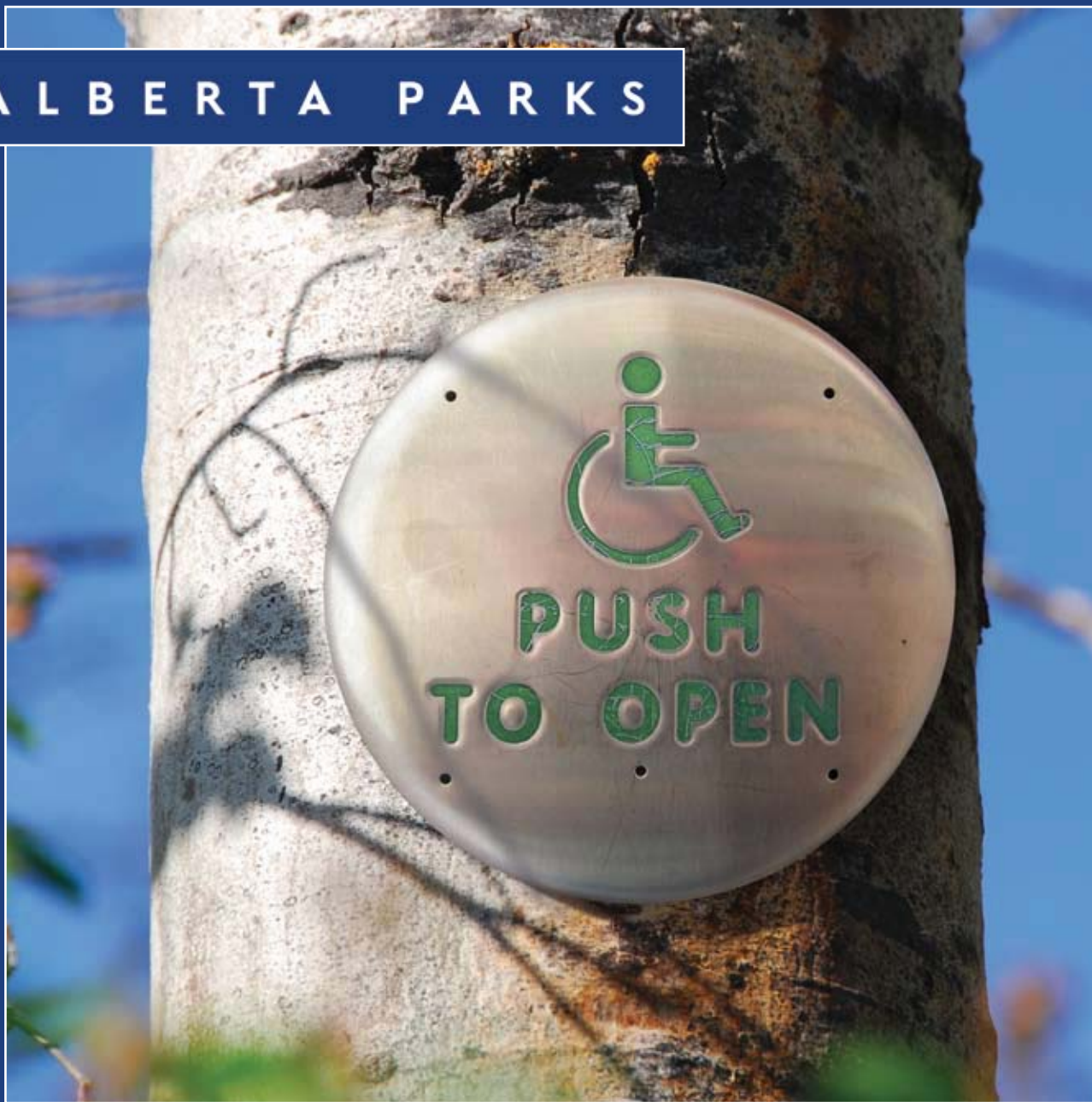


ALBERTA PARKS



Alberta

Freedom To Create. Spirit To Achieve.

push to open

the 2008 alberta parks access challenge



push to open

the 2008 alberta parks access challenge
written by don carruthers den hoed



dedicated to jeanne lougheed
and ross watson

the pushing champions

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alberta tourism, parks and recreation
parks division
kananaskis country outreach

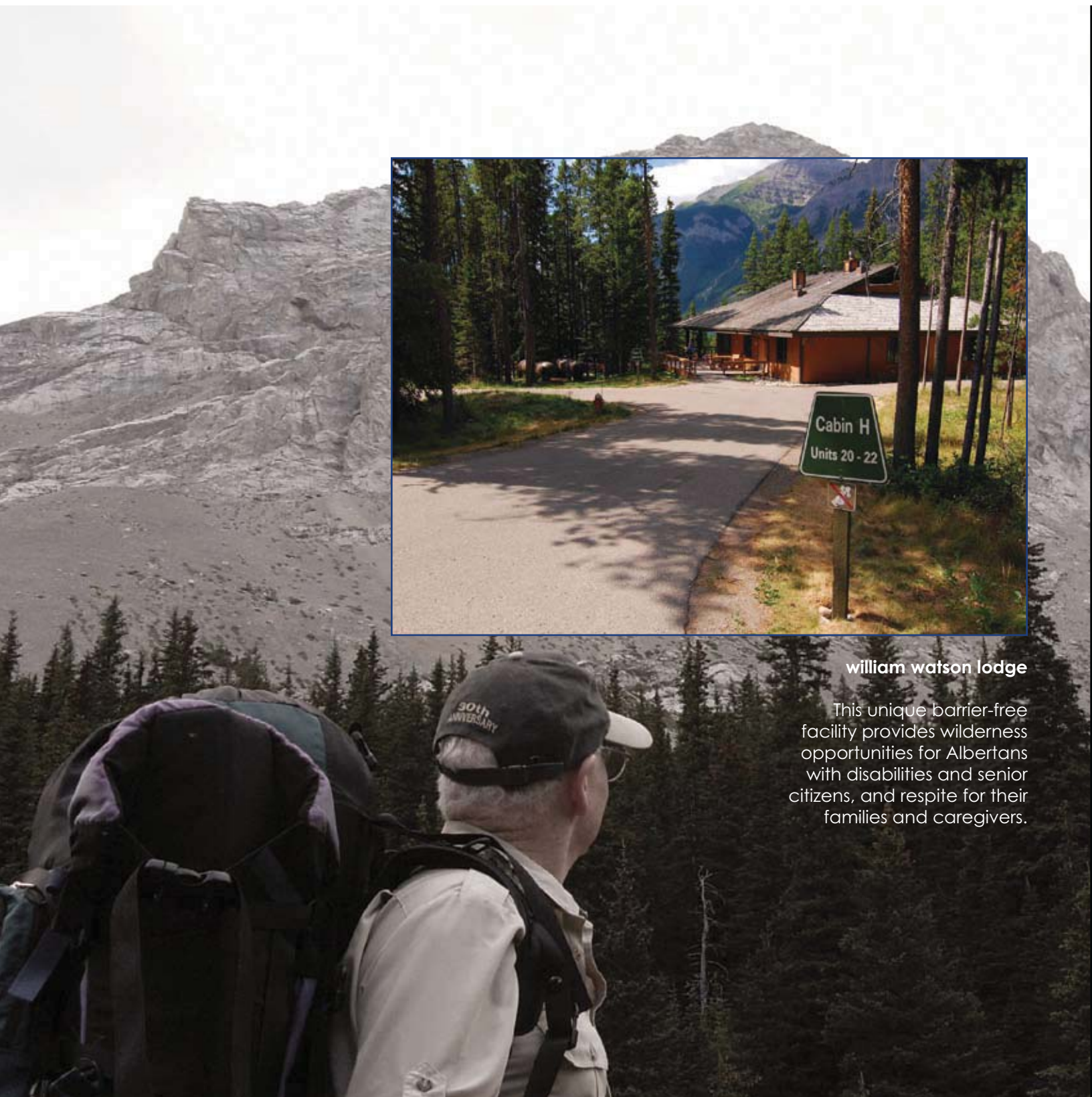
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william watson lodge

This unique barrier-free facility provides wilderness opportunities for Albertans with disabilities and senior citizens, and respite for their families and caregivers.



everyone belongs outside

Connecting with nature is important for the quality of life of all people. Parks provide opportunities for people to be active in natural or wilderness settings, to spend time with friends and family, and to escape busy daily routines. The Alberta Parks Division is committed to supporting the participation of all people in park experiences and programs, regardless of ability.

The first step to improving participation in parks is improving access. By removing barriers in new and existing facilities, in programs, and in daily operations, people with disabilities can experience nature

with everyone else. The second step is by fostering inclusion – by making sure people feel they truly belong in parks and can get involved in parks, nature, and recreation programs.

People with disabilities who want to visit parks crave the same things as everyone else: to experience and be challenged by pristine and rugged nature. In order to ensure access without impacting the wilderness—and to foster inclusion at the same time—the Alberta Parks Division is developing and supporting programs that modify the user, not the environment. Programs such as the Alberta Access Challenge.

“Inclusion, to me, is about making everyone feel like they belong.”



the original event poster



the alberta access challenge

"This changes the way we see recreation - that it's not for the few, it's for everyone."

For three days in August 2008, the Friends of Kananaskis Country, the Alberta Parks Division, and the Kelowna-based Community Recreation Initiatives Society (CRIS) hosted the first-ever Alberta Access Challenge. Based on similar events hosted by the British Columbia Mobility Opportunities Society, this unique event aimed to prove that barriers could be overcome.

Over the three-day event, 65 volunteers provided over 2000 volunteer hours showcasing accessible facilities, such as William Watson Lodge, the Peter Lougheed Provincial Park visitor centre, and barrier-free trails in the area. More significantly, they also provided inclusive outdoor experiences for people with disabilities by using adaptive equipment such as

TrailRiders, tandem bicycles, and outrigger kayaks. With tremendous teamwork and enthusiasm, participants with disabilities were able to take a three-day backcountry trip, hike to a mountain lake, or paddle through the waves in a sea kayak.

The organizations and the people involved in the event thought they were helping a few people with disabilities experience the backcountry. What they didn't know was that this event impacted the lives of all the volunteers and organizers as well, and continues to have an impact today. The 2008 Access Challenge proved that by working together, we can provide meaningful opportunities for everyone to connect to nature, and to each other.



"It's like a part of my soul that I didn't know was there is opened up now."

the backcountry

When the backcountry volunteers began preparing for the three-day trip to Tombstone Campground and the Elbow-Sheep Wildlands Provincial Park, it quickly became clear that this trip would be like no other. As the TrailRider volunteers watched, anxious to get on the trail, Greg, Lana, and Eliza calmly worked with CRIS Kelowna volunteers to ensure the equipment would fit their bodies and provide necessary support. The three-hour effort seemed to drag on, but it reflected the reality faced by people with disabilities for whom a pressure sore from an ill-fitting seat can result in serious recovery issues and for whom patience is the best tool in a world filled with barriers.

Patience was simply the first lesson learned in a weekend filled with

steep hills, rising creeks, windstorms, and flat tires. Over the weekend, the three participants with disabilities became part of three teams of humans testing their limits, conquering their fears, and fuelling their adrenaline.

On the second night, as the group rested below towering peaks and listened to wolves howl, it became clear that this was much more than a backcountry trip. It was the coming together of a group of humans to prove that belonging, inclusion, and connection are possible to find in today's world. And as Greg took an icy dip in a glacier-fed lake—something few people ever do—it became clear that cerebral palsy is a mere detail for someone with the passionate soul of an adventurer.



lana



eliza



greg



"It was inspiring to see the teams work together to get the TrailRider up the steep climb from the Tombstone Campground, over the rocky terrain and to witness one of our fearless trail riders take his first ever dip in the glacier-fed waters of a mountain lake...!"





the frontcountry

Less than a year before the Alberta Access Challenge, Sam had a stroke. Prior to his stroke, he had been an active and fit hiker, and one of his favourite destinations was Rawson Lake in Kananaskis Country. Less than a year after his stroke, Sam was again enjoying lunch on the shoreline of those treasured mountain waters.

On that warm Saturday in August, an enthusiastic group of friends—who had been strangers just the day before—volunteered to pull and push TrailRiders on a frontcountry day hike with Sam and Dan. The plan was simple: within 3 kilometres of the trailhead, the flat trail along the shore of Upper Kananaskis Lake would meet the steeper, more challenging trail to Rawson Lake. It would be up to the diverse group of

volunteers and their pilots to decide which route to take. When the group reached the junction they quickly agreed to attempt the climb to the lake. They made it.

Despite an enjoyable hour spent at the lake resting, socializing, and basking in the surroundings, this day trip was not easy for anyone involved. 300 metres of elevation gain and a return trip of 8 kilometres can tax the average hiker—let alone a group of people pulling two adult males in heavy adaptive wheelchairs. Yet, the participants returned from the hike in an ecstatic mood, having realized their goal and having had their minds opened to how barriers can be overcome with teamwork and determination.



dan



sam

"Being in nature has a healing effect on all of us."



"Dan just said 'go big, or go home!' and that impressed me a lot."



"People just feel at peace with themselves when they're outdoors and if you can provide that to any one person, I think you're making a huge impact in their life."



"When someone is in a sea kayak, they look just like everybody else"

the water

From camping to hiking, climbing to hunting, every imaginable outdoor recreation activity is being done somewhere by someone with a disability. During the Alberta Access Challenge, that diversity of outdoor pursuits was represented by tandem bicycles, a presentation by blind mountaineer Ross Watson, and by providing adaptive sea-kayaking trips to people with a range of disabilities.

Guided by the experienced volunteers of CRIS Kelowna, and aided by local volunteers, six individuals with disabilities felt the spray of fresh water on their face and the chill on their hands as they paddled Lower Kananaskis Lake in tandem sea kayaks equipped with outrigger pontoons. And, rather than rely on a team of five people to pull a Trail-Rider, the kayakers worked in pairs—alone with their navigator and with nature.



marc



jessica



melissa



dan



marjorie



cecile



"I have yet to find anyone that hasn't found a benefit from being on the water."



ety
OUTDOOR RECREATION FOR
Persons with Disabilities
in the Region
PUSH
TO OPEN



"Physical disability or mental disability or whatever kind of disability or obstacles you might be facing really don't have to prevent you from doing those things you might want to do or dream of doing."



open house on opened trails

The original plan for the Access Challenge was to host an open house at the Peter Lougheed Visitor Centre so members of the public could learn about inclusion and accessibility in parks. While some people did stop by to see the display on adaptive hiking equipment and to attend the guest presentations by Ross Watson and Alberta Parks staff, the true open house happened on the trails and at the facilities in Kananaskis Country.

Rob Lougheed, one of the event volunteers and the former Chair of the Alberta Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, recalled encountering members of the public on the very busy trail to Rawson Lake:

"Some of them I'm sure thought it was a stretcher evacuation. And then they realized 'oh, they're going up the hill, not down.' You could see them thinking 'oh, I can walk this trail or run up this trail, and these people have to be taken up in a TrailRider because they can't do what I can do.'"

Marc Ross volunteered for the Alberta Access Challenge hoping to try some of the adaptive equipment. He joined in the kayaking on Sunday and tried the tandem recumbent bicycle that same afternoon. On Saturday evening, though, Marc made a significant and profound

contribution to the Access Challenge. As 200 able-bodied people waited at the Elkwood amphitheatre for the evening's interpretive program to begin, a TrailRider emerged from the woods, moved through the crowd, and eventually stopped on stage. Marc captivated this group as he spoke eloquently of his life since he broke his neck, and of the importance of believing in your dreams, working together, and getting outside.

The Alberta Access Challenge is about providing wilderness experiences for people with disabilities. It is also about normalizing diversity through public exposure, and turning this exposure into understanding.



“Megatron”

It took this massive diesel truck and trailer, fully-laden, to bring all the equipment from Kelowna to Kananaskis Country.





making it happen

The volunteers of CRIS Kelowna have abundant experience providing adapted outdoor recreation programs. Nonetheless, the Alberta Access Challenge required tremendous effort well in advance of the event. In early spring, work began in earnest on route and safety plans, volunteer and participant recruitment, fundraising applications, food and housing logistics, and equipment arrangements.

As the event got underway, the planning evolved into an hour-to-hour enterprise of ensuring people were fed, housed, oriented to the equipment and the environment, and told where to be at any given

time. There was also extraordinary effort required to bring supplies in and out of the backcountry base camp, as demonstrated late on Sunday by the group of volunteers who hauled two fully-loaded TrailRiders out from Tombstone Campground in the freezing rain.

In the end, it didn't matter if an individual was planning the event, pulling a TrailRider full of gear, paddling a kayak, or making sandwiches and setting tables. Every ounce of effort was returned tenfold in the profound impact the weekend had on participants, volunteers, and organizers alike.

*"You can do anything
when you have cooperation
between people."*

Community *Recreational Initiatives*
Society



troy becker, founder of CRIS
kelowna, with greg mcmeekin



kathy wilcox, executive director of
the friends of kananaskis country



don carruthers den hoed, outreach
coordinator for kananaskis country,
alberta parks division

ALBERTA PARKS



doing more together

A TrailRider doesn't make it up a hill by itself. Likewise, an event like the Access Challenge doesn't happen without teamwork. While the cooperation of all the volunteers and individuals—most of whom started as strangers—is a notable key to success, it is only part of the picture.

The 2008 Alberta Access Challenge succeeded due to the shared leadership of The Friends of Kananaskis Country, the Community Recreation Initiatives Society (CRIS) from Kelowna BC, and Kananaskis Country Outreach, Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

By sharing their respective expertise in volunteer support, integrated recreation, and inclusive education these three organizations were able to reach heights beyond what they could reach alone.

As an indication of the bright future of the Alberta Access Challenge, a series of other partnerships developed leading up to and since the event. Many thanks are owed to the William Watson Lodge Society, Travel Alberta, the University of Alberta's Steadward Centre, and the British Columbia Mobility Opportunities Society (BCMOS), who built the TrailRider and host Access Challenges of their own.

"It was so inspirational to be around the CRIS people and see their passion and commitment. It's also really inspirational to see your dedication to inclusion in the parks - nature is so therapeutic and it only ever makes people's lives better!"



volunteers

Some people volunteered for the Alberta Access Challenge because it was a program related to parks and the outdoors.

Some people volunteered because it was a program related to persons with disabilities and social justice.

By the end of the weekend, everyone was deeply affected by the event because it had been about belonging.

"The thing I loved most about the weekend was the atmosphere of teamwork and camaraderie. Everyone contributed in their way and was valued for those contributions—really valued."

"I just want to thank you for letting me be a part of last weekend. I had such an amazing time and am so excited about the TrailRiders and all the potential to have some amazing programs in K-Country!"

"When you get a group of people together who are willing to do something I believe that anything can be achieved or anything can happen."



the quotes on these pages, and throughout the book, are the reflections and voices of participants and volunteers of the 2008 alberta access challenge

"The TrailRider was amazing as a vehicle to open access to rugged terrain, but not nearly as amazing as the people it brings together to use it. This weekend will be on my mind and in my heart for years to come. Thanks. The Access Challenge is something of which we can all be very proud to have played a part."

"This was so uplifting."

"My head is still buzzing after this incredible weekend, yet my body is definitely in slow mode ...This was a powerful experience for all involved!!!"

"Those 5 people I spent 48 hours with know more about me and understand me better than the people I've lived with for 6 years... it's amazing!"

"It's not impossible."

"It was such an enlightening experience!"



"How can you explain the impact it has or how life-changing it is to go to the top of the mountain if you're in a wheelchair and you've never been on a hike or haven't been on a hike since your injury?"

"I think if more people were aware of it, particularly those in the disability community, they would realize that they don't have to be limited by their disability."

"Everybody deserves a chance to try and achieve their potential. Whatever it takes to help them be the most complete person they can."

"Why place limits on yourself? Why place limits on other people?"



"These barriers are mental a lot of the time, rather than physical."

"It's more than just concrete where most people will experience themselves."

"People with disabilities are people first and they deserve access to everything that everyone else does."

"Camping is possible. Recreation is possible for people with disabilities."

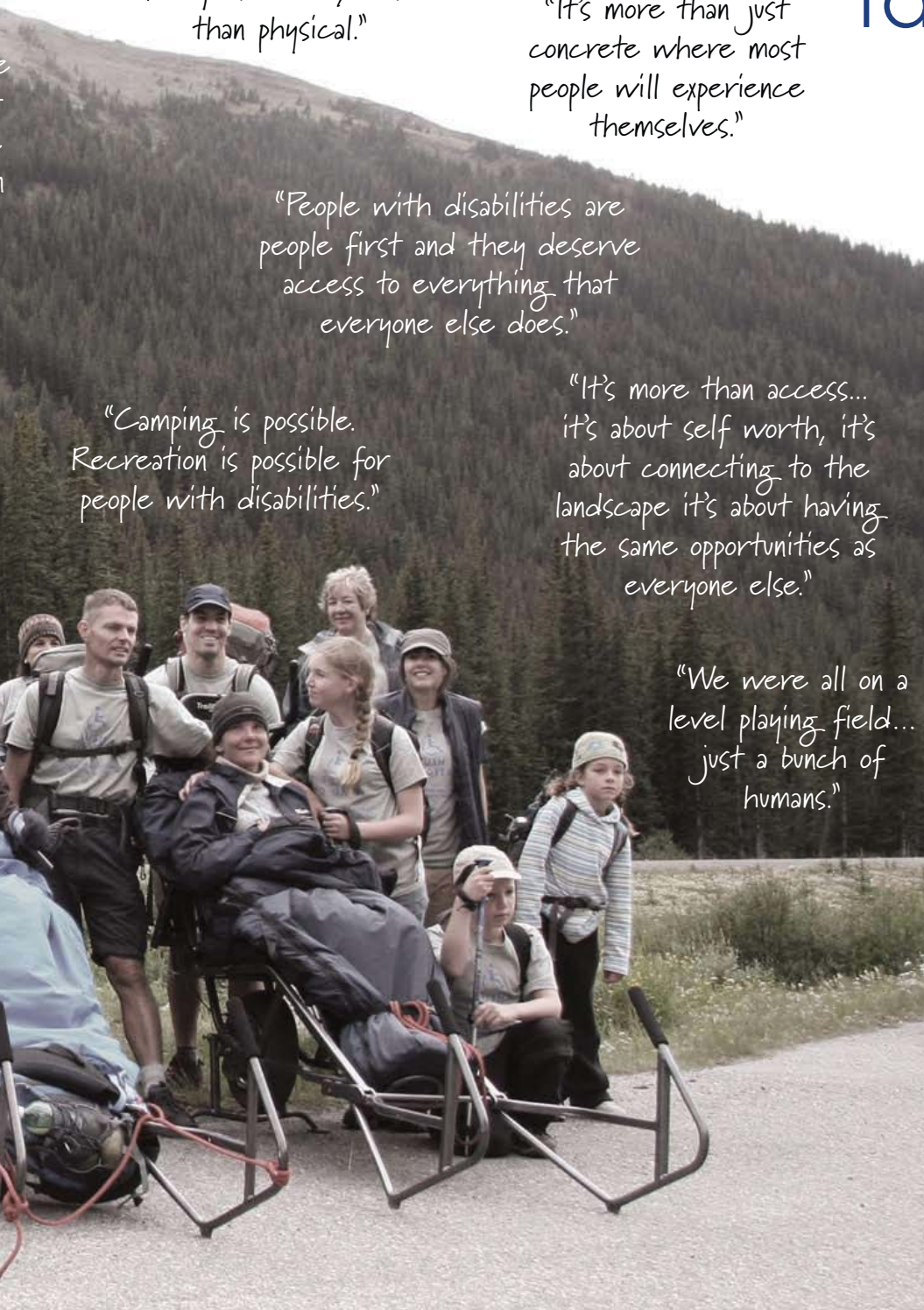
"It's more than access... it's about self worth, it's about connecting to the landscape it's about having the same opportunities as everyone else."

"We were all on a level playing field... just a bunch of humans."

tabs

People with disabilities often refer to people without disabilities as 'tabs' or 'temporarily able-bodied.' It's a reflection that at some point in life, due to permanent or temporary injury, illness, or other life situation, everyone will face barriers and become 'disabled.'

While this event focused on removing barriers for people with disabilities, the 'tabs' arguably benefited as much as the participants...or more.





tabs
the volunteers





"When one has been pushed to the periphery, 'benched,' pushed aside, ignored, and told they better sit out, it is beyond comprehension that there would be a time when you could try things without criticism, with goodhearted competition, and with acceptance."



the story of a person who pushed to open

cecile buhl

"I have tried to tell people about the 2008 Alberta Access Challenge Weekend in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park. I have had difficulty expressing myself, just as I did on the last day of that weekend. When talking to friends, the phrase, 'You had to be there.' came out of my mouth. Even now I seem to find it hard to put into words the change this weekend has brought to me.

In describing the activities for the weekend, many said, 'Good for you!' or some response. I kept trying to say, 'No, but you don't understand!' They would nod in an interested manner. But they did not understand. I am sure they want to.

For years I have been trying to do activity that was inclusive and comfortable for me. Granted, many of the fears and discomforts holding me back were of my own making.

When one has been pushed to the periphery, 'benched,' pushed aside, ignored, and told they better sit out, it is beyond comprehension that there would be a time when you

could try things without criticism, with goodhearted competition, and with acceptance. I assume the people who have always been active in their childhood would have less problems feeling at ease in new and competitive activities. Many participants of the Access Challenge Weekend were active prior to their present state. My impression was that they are still active and a weekend such as this brought them back their former activity level.

As a child, before I allowed people to put restrictions on me, I was constantly in the forest behind our house. I would walk with my dog for miles and look for flora and fauna. I would go to the beaver dam and check out how the building was going; along the way I would pick blueberries. In essence, I was just enjoying nature and the quiet solitude that brings peace to one's soul. I missed that as I grew up, took on responsibility, and had to go to college.

From my perspective, not coming from a background of group activity and support in activities in general, the Alberta Access Challenge Weekend made me see there was a way to become more involved

in those things I used to love to do. I realized that I didn't have to do it alone as I have always tried. I can leave some of my fears and painful memories out in the wilderness and let them fend for themselves. I can move on to enjoy the outdoors, try new things, and meet like-minded individuals.

This weekend was a pilot project to initiate more awareness for the general public, government, and people with disability. It was a challenge for social change as much as for policy change. However, it ended up being much more than that for me.

I didn't expect it to become a personal challenge. One that made me look at the painful memories that have held me back, as well as acknowledging those restrictions I had placed on myself. I learned again that I have to allow other people to help me to achieve my goals, just as a team wins a championship.

It not only gave me access to the beautiful country in Kananaskis, to new outdoors activities, but also to myself."

"We were aware that a disability and restrictions on outdoor activity can result in isolation, so we resolved to not let this happen to Danny."





the story of a family that pushes together

the wein family

"In the garage of our home, Danny's kayak hangs alongside the family canoe. Neither craft has been in the water since 1998, when, at age 22, Danny had a motorcycle accident in Bogota, Columbia. Since the accident, he has not scuba dived, played soccer, conducted university field research, gone fishing or camping, hiked in the mountains, or taken part in long-distance travel.

We were aware that a disability and restrictions on outdoor activity can result in isolation, so we resolved to not let this happen to Danny. To get out of the city, our family travels locally to a camp at Pigeon Lake. Each year we spend a week at William Watson Lodge. And in 2008 we took a longer trip to Vancouver and Victoria. Danny has always craved—and as his parents we have always encouraged—independence. Since the accident, we travel vicariously through Danny's sister, Laurie, who is involved with international conservation.

Then we heard that Alberta Parks was involved in putting together a few days of backcountry travel for persons with disabilities. Danny

thought this was great, especially when he heard that sea kayaks were involved!

Time moved slowly - until we arrived at William Watson Lodge where a team was already setting up several people in TrailRiders for a trip to the backcountry.

The next day it was Danny's turn to experience the TrailRider. With two athletic volunteers pulling and another volunteer pushing Danny, the convoy of 25 people headed into the mountains. Whenever the perspiring 'sherpas' rested or were deciding to take a shorter or a longer section of the trail, Danny got busy with his letter-board to spell out that he was happy to go faster, farther, and higher! It was a good day and we love the volunteers who gave Danny so much pleasure.

The following day was an even greater experience. Before his accident, Danny loved getting into his kayak and experiencing the British Columbia waters. Now he was having his six-foot-two-inch frame stuffed into a sea kayak with outriggers and was given a paddle. Away they went with a volunteer paddler in the rear seat providing more power. Danny's letter-board was

overlooked until, out on the lake, he just had to communicate something. Another wonderful volunteer sped back to shore for the letter-board so that Danny could express himself. It was a great day!

How can our family condense the Access Challenge weekend into a few words? This is also a challenge. It was a time of meeting good people who are incredibly dedicated to serving those with a disability and who volunteered their time and experiences to give Danny (and us) such pleasure. We continue to relive the experiences often through the stories and the digital images that were taken that weekend. Thanks to Don and his Alberta Parks colleagues, the Friends of Kananaskis Country, the fine people from the B.C. Community Recreation Initiatives Society, and all of the volunteers. Our family salutes them all."



the story of an organizer who was pushed, and was opened

"The story of the Access Challenge could be told simply as the bringing together of an incredible group of volunteers and organizations for one weekend to enable a number of people living with serious disabilities to experience Kananaskis Country. I could talk about the organizational logistics and funding resources required. It would be easy to focus on the challenges faced and overcome during the event.

I would like instead to tell you about my personal transformation that occurred both during and after the Access Challenge.

In the weeks prior to the event, I felt both nervous and excited about what we were going to be able to accomplish. It all came together in some sort of intricate dance: seed funding, equipment, accommodations at William Watson Lodge (WWL), permits and safety plans, a myriad of volunteers with huge hearts (and strong backs), and the food...oh my God, the food!

As the participants and volunteers began to arrive at WWL, there was an undercurrent that something pretty special was about to happen.

I don't know precisely what I was expecting, but the enormity of what happened to me was nothing short of miraculous. I consider myself a fairly open-minded, sensitive, caring individual, but nothing in my life had prepared me for Danny.

When Dan powered into the lodge in his wheelchair and greeted me with his 'oh, so charming' smile and pointed to his alphabet board in the back of his chair—well, I froze. I'd never met Danny, but knew his 'story' about the accident, the wheelchair and that he wasn't able to speak. However, I wasn't prepared for someone who was unable to speak having so incredibly much to say! I immediately found someone who could give me a quick tutorial on reading the alphabet board and then Dan and I were off on a sort of maniacal, convoluted journey of getting to know each other. When his knuckles were literally bleeding and my throat was parched we took a break. This is now Dan's life, but for me it was diving into a whole new concept of how people connect with each other.

What followed was a flurry of often painfully slow activity. The TrailRiders were finally ready to take off up the mountain. The kayaks skimmed across the lake and the bikes toured around the visitor centre. Time

slowed down in the way it often does when you are walking with your grandparents or exploring with a small child. This was juxtaposed against the clock-time schedules we had imposed on the event. In the gap, time stood still for me.

This is where possibilities live.

Someone who has had cerebral palsy their whole life CAN climb a mountain; someone whose life was instantly changed in an accident CAN once again kayak across a mountain lake; someone who has always been held back from full participation CAN be a part of the action! I started to really understand that accessibility is the vehicle, but inclusion is the engine.

I realized at some point during the weekend that I kept forgetting to breathe. My understanding of the human spirit was shifting and it literally took my breath away. The stories from the volunteers and participants about their experience validated what I was feeling. At one

"I wasn't prepared for someone who was unable to speak having so incredibly much to say!"

kathy wilcox

point I found myself in a stall in the bathroom inexplicably sobbing. This was not what I had bargained for.

In the weeks and months following the Access Challenge, I couldn't find the words to express the magnitude of what I had experienced, so I said little. Naturally, there were conversations about what could have been done better, what worked well, what we should do next year. The participants and volunteers were able to eloquently express what the weekend had meant for them, and still I said little.

It was only during a trip to Kelowna to debrief with the folks from CRIS (Community Recreation Initiatives Society) that I experienced my own personal challenge and found my voice. The full impact of what the concept of inclusion really means hit me squarely in my own face.

I was invited to participate in an evening kayak ride with CRIS clients. I was prepared to do what I would normally do—make my excuses and stay in my hotel room for the evening—but for some reason I heard my self say yes. I am a woman of some considerable size and the idea of getting my butt into a kayak was truly daunting. The thing is: I love the water.

It wasn't pretty, but I got into that kayak and rowed my heart out as the moonlight reached down to touch the lake. With more than a little help from my CRIS friends I got out of that kayak cold, wet, limbs shaking, but exhilarated! The elation didn't solely come from the paddling.

And so, finally the words have come. Through my reflections I repeatedly come back to two concepts: connection and possibility. In planning and executing the Access Challenge, we provided a stage for people to make connections with each other; with the natural world; with themselves. Somewhere within these connections lies possibility. If we focus on making connections, the roadblocks to what is possible truly become less daunting."

"In planning and executing the Access Challenge, we provided a stage for people to make connections with each other; with the natural world; with themselves."





"By having them see the open sky and the wildlife—it completes them."

...It completes me."



a lasting impact

During the 2008 Alberta Access Challenge, we pushed to open nature with adapted TrailRider wheelchairs and sea kayaks, committed and creative partner agencies, and the dedication, energy, and time of volunteers of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. For that weekend, Kananaskis Country became inclusive—everyone was equal and everyone belonged. But one weekend is not enough.

Funding from the Alberta Parks Division Cooperative Fund made the Alberta Access Challenge weekend possible and laid a foundation for the future. In addition to the event costs, these funds were also used to purchase a TrailRider for the Friends of Kananaskis Country to use in future programming and environmental education. This “legacy chair” is an excellent illustration that successful events such as the Alberta Access Challenge can have lasting impact.

The *Plan for Parks*—the management guidelines for Alberta Parks Division for the next decade—contains a strategic priority to implement an inclusion strategy. The drive to ‘push to open’ the wilderness will be a key part of that work.

Alberta Parks Division already has plans to hold another Access Challenge event next year. There is also a broader plan to create an ongoing program that would enable participation in parks and protected areas for persons with disabilities year-round. Whether this is an internal program or partnership with another group remains to be seen.

Regardless, the impact of the Access Challenge will reverberate well into the future as we continue to ‘push to open’ the wilderness for all Albertans.

"Events like this crystallize ideas and stimulate others to take up the challenge. Everyone is ready to put their weight behind the next event - next year - hint, hint!"





you can PUSH

There are many ways to get involved with inclusion programs in Alberta's provincial parks:

Participate: if you (or someone you know) has a disability, we invite you to experience parks with us.

Volunteer: if you want to help create experiences, your effort will be appreciated regardless of your abilities.

Partner with us: if your organization wants to help 'push to open' the wilderness, we can do it together.

Finally, while we are always working hard to improve and enhance the infrastructure throughout Alberta Parks, we appreciate your input to help reduce barriers. Please let us know about problems you encounter in our facilities or programs, as well as any exceptional places you think provide a truly inclusive experience.

"Heck, they did it! let me try that. It might change my life..."

To get involved or for more information, please visit www.albertaparks.ca/pushtoopen

cecile buhl, dan wein and family, and kathy wilcox' stories reprinted courtesy of the authors

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don carruthers den hoed: all photos except:

will schmidt: inside front cover, pages 8 (right), 9 (right), 10 (lower), 12, 13, 14, 15, 17 (top left), 19, 20 (top, bottom right), foldout left, and 34

chris ha: pages 22 (lower) and 25

john and marj den hoed: pages 20 (background) and 23

melanie fricot: page 11 (left)

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kananaskis country outreach

canmore, alberta

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www.albertaparks.ca/pushtoopen



"I wish the general public could get a sense of the feeling of what we did and how difficult it was, and how unique it was."

"For the whole weekend we felt normal."



www.albertaparks.ca/pushtopen