

A man who keeps on giving – Yoshi Tanabe and the Tanabe Bursary Story



Yoshi Tanabe is extremely proud to be the namesake of the Cerebral Palsy Association of BC's Tanabe Bursary program! The program has supported over one hundred students with cerebral palsy to attend post-secondary school in BC and reach their dreams.

Yoshi believes that pursuing post-secondary education can be a very expensive proposition, especially if the family or the student has to incur the full cost. He notes that there is a lot of competition for the bursaries and scholarships that are available to students. Not only do students with CP face financial challenges, but physical challenges as well. "It is very important that people with CP further their education," says Yoshi. "It not only broadens their minds, it also can be essential to finding potential employment. People with CP have to use the power of their minds to succeed in life because very often they cannot rely on their bodies to do manual work."

Since 1994, CPABC has been making a Life Without Limits one student at a time by providing financial assistance in the form of a bursary to students with CP pursuing post-secondary education. The bursary has supported students in engineering, arts, journalism, social science, etc ---- including many multiple recipients. Each student represents a joy and a success, and another young person who will find their passion and reach their dreams. Many students have given back to the organization by becoming board members, speakers or volunteers. The CPABC honours the man who lent the bursary his name.

Yoshi's story began on March 12, 1949 in Kyoto, Japan. It was a time of transition and uncertainty as the country had regained power from the American occupation under General Douglas MacArthur. Japan was devastated by war and there was a shortages of everything; patients had to bring in their own supplies to the hospital. Yoshi was born prematurely with cerebral palsy, along with an identical twin brother who didn't survive. The doctors didn't think that Yoshi would survive due to the complications of being born with cerebral palsy. Yoshi

couldn't swallow so he was fed by a syringe. His dad was able to find an incubator with a light bulb at home with a futon draped over it to keep me warm.

However, Yoshi's aunt was able to find some medicine on the black market. The doctors knew Yoshi was disabled but thought it was a calcium deficiency, so his parents roasted and ground fish bones to feed him. Milk was scarce but they managed to get it for him as well. Making things more difficult, Yoshi contracted tuberculosis from a neighbour when he was a year old and almost died. When he reached school age, he attended public school where he was the only disabled child in a class of 50. By the time he got to school Yoshi could walk but his balance was precarious. At that time in Japan, people hid their family members who were disabled to save face, but Yoshi's family was different. "Fortunately, my parents took me out wherever they went which was unheard of."

His parents didn't see a future for him in Japan so they immigrated to Canada. His brother, mom and Yoshi sailed to Canada and docked in Vancouver on November 16, 1957. They lived on Cordova Street in the Downtown Eastside – an area still known today as Japantown. Yoshi went to nearby Strathcona Elementary School for a year. The school nurse, who happened to be Japanese, told his parents about GF Strong Rehabilitation. It was there that Yoshi learned English through speech therapy which he took for four years, along with occupational therapy. He returned to Strathcona before graduating from Britannia Secondary School. "It was a challenge for me growing up in a poorer area of town combined with having a disability and limited English with a speech impairment," says Yoshi. In addition, his parents could not speak English and needed a translator every time they had to make a decision in life.

Despite the language barrier, he graduated high school and won the Herb Capozzi Scholarship for the student "with the hardest mountains to climb...the toughest challenges ahead of them." He persevered and graduated with a Finance and Investment Diploma from university. He says there is still a lot of discrimination against people who have speech impediments or exaggerated movements ("We are treated as if we are mentally handicapped and or denied service") but feels that public education is an ongoing campaign.

Yoshi is a tireless advocate for the disabled community. When he finished college, Yoshi spearheaded an initiative working for an organization called Handicapped Effort to Employ the Disabled, aimed at finding employment for people with disabilities. Realizing that the unemployment rate was high amongst people with disabilities, he created several organizations run by and for people with disabilities as a means of creating employment and advocating on our own behalf. Yoshi was a founding member of the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities (now Disability Alliance BC), Voice of the Cerebral Palsied of Greater Vancouver (VCP) and the Voice of the Cerebral Palsied Housing Society (VCPS).

His activism doesn't end there. "I have also sat on a number of other boards and committees including Theatre Terrific, International Society of the Handicapped, King Edward College, Twin Rainbows Co-op, Handicapped Action Committee of Victoria (HAC) and Provincial Equipment and Assistive Devices Committee (PEADC). I was a founding member of the Twin Rainbows Co-op and played a key role in designing the wheelchair accessible units. Through the VCP and VCPS I played a major role in building and running a 39 unit mixed housing apartment with 12 wheelchair accessible units."

Yoshi continues to be the Executive Director of the VCPS, is happily married and celebrated his 22nd wedding anniversary in May 2016. I think that he has definitely been living a Life Without Limits!