Volunteer Ingenuity Enables a Proud National Moment

Ben Roth
Tetra Society of North America

It's a big flag. Six square metres in fact, and attached to a five-metre long pole. By tradition, the mayor of the next host city is expected to accept the flag during the closing ceremonies and wave it back and forth eight times, but organizers in Turin were certain that Vancouver's quadriplegic Mayor Sam Sullivan would need someone else to do the job.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

"I said that's not the way I've ever dealt with things in my life, and that I will do it myself. I will find a way around this problem," said Sullivan.

The first call Sullivan made in his search for a solution was to the Vancouver Chapter of the Tetra Society of North America, a group he founded almost 20 years ago. Tetra is a non-profit charitable organization that recruits technically skilled volunteers to create custom assistive devices for people with disabilities. With a dozen chapters in British Columbia alone, Tetra now has a total of 25 Canadian and two U.S. chapters, and the organization's volunteers have completed more than three thousand projects to date.

"We've designed lots of different things in the past, but the flag holder was a unique challenge," said APEGBC member and Tetra volunteer Jay Drew, who designed the device. "It had to be light but strong, easy to install, hold the flag at the correct angle, and we had to ensure that Sam wouldn't be blown over in a gust of wind."

Although the modifications to Sam Sullivan's wheelchair enabled him to represent Canada on the international stage before an audience of millions, most of the assistive devices that Tetra volunteers produce are intended simply to allow people with disabilities to do routine, everyday things that others take for granted. "Our idea is that people aren't handicapped by their disabilities, but by obstacles or barriers in their living environment. Tetra devices help people to overcome those obstacles," says Drew. "Most of our projects use less than $50 worth of materials, and are made in basement or garage workshops."

Tetra volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds. "Typically, a chapter will include technicians, occupational and physical therapists, machinists, architects, professional engineers and a variety of other skilled volunteers," said Pat Tweedie, Tetra's Provincial Program Coordinator.

"Many of our volunteers are also APEGBC members," Tweedie said. "Clive Rush has made a number of standing frames to help people in wheelchairs to stand, and he's now working on a lifting device to help a person get into bed without help. Dave Doman built an elevator to help a lady move heavy items into her home. John Connor created an entertaining activity center for a group home resident. And that's just a sampling of recent projects," she said.

"It's a win-win for everybody," Jay Drew said. "Volunteers get the opportunity to do some hands-on creative and inventive work that makes a real difference for someone with a disability, and the people we help gain greater independence."

Tetra's Vancouver Chapter meets the third Monday of each month at the APEGBC Boardroom #200-4010 Regent Street, Burnaby. Meeting times and locations in other places will vary. New members are always welcome: call Tetra's Provincial Coordinator Pat Tweedie at (604) 688- 6464 ext 108, toll-free 1-877-688-8764 or visit www.tetrasociety.org for more information.