



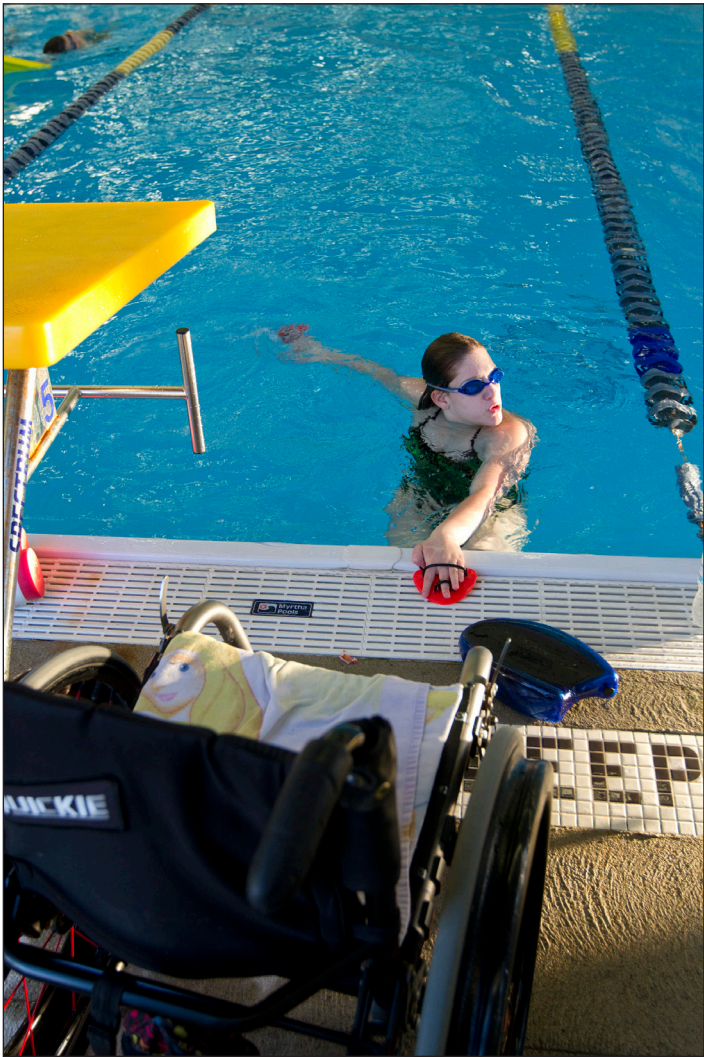
Swimmer Abi Tripp has had mobility issues since the day she started walking, but has found a place to just be a swimmer at the Y Knot Abilities Penguins Can Fly swim team in Kingston.

Where Penguins Fly

Photos and Story by Rachel Psutka



Vicki Keith helps swimmer Harley Bolton, 16, with his finger paddles.



Emily Sayeau, 13, has spina bifida and needs a wheelchair on land, but in the water she can swim freely without any aids.

Towels and knapsacks are haphazardly strewn about the pool deck, their cheerful colours lit by the setting sun of a February afternoon.

The sound of splashes and laughter fill the air, with the occasional interruption by coach Vicki Keith.

“Keep swimming! No talking!” she shouts. Her words have some effect on the group of young swimmers. Most duck back under the water, bubbles rising as they push off a wall to complete another length of the pool. Some talk to their friends for another couple of seconds, before Keith sends another reprimand their way.

“We have some of the most unique swimmers in the world, I think,” Keith quips, as she turns her attention to a group of younger swimmers just arriving at the pool after a day of elementary school.

The only evidence of just how unique the swimmers are is a wheelchair and a walker at the edge of the pool, and the occasional awkward stroke of a swimmer with a weakened limb.

“When they’re in the pool, they all look the same,” explains Keith. “That’s the beauty of this program. Water is the great equalizer. Once they’re in the pool, they’re all the same, regardless of their physical dis-

ability.”

Keith is better known for her epic marathon swims, gaining the moniker Queen of the Lakes after being the first person to conquer all five Great Lakes, completed in a two-month period of 1988. But it is in raising money for athletes with disabilities in her first few lake crossings that Keith felt the drawn to set up the Y Knot Abilities program, something she did in 2001 at the YMCA in Kingston.

“Penguins Can Fly was designed so that disabled swimmers could participate in a sporting environment with their able-bodied siblings,” explains Keith. “When they’re swimming, sometimes they don’t even know if they’re talking to a disabled child or an able-bodied sibling. It doesn’t even matter to them.”

After working with Variety Village in Scarborough for several years, Keith discovered what she calls the black hole for disabled athletes in Ontario.

“Toronto has programs, and Ottawa has programs, but there was so little for athletes in this area,” she notes.

Since its inception, the program has produced such success stories as the Lambert sisters. In 2006, older sister Jenna, born with cerebral palsy, became the first female with

a physical disability to cross Lake Ontario at age 15. The next summer, 14-year-old Natalie, an able-bodied swimmer, became the youngest to ever cross Lake Ontario after a 54-kilometre crossing, ending in Kingston. Both raised tens of thousands of dollars for the Y Knot Abilities programs at the Kingston YMCA.

“If you have a child with a physical disability, this is the program to be in,” says Keith. “We have individuals coming from Brockville, Belleville, Harrowsmith, and beyond. This training for them is worth the drive.”

The current swimmers are now training for the Paralympic Trials, held in Montreal from March 27 to April 1. A whiteboard in the corner of the pool has an active countdown going, the numbers dropping off day by day.

While no local swimmers have made the national paralympic team yet, Keith said the accomplishment for many of these swimmers is in making the trial in the first place.

“It’s a major national meet, the biggest for many of the swimmers,” Keith said. Six swimmers are set to go to the trials, supported by the 30-odd other members of the team, including about a dozen able-bodied siblings.



Nik Tolgyesi, 16, chats with fellow swimmer Michelle Sempowski, 15, during a practice of the Penguins swim team.



Abi Tripp, 11, seeks advice from coach Vicki Keith at a practice at the YMCA in Kingston.