



# Toronto Synchronized Swimming Club

## SPECIAL EDITION NEWSLETTER EPILEPSY AWARENESS



As you may or may not know TSSC has a swimmer, Erin O'Neill, who is a competitive swimmer in the Athletes with Disabilities (AWD) category.

March is Epilepsy Awareness month. As part of TSSC's commitment to promoting inclusiveness and raising awareness, please see the article below written by Erin's mom, Carmel McMillan.

Carmel will be at the U of T pool this **Tuesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>** and **Wednesday, March 4<sup>th</sup>** to talk to teams about Epilepsy awareness and hand out purple wristbands in support of Epilepsy Awareness Month.

For more information on TSSC and the AWD program, please visit our website via the following link <http://torontosynchro.com/awd/>.

Follow **#purplenation** on Twitter to find out more about Epilepsy Awareness.

### The Synchro AWD (Athlete with a Disability) Program & TSSC By Carmel McMillan

To my fellow Synchro parents - my name is Carmel McMillan, and my daughter Erin O'Neil swims in the Athlete with a Disability category for our Club.

The Board has kindly given me this opportunity to share some background about both our AWD program and my daughter, because we have a lot of new swimmers and families in the Club and many of you (and your daughters) may not know her and be wondering what it's all about.

I also had the chance to do brief presentations to the girls earlier in the season, so that if they see Erin at the pool (or if she swims into them during warmups!) they understand a little bit about why she's different; and also to give them some context if they're at a meet and encounter other AWD swimmers on the deck or in the pool.

The AWD program within the Canadian Synchro community is really quite a wonderful example of how people with a variety of disabilities – both physical and intellectual – can be integrated into a sport rather than segregated, and the opportunities for learning this offers for both sides. Many of the AWD swimmers in the GTA region swim with the Variety Village Club, but there are competitors scattered throughout the area including the Granite Club and Olympium (among others).

The program provides two separate streams for AWD athletes – one for physical challenges, and the second for cognitive challenges. Within each stream there are tiers to recognize different levels of experience and ability, with the main difference from the regular competitive program being that AWD athletes do not "age out" – they can continue competing as long as they are able to. The key criteria for Athletes with a Disability is whether they can swim; if they can swim, they can do synchro!

There have been some truly remarkable athletes over the years that we have been competing, including one swimmer that was hearing-impaired and wore Cochlear implants to memorize her routine on deck then removed them and swam from memory – she never missed a beat!



Toronto Synchro began supporting AWD swimmers six years ago, when we approached the Head Coach at the same time as another family with an AWD competitor. There were no guidelines or training materials available, but the Club persevered and worked with both families to develop a program that would work for the girls, and over the next few years the Club embraced the program and began to look for ways to encourage more AWD swimmers to participate. This has been the biggest challenge, and awareness is the single biggest issue – most people are unaware of Synchro to begin with, and very few realize the opportunity we provide for swimmers with Disabilities.

We were lucky to approach the Club at the right time and with a supportive and welcoming Head Coach and Board – Erin swam Rec with TSSC for a couple of years before we discovered the Competitive program, and at the end of her second year was told by her coach that she should probably swim with Variety Village.

I can see why this young Rec coach might think that this was the right approach, because Erin has not one but several physical challenges that make it impossible for her to swim with a team.

She was born 6 weeks early and had a stroke right after birth, leaving her with a mild left-side Cerebral Palsy – this means that her left side doesn't work particularly well; she has no fine motor control on that side and her balance, strength and co-ordination are all affected.

She was diagnosed with Pediatric Glaucoma when she was 10 years old and that has left her with no peripheral vision at all and a very narrow field of central vision – she's considered to be legally blind.

She had back surgery at the beginning of Grade 9 to correct a serious curvature of the spine, and has two rods in her back that run from her neck to the base of her spine – her surgeon joked that he left her two vertebrae unfused at the base of her spine so she could “shake her hips” when she danced! This means that she can't bend at the waist and needs to find alternatives for many standard synchro figures.

Finally, she was diagnosed 3 years ago with Epilepsy and has struggled to find a balance between school (University) and other activities that allows her to manage her seizures effectively.

I realize this may sound overwhelming – but I explain this so that you (and the girls) understand WHY she is different. She may swim into them during warmups or ignore them during group activities, she may walk into them on deck, or cut them off going through a doorway. It's never deliberate, and I've explained this to the girls so they don't think she's just rude or ignorant!

She's just like everyone else inside her head – she loves music, books, movies and TV shows ... I know many of the parents have been fond of her routine choices, because she's a big fan of older rock music and has used everything from Meatloaf to Rocky Horror Picture Show and the musical “Joseph”! (You can see one of Erin's old routines up on the Club website on the AWD page.) <http://torontosynchro.com/awd/>

I hope this gives you a better understanding of the AWD Program and our TSSC AWD swimmer ... thanks for taking the time to read this, and thanks to the Club for all the encouragement and support they've given us over the past 6 years. It's been a wonderful experience and we hope Erin will continue to participate for many years to come.

Now that you understand more about this program, if you (or your daughters) know of any swimmers with disabilities that may be interested in participating in this terrific sport, please encourage them to contact the Club Administrators or check out the AWD tab on our website. Erin would love to have more competitors in the pool!