

When The Going Gets Tough, The Tough Go Kayaking

By Kate Gilderdale
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When Jim Brown sets out to do something, he gets it done.

The Stouffville resident, who has been in a wheelchair since undergoing spinal surgery 22 years ago, is no stranger to overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles that would defeat the most sunny-natured optimist.

"I was at Toronto General Hospital in 1991 in a wheelchair, feeling down," he recalled. "I went over to Sick Children's Hospital and looked around." Seeing the struggles these children were going through gave him a new perspective on his own situation.

"I worked with children that had pain and injuries and they had such a positive attitude. One day they were on the critical list; three or four days later they were walking around." That attitude stayed with Jim and proved invaluable six years ago, when he suffered a stroke.

"I lost almost 100 per cent of hearing in my left ear and 40 per cent in my right," he said. He was also diagnosed with heart problems and sent to Sunnybrook Hospital for an angiogram. In addition to a blood clot in his brain, he had seven blocked arteries and a defective heart valve. He also had angina, diabetes and pulmonary hypertension, and had been on oxygen for more than two decades. His cardiologist referred him to one of the top cardiac surgeons in Canada, whose initial reaction was to refuse to operate.

"He started by saying that people who do exercises go on to live quite healthy lives. He said, 'I'm not sure you are exercising. You've got seven blockages, a defective valve and high blood pressure,'" Jim recalled.

"Then I realized that another human being, not me, was making a decision about my life and I could see in his mind he thought I was unfit." Nothing could have been further from the truth, however.

"I have never been a drinker or a smoker, but I was always athletic and I have always been a swimmer," said Jim. At the doctor's office, to prove his point, he started to remove his tie, jacket and shirt to reveal a strong upper body and arms. The surprised surgeon agreed to reconsider and put Jim's name up for surgery.

"He told me he would put it in front of the board for a

vote. That was in January, and I waited all the way until the first week of September, when his secretary called me to say he was going to do it."

Jim said his wife, Colette, and their grandchildren, Darby, 14 and Ethan, 10 have been key to maintaining his indomitable spirit by supporting him through thick and thin. And his two beloved canine companions, Miss Daisy and Shep, have also provided both unconditional love and practical assistance. The former, also known as Captain Daisy, acts as his 'ears', while Shep is trained as a general purpose aid dog. Both are devoted to Jim, who returns their affection in spades.

To prepare for surgery, he had to take courses and work on improving his lung capacity. "I practised for months, blowing up 20 balloons a day," said Jim, but he was still having trouble when his wonderful technician came up with a possible solution.

"She said, 'I think I know the problem. Where are your dogs?'" With the support of his health care team, Shep and Miss Daisy were allowed into the hospital, spurring Jim on to achieve his goal.

"They were there the day of the surgery, even when I was counting down. I woke up in recovery and there they were." Despite incredible odds, Jim not only survived the surgery, but came through with flying colours, and no longer uses an oxygen tank.

This summer, he is launching the Cardi-Yak Expedition. "I plan to kayak eight hours a day, six days a week throughout the summer," he said. His dream is to use the expedition to raise funds for a charity that will help others like him overcome formidable odds to live a full and joyous life.

To prepare for his marathon effort, "I did about 1,200 kms last summer at the Harbourfront Canoe and Kayak Centre and worked out all winter." The centre teaches disabled people to sail and provides kayaks for rent.

"They helped me put my kayak in the water and helped put me in it," he said, adding that owner Dave Corrigan has been immensely supportive of his efforts. The motto on the back of his Kayak simply reads, 'Believe' and it's a fitting sentiment for Jim's attitude, perseverance and generosity to others.



Jim Brown is seen at Candlelight and Memories with his beloved dogs, Miss Daisy and Shep.



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