



**Halldor
Vjarnason**

The holder of a Paralympics world cycling record can also help you with estate planning, take you on a fire hall tour, and give you jokes on any topic you name.

Overcoming Challenges,

Six a.m. It may be a brilliant summer morning with a light breeze or dark midwinter with icy rain. Whatever the weather, Halldor Bjarnason is seated on his Joachim 12-speed, prepared to cycle his daily nineteen kilometres. “My doctor told me that when you’re nearing forty,” says Bjarnason, who is thirty-nine, “it’s important to keep fit.” So in addition to cycling, he is in the gym three times a week, hoisting weights. He also hikes the North Shore mountains and skis cross-country. If getting into a wet suit wasn’t a problem, he’d still be scuba diving, as well. An impressive, disciplined regimen for anyone, but perhaps even more so for Bjarnason, who has cerebral palsy.

On the other hand, this is a man who has competed in six international games, and at the 1988 Seoul Paralympics set a world record in the 1500 metre tricycle sprint.

Cerebral palsy: “cerebral” refers to the brain, specifically the cerebrum, the upper part of the organ and the director of conscious mental processes; “palsy” can signify paralysis, but more usually is associated with uncontrollable tremors.

Cerebral palsy is the result of damage to the brain’s motor centres before, during or shortly after birth. It is believed to occur in one of every 1,000 deliveries. Often cerebral palsy is the result of anoxia (extreme lack of oxygen), but can be caused also through trauma or infection. The effects range from mild to severe, but most noticeable are incoordination of movements and difficulty in speaking. The authors of “Comprehensive Pediatric Nursing” write “a major goal is to foster in the child with cerebral palsy a positive self-image—motivation to learn,

development of independence, need to socialize and be accepted.”

In an autobiographical sketch, Bjarnason writes “Halldor arrived in the world on Hallowe’en—undetermined whether



delivered by bats, goblins or natural processes. Parents were happy, rest of the world cringed. Went to school, causing great havoc—the public school system was not used to dealing with a participant who walked funny.” This is typical of Bjarnason, who has made part of his living supplying jokes to public speakers.

Bjarnason’s grandfather emigrated from Reykjavik to Brandon, joining a large Icelandic community in Manitoba. Bjarnason grew up in Winnipeg, where his parents, Kenneth and Mildred, “never set limits. I was raised to seize opportunities, to have an absolutely full life.

“When I was really small, I wanted to be a firefighter. My parents didn’t tell me I couldn’t, but my mother took me to every fire hall in the city, and we talked to the firefighters. I came to realize

it wasn’t a very practical vocation for me.”

But law was. Bjarnason earned a Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree in political science at the University of Winnipeg (his

Challenging Perceptions



Bjarnason did, and went on to compete in World and Can-Am games and Paralympics in Gits, Belgium; Hempstead, New York; Seoul, Korea; Assen, the Netherlands; and Barcelona, Spain. "Competition," he says, "is part of my philosophy of life. It forces me to improve my performance." He also became national president of the Canadian Cerebral Palsy Sports Association (1990-93) and the association's international representative (1991-95).

Meanwhile, his career was advancing in other areas. He worked as a program officer in the Secretary of State's BC/Yukon office, as a staff lawyer with the BC Labor Relations Board, and as a freelance consultant, providing legal services related to non-profit society development and sport risk management (i.e., how to run a sports program without casualties and/or law suits), doing research, and providing material to speakers. "People who give speeches and presentations love to spice them up with humor. I said, give me the topic, I'll come up with the jokes."

He was also collecting a number of honors, beginning with the Governor-General's Medal in 1982, and including the Terry Fox Humanitarian Award and the Community Service Award, presented by the BC Branch of the Canadian Bar Association. There has always been a lot of community service going on, including chairmanship of the Disability Advisory Committee of the Law Society of BC, and work with the Law Society's Equity & Diversity Committee, the Canadian Bar Association's National Equality Committee and Legal Research Section, the Planned

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thesis was on counterterrorism, but he also wrote a history of the Winnipeg Fire Department which the fire chief liked well enough to have copies printed for all 900 members of the department; ultimately this would lead to an invitation to write the department's official history).

Bjarnason studied law at Queen's University in Kingston. After articling with one of Toronto's prestigious Bay Street firms, he was called to the Bar of Ontario in 1991 (and, he notes, "I also went to the bar").

It was while he was at the University of Winnipeg that his competitive cycling career began. "I got a note in the mail in 1985 saying a group was starting the Manitoba Cerebral Palsy Sports Association. Being a bit cocky, I rode off to the meeting, which was taking place the same day I got the letter. I suggested this wasn't very well organized, but they asked me to have patience, said they were just starting, and then they invited me to go to the Alberta Games a couple of weeks later. So I went and raced, and watching was Doug Wilton, coach of the Canadian National Disabled Cycling Team. He told me 'Stop screwing around and get serious.'"

Lifetime Advocacy Network, the Neil Squire Foundation Mentoring Program, Theatre Terrific Society, the BC Civil Liberties Association, and the BC Sports Medicine Council.

Bjarnason shares vintage oak-furnished offices on the eighteenth floor of the Marine Building with Emma Andrews, a chic, petite lawyer from Honduras who works in the areas of immigration, family law and civil litigation. They met in a Gastown office and found themselves working together more and more often. Out of that association was created Andrews, Bjarnason, Barristers & Solicitors, *Abogados* (lawyers).

Here, Bjarnason—blue-eyed with spiky blonde hair, dressed in a conservative grey suit, white button-down shirt, neatly patterned maroon necktie, old-fashioned suspenders, and black lace-up brogues—is involved in the preparation of wills, establishment of trusts, and estate planning. His particular interest is assisting parents of children with disabilities.

Some forty times a year, he climbs behind the wheel of his silver grey 1997 Honda CRV and drives off to lead seminars with such organizations as the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network, the Simon Fraser Society for Community Living, and

the Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion. He has lectured also at UBC, the University of Winnipeg, and Langara College. Sometimes he addresses groups, other times he offers legal counselling to individuals or couples. All of his time is donated (although persons counselled later may engage his professional services).

People come from all over the province, especially areas with limited access to expertise on disability issues. They listen to Bjarnason intently, as he explains the legalities of property transfers, the structuring of discretionary and non-discretionary trusts, benefits available to persons with disabilities, and, ultimately, how parents can provide for children with disabilities through wills or trusts. Pat Tesan of the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network, who has worked with Bjarnason for the past four years, says "He's taught me so much."

Bjarnason's *History of the Winnipeg Fire Department*—a fascination he has never lost—is en route to publication now. It won't be his first work in print. With Lynda Cannell, he wrote *Organizing Events*, published in 1999 by Canada Law Books. In preparation is his *Emergency Services Encyclopedia*. In addition, he has written articles and chapters on planned giving and estate planning, sport and sports therapy liability, human rights and disability issues, and Canadian firefighting history.

Recognizing these accomplishments, a writer asks Bjarnason what his greatest challenge has been. "Overcoming other people's attitudes," he immediately responds. "I can figure out

how to overcome any physical challenge, but in other people's perceptions, I may be considered 'retarded' or 'incompetent' or not a real person. A few years ago, going to New York for a weekend, I was passing through customs and the officer asked all the usual questions. But then he asked 'Where are you going to stay? How will you pay for that? Who'll take care of you?' He took my wallet, counted all the cash, looked at the credit cards, and started the questions over again. 'Where do you live in Vancouver?' And finally, 'Who baby-sits you?' I took out my business card, slapped it down in front of him, and said 'I'm a lawyer. And I'm not impressed.' There were ten seconds of dead silence. Then he said 'Oh. Okay. Have a good trip.'

Besides cycling, hiking, weightlifting and his various professional and volunteer activities, Bjarnason may occupy himself with photography, his collections of firefighting memorabilia and more than 4,800 pins and buttons from around the globe, or cataloguing jokes, on any subject from taxidermy to terpsichore.

Asked his advice to parents who have children with disabilities, he says, "Try to get over the urge to be overprotective. It's natural to want to protect children, but allow them to develop their full potential, to participate in the world."

And his advice to children who find they have been born with what society regards as disabilities: "Try everything. You'll find things you can be great at."

Maybe a lot of things. ✨



Revealing One of Vancouver's Secrets

The legend of the Swiss archer-hero William Tell is told on the tapestry in the Crossbow Room, the private dining room of Erwin Doebeli's legendary William Tell Restaurant.

The William Tell's dark-paneled Crossbow Room is one of Vancouver's best-kept secrets, although it is the setting for many special occasions, for individuals and businesses. Chandelier lighting accents the elegance of fine linen, china, silverware and crystal. Wine cellar storage walls add warm ambience.

The Crossbow Room can be arranged to accommodate all varieties of dining, reception and party events. Custom menus can be designed.

For a view of the William Tell, visit www.thewmtell.com. For detailed information and reservations, telephone Suzanne Bidinost: (604) 609-2215 or Email info@thewmtell.com

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