

'There's no such thing as impossible'
A solution always exists, lawyer believes

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Halldor Bjarnason, the 41-year-old winner of the Coast Mental Health Foundation's Courage to Come Back Award for Inspirational Achievement, is no stranger to accepting awards.

Born with cerebral palsy, he won a Governor General's medal, the Terry Fox Humanitarian Award, a Canadian Bar Association's community service award, and he set a world record at the 1988 Seoul Paralympics in the tricycle sprint.

Bjarnason will accept his award at the Courage to Come Back Award dinner on April 28 at Vancouver's Hyatt Hotel.

The Vancouver lawyer talked to The Province's Lora Grindlay.

How satisfying is to have received so much recognition from so many organizations?.

"I'm always surprised by it. I've always tried to get the most out of life and if other people think I'm inspirational, great. Getting awards is a bonus. I'm pleased other people can find benefits in what I do."

Your cerebral palsy has caused a speech impediment. Yet you chose to become a lawyer.

"I'm perfectly capable of going before a judge and speaking. It's a matter of taking the time to speak clearly. I have a written copy of my argument and I give that to the judge. I've found having a disability is an asset. A good portion of my practice is doing estate planning for parents of disabled kids and people with disabilities. It's ironic that clients come to me because of my disability."



CREDIT: Nick Procylo, The Province

Halldor Bjarnason says he is a lucky man.

Who provided the most help and support to you?

"My parents -- they were always encouraging. I was raised with the belief that there is no such thing as impossible. They never told me I couldn't do something. There's a way around every obstacle. You have to be a bit unorthodox to get around it, but there is a solution to every problem."

You wrote the History of the Winnipeg Fire Department, which will be published in the next few months. What is it about firefighting?

"When I was a little guy, I wanted to be a firefighter, like every little boy. My parents wouldn't tell me that I couldn't do it. Mom and I went to every fire station. We read every book about firefighting. It became a life-long love."

What advice do you have for others who have a disability?

"Try everything. Do not listen to the naysayers. There will always be people who will say you can't do it. Surround yourself with positive, encouraging and creative people."

What brings you the ultimate joy?

"I love life, the outdoors, being active, contributing to the community. I love my work. I'm very fortunate. A lot of people never figure out what they want to do. I do appreciate that I am fortunate."

You used to pay the bills by writing jokes for public speakers. What role does humour play in your life?

"I always try to find something to laugh at -- that's when the creative solutions come up. I don't know how people survive without humour."