

BOLD AND BRASH

By Jan Gladstone

Michael Szadiak calls himself a “People Person” and can be seen scooting around town in his motorized wheelchair every day, a smile and a few words for everyone. He lives in Pine View Manor, a wheelchair-accessible, one-floor level building that he helped design 13 years ago. His apartment faces the junior high school and he enjoys watching the children on the playground at recess.



Michael Szadiak Photo by Jan Gladstone

At that same age, his junior high years were quite different. It was in September, 1951, when he was in Grade 7, that he contracted polio and his whole world changed—less than one year before the polio vaccine was first tried on people with great success. After a month in the local hospital, he was flown to Winnipeg to the Children’s Hospital, where an iron lung awaited, but fortunately wasn’t necessary. A woman from England, Josephine Stack-Hayden, became his physiotherapist and friend. “Without her, I wouldn’t be here,” Mike is quick to praise. “She was a godsend. Even on her day off, she would come in to work with me before she went to church.”

After a year in the hospital in Winnipeg, Mike returned home to The Pas, a shy, young teenager. He completed his Grade 8 by correspondence over three tedious years and was then mainstreamed into regular high school classes, where he had many friends who helped him. He was active in school—he was the class rep and also liked to watch sports and keep score at basketball games. He attended summer camps for the handicapped in Gimli.

Soon it was time to start thinking about what to do after graduation. The options were few and the obstacles many. He chose to stay in The Pas because he placed great value on friends and family.

“The way to overcome shyness is to become so wrapped up in something that you forget to be afraid” are the words of Lady Bird Johnson, and they apply to Michael Szadiak.

He began to actively take part in provincial and national conferences of the Society for Crippled Children and Adults. In 1975 he became the founding member of the Manitoba League of the Physically Handicapped in The Pas--the first site outside of Winnipeg. Main issues were transportation, housing, and easier access to sidewalks. Mike attacked each problem with the zeal of someone who lived the problems 24 hours a day. He became a compelling letter writer and speaker. His politicking brought the MLPH's issues to the legislature where his words were quoted. He raised awareness locally through radio programs, newspaper articles, and networking with groups, agencies, and local government. Provincial and federal funds became available and things started happening—things we see today and take for granted—The Pas Handivan, sidewalk curbs sloped for access by wheelchairs, ramps leading to many public buildings, elevators in schools, and a subsidized apartment building staffed by Home Care assistants.

“It is remarkable what a few dedicated people can do.” says Mike, “You have to be bold and brash.”



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Pine View Manor

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