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Exploring Vancouver With A True Olympian

Next week when the Winter Olympics get underway in Vancouver, BC, many will recall the iconic image of Sam Sullivan waving a massive Olympic flag at the 2006 winter games in Turin, Italy. Were Sullivan just another athlete or Olympic official the image he cut would be long forgotten. But Sullivan is no ordinary gifted athlete or business of sports bureaucrat.

As the former mayor of Vancouver and a quadriplegic who worked tirelessly to ready the city and British Columbia for the games, Sullivan is an inspiring figure who will tower over the buff six and a half foot tall athletes at the games from his permanent perch in a wheelchair. Though he will never ski or ice skate again, as a living legend and champion of Vancouver -- and particularly its poor and dispossessed -- Sullivan deserves the Gold as much as any of the athletes who will be competing in this year's winter games.

Sam Sullivan is a builder, which is not easy for a quadriplegic. Whether it's designing on a napkin the one wheel contraption he now uses to "hike" in the mountains around Vancouver or as Mayor advocating for and authorizing the construction of the Canada Line (a north-south urban train line that runs to Richmond and the airport), the Downtown Streetcar and the new (and costly) Olympic Village; Sullivan is known as someone who gets things done.

But Sullivan does so much more than build with bricks and mortar. He's also fostering progress in Vancouver through

his Global Civic Policy Society ("Policy without the politics") and lifting up the forgotten through his support of NAOMI, a drug rehab program for heroin addicts, and other programs for the city's needy. Global Civic which promotes a more engaged citizenry provides a forum for those who have dedicated their lives to local government through public office or the civil service. NAOMI, the North American Opiate Medication Initiative, is a clinical trial that is testing whether heroin-assisted therapy benefits people suffering from chronic opiate addictions who have not benefited from other treatments.

These programs, and other Vancouver initiatives inspired or championed by Sullivan are profiled in Sam Sullivan: Life in a Wheel, a new film from Explore, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that champions the selfless acts of others. In the spirit of full disclosure, I work as a consultant for The Annenberg Foundation which is bound at the hip to Explore and has supported Sullivan's work through grants to the InnerChange Charitable Society and the Sam Sullivan Disability Foundation, among others. That's how I learned about Sullivan and his important work and inspiring story. As someone who works as a philanthropic advisor (among other things) I'm glad I did.

With the Winter Olympics just around the corner now is a good time to learn more about Sullivan and the way he is giving back to improve life for those less fortunate in Vancouver, the urban jewel in the Canadian crown. As an able bodied albeit overweight man in his late 40s, seeing the way Sullivan navigates around Vancouver in his wheelchair would be inspiring enough but there's much more to this exceptional human being and that is captured in Explore's film.

No one of course is perfect, and Sullivan has his critics as well. There are lots of people in Vancouver who blame him for the Olympic Village cost overrun and have nothing but disdain for his progressive drug policy and housing density initiatives. Indeed Sullivan lost his reelection bid for Mayor. Nonetheless, this is an exceptional individual worthy of an Explore profile. Viewing the film which can be found on line will help you judge for yourself.

The film follows Sullivan on a "hike" to the location where he was paralyzed 31 years ago during a skiing accident, sailing with the Disabled Sailing Association, traveling around Vancouver's neighborhoods with Explore's host Charles Annenberg Weingarten and visiting NAOMI, the heroin addiction treatment program he championed as Mayor. Speaking on film at NAOMI Sullivan explains that like the addicts who benefit from the controversial program that provides them with heroin and methadone while they are getting clean, "I manage my problem, I don't fix it." Sullivan is nothing if not an original thinker and (today) eternally upbeat individual. Near the end of the Explore film he states, "Before my disability there were 10 billion opportunities for me to explore. Now there's probably five billion, far more than I'll ever be able to attempt."

This sort of optimism from a man who has struggled much of his life to relearn limited use of his hands, arms, and shoulders and saw nine friends commit suicide is not common; but neither is Sullivan.

Over the next few weeks as we watch and read in the sports pages about the achievement of the world's greatest winter athletes it is worth paying tribute to the no-less spectacular achievement of Scott Sullivan. Explore's film is a fitting tribute to a gifted striver and achiever in his own right.

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