When she was seven years old, Morgan Cathcart longed to join her friends playing skipping games during school recess. She watched as two classmates held each end of a long skipping rope and everyone else lined up to jump in. Morgan’s spina bifida meant her legs weren’t strong enough to join in the game. So she stood off to the side, feeling left out and isolated.

“My damaged spine and partial paralysis meant my legs didn’t know what to do,” remembers Morgan. “My mom heard about Free2BMe where, with a coach, I built up the strength in my legs and practiced those skills so that I could join in the fun at school.”

Free2BMe provides physical activity and fitness opportunities for children and youth from 4 to 19 years of age with physical, sensory or developmental impairments. Part of The Steadward Centre at the University of Alberta, Free2BMe staff are trained in Adapted Physical Activity, and create individualized plans for each participant.

“It’s a gift that extends far beyond childhood. An avid swimmer, Morgan also worked with her Free2BMe coach to teach her legs to push off from the pool wall. She swam five seasons on an able-bodied competitive team before joining The Steadward Bears ParaSwim Team. She recently scored a national-qualifier time at the Rio Summer Olympic and Paralympic trials.

“Adapting programs and places for individuals with different abilities is far more than accommodating access,” says Dr. Robert Steadward, founder of The Steadward Centre. “It’s a philosophy. It is seeing the possibilities that an individual can achieve.”

Morgan now uses a wheelchair for safety and increased mobility, especially at university where she is studying to become a special education teacher. “Free2BMe is the starting place, where you can learn what your capabilities are,” she says. “Everyone should have the ability to learn how to move like you need to be able to move.”
Independence into Adulthood

Jordan Fankhanel initially came to the Free2BMe program as an uncommunicative five year old. “He was very floppy,” remembers his mom Lori. “Jordan’s body was so weak he needed help learning how to sit in a chair.”

Jordan, who is now a tall, muscular young man, learned a lot more than how to hold himself up. A series of summer camps, which he could attend without his aide, provided him the opportunity to be a part of the team. Physical Education is now his favourite class in school, and this year he hopes to try out for his high school’s football team.

“Free2BMe has allowed us to have moments where there’s no neon sign announcing we’re different. Jordan is no longer on the outside looking in, and that gives me hope.”
— LORI FANKHANEL

Lori credits Free2BMe with teaching Jordan much more than physical movements. For example, she says Jordan is motivated to learn how to ride local transit by himself, so he can lift weights with his best friend at a community recreation centre.

“What looks to be a program to get special needs kids moving has a far greater impact on families,” says Lori. “Free2BMe has given Jordan a chance at a higher level of independence into adulthood.”

Support Inclusion and Independence

The Steadward Centre for Personal & Physical Achievement at the University of Alberta actively supports inclusion and independence for children, youth and adults living with impairments. This is done through knowledge-sharing, research, education and collaboration with local, national and international organizations. The Free2BMe program focuses on children and youth from 4 to 19 years old and facilitates inclusion by:

- running educational workshops and providing “Move and Play the Inclusive Way” resource materials for local schools, recreation centres and private gyms, and
- hosting tours for physical activity professionals at The Steadward Centre, to help them understand how to break down the barriers that often exist to prevent children experiencing disabilities from participating.

Help Children Choose the Way they Move

The 600 kids who come to Free2BMe each year need your help.

Our goal is to raise $100,000 per year to support our quality programming. This will fund:

- specialized Adapted Physical Activity Consultants
- trained volunteers to ensure 1:1 support is available as needed
- specialized equipment
- affordable program fees

Your support is needed to continue delivering highly successful programs for kids experiencing disability.

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