

KEYNOTE ADDRESS FOR THE FIFTH INTERNATIONAL THERAPEUTIC RECREATION SYMPOSIUM '97

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Recreation: A Cure for the 21st Century

First let us examine what we mean by "recreation," what it is and what it is not. Traditionally recreation has been defined as: "what one does in their leisure time to refresh one's strength and spirit after toil" (Thatcher, 1980, p. 700). It includes sports, visual arts, performing arts, bird watching, leisure reading, crafts, imaginary play, organized games, and so on. However, recreation has also become an interdisciplinary tool used in the toil (work) of many professionals: law enforcement officers, health care workers, social workers, theologians, environmentalists, educators, and of course recreation professionals themselves.

Recreation is NOT just amusement. It is not just a form of diversion, although both of these aspects have value. Recreation is more than that. Recreation today is also extensively used as a vehicle for developmental, rehabilitative and preventive goals. And not just for our human populations either. Edmonton's Dogs Off Leash Committee, for example, argue that the reason there is a need of off-leash areas is to provide the opportunity for dogs to play and socially interact. Such opportunities improve their disposition, discipline and overall health and well-being. This sounds vaguely familiar to the arguments made about the benefits for human beings.

Our quality of life in today's fast changing and stressful world heavily depends on the astute use of recreation in our lives and social processes. More than ever before in our recent history, our communities and human services professionals will need to understand the value of recreation and learn to use recreation to meet the challenges of the new millennium. It will become, I venture to say, the cure for the 21st century.

Recreation: A Cure-All Medium

Recreation has some characteristics and attributes that uniquely sets it apart from other human endeavors. These are:

- every human being has the capacity to recreate and have fun
- it is the one thing we all know how to do
- by definition, it is enjoyable and gratifying
- recreation is a common denominator that can bring diverse groups of people together e.g., intergenerational, cultural, able bodied and disabled, religious, racial
- laughter is a very common ingredient of recreation activities, and the endorphins it produces has been medically shown as very important to our system
- the benefits of recreation traverse our entire societal framework
- recreation can be a medium, a vehicle through which it is easy to apply or translate other social, therapeutic, and learning goals and objectives

Lastly, I have seen evidence. You have seen evidence. You have experienced first-hand the joy it brings to a person with brain injury when they produce a craft for the Christmas tree. You have seen the skill they have acquired in the process of that arts and craft class, bringing them one step further in their recovery. I have seen the successes of police officers in the D.A.R.E. program, through the medium of hockey, reach



at-risk young boys and prevent them from further involvement in drugs and alcohol abuse. Social workers a few years ago, collaborated with recreation professionals to provide a program for the children of abused women. Little did they realize the extent of the success this would yield in disclosures and teaching children coping skills and appropriate behaviors when faced with abusive situations.

First-hand experience showed me years ago how swimming classes raised the self-esteem of a young man with a mental disability when he finally learned to blow bubbles with his head below water. Therapists at the University of Alberta have successfully increased the strength and endurance of the elderly through fun exercise programs. I have seen how burn patients prevent the debilitating effects of scarring by bouncing a ball or playing catch.

I have seen it, you have seen it, we have all seen the results. What we have not done well as a profession is to provide statistical proof and substantiate our claims about the benefits of recreation through empirical evidence. Anecdotal evidence or experiential learning helps *us* to understand human behavior, but it has limitations in the boardrooms where decision-makers allocate the constantly shrinking dollar. For instance a study published in 1994, *Beyond Fun and Games: The Emerging Role of Public Recreation*, profiled 19 initiatives from across the United States (National Recreation and Parks Association, 1994). Collectively they illustrated the diversity of broad new dimensions of recreation as a human service. The goal was to move the perception of public recreation beyond "fun and games" to the status of an essential service. Although it raised awareness of successful projects and brought attention to the entrepreneurial initiatives of cash-strapped public servants, it did little to increase the funding levels of public recreation to that of essential services.

There is emerging literature articulating the benefits of recreation and studies measuring the perception of the public about the benefits of recreation. These include:

- *The Benefits of Local Recreation and Parks Services: A nation-wide study of the Perceptions of the American Public*. (Godbey, Graefe & James, 1992).
- *The Benefits of Parks and Recreation - A Catalogue*, a publication produced in 1992 by the Parks and Recreation Federation of Ontario and the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation
- *The Use and Benefits of Local Government Recreation and Park Services - A Report on Benefits*. (Harper, Neider, Godbey & Lament, 1996).

They are all instructive, but we need more if we are to truly market the benefits of recreation to decision-makers.

The Benefits Of Recreation

Although I have tried to classify the benefits of recreation into its health, social, economical and environmental aspects, they are interdependent and integration is necessary in many cases for the full value to be realized!

For individual health and well-being:

Exercise reduces stress and relieves tension. Stress is a contributing factor in a wide variety of emotional and behavioral difficulties including anxiety and depression (Greenberg & Valletutti, 1980). Stress is also a contributing factor in most physical illnesses including heart attacks, diabetes, angina, bronchitis, arthritis, etc. (Pelletier, 1977). Exercise reduces blood pressure and heart rate, and reduces other physiological changes set off during the alarm stage of the general adaptation syndrome. Exercising helps to give more physical strength to handle stressful crises.

Patients with incurable diseases such as Alzheimer's, terminal cancer and Aids (with forms of dementia) benefit greatly from recreational activities being included in their treatment. Structured crafts and



games and exercise have proven to be highly beneficial. A review of the literature noted that moderate doses of endurance exercise has a beneficial effect on immune responses. It has been shown that increased physical activity assists in the prevention of the onset of noninsulindependent diabetes mellitus (Manson, Nathan & Krolewski, 1992). The therapeutic value of stress management which includes exercise in terminal cancer patients, was dramatically demonstrated in a 1978 study (Simonton, Matthews-Simonton, & Creighton, 1978). Instead of being passive participants in the treatment process, patients are increasingly being taught how to prevent illnesses and how to speed up recovery from illnesses by learning stress management strategies of which recreation and exercise form a significant part.

Recreation has health and longevity benefits for the aged. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of morbidity and mortality from several chronic diseases and increases physical fitness, which leads to improved functioning. There appears to be a direct linear relationship between physical activity and health and functional effects. In a study where a group of 70 year old inactive men participated in daily exercise programs for a year, it was reported that at the end of the year they had regained the physical fitness levels normally associated with 40 year olds. There continues to be mounting evidence that shows that exercise reduces the degree of physical and mental slowness that occurs with many of the elderly.

Play is vital to childhood development. It is critical for children's cognitive, social, language, and motor skills, as well as developing creativity (Zastrow & Krist-Ashman, 1994). Play is also invaluable in the socialization and development of self-esteem in children, it promotes learning (symbolic play and representative play) and has therapeutic benefits (e.g. expressing self and resolving conflicts). Playing helps resolve conflicts resulting from child abuse, family disruptions and other trauma (Landreth, 1995).

Play therapy has long been used as part of the treatment format for child anxiety disorders by child psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein (1955). Social workers have been writing about the technique as far back as the 1890's to the 1920's, citing play therapy as a treatment tool for child anxiety disorders and other mental health concerns.

For youth with a history of childhood asthma, it was demonstrated in a 1991 study that yoga training resulted in significant increase in pulmonary function and exercise capacity (Berger & Owen, 1992).

For Enhancing Social Well-Being

Community development and community collaborations, both basic processes used in recreation service delivery, result in a feeling of community and community pride. Delarnere and Hinch (1994) established the social impacts of community festivals to be: community pride, social interaction, togetherness/sharing of ideas, community identity and community wellness.

Recreational activities can overcome isolation and alienation for seniors, people with disabilities, single parents etc. Recreational activities enhance the social competence (social interaction and decision-making skills) of individuals with developmental disabilities. Negative behaviors displayed by institutionalized adults with a mental disability, decreased by 24% and positive behavior increased by 66% after one hour of continuous physical activity (Brown & Chamove, 1993).

Recreation promotes self-stimulation, self-regulation and self-reinforcement. In a 1992 study, Berger and Owen noted that there was an acute decrease in tension, fatigue and anger after yoga.

Recreation programs can also be used as a tool in helping to overcome discrimination e.g. ageism, racism, and against persons with disabilities. People engaged in a fun activity together reduces the barriers. They begin to see the similarities to themselves and appreciate their diversity.

Recreational activities are vital for the social development of children and adolescents (Turner, 1989). Aerobic exercise has been shown to have a positive influence on premenstrual symptoms, especially



depression. Recreation can be a tool in finding a social role through volunteerism for the elderly and other individuals with disabilities who are unable to find employment. Volunteering in recreation can also assist in skill development, organizational development and overall, increase the quality of life in a community.

Recreation Promotes Economic Well-Being

Recreation reduces health care costs. This occurs through the promotion of individual health and well-being physically and mentally. Recreation prevents the onset of diseases. Recreation is also used in treatment and therapeutic activities because it speeds up the healing process. Through recreation the learning and relearning of motor skills, is made easier after injury or disease. In 1993 the RAND Corporation claimed that each additional mile walked or run by a sedentary person, would give him/her an extra 21 minutes of life and save (U.S.) society an average of 34 cents in medical and other costs.

Recreation contributes to maintaining and extending independent living by the elderly. Thus this reduces the public costs of nursing homes and other institutional care for the elderly. Through recreation programs, children increase their knowledge of safety and accident prevention techniques. This reduces insurance costs, medical and hospital costs and repair costs.

Many companies have exercise programs established at their own expense on the work site because it has been shown to greatly improve productivity. In a 1991 study (Steinhardt, Greenhow & Stewart, 1991), of law enforcement officers, increased fitness levels were directly related to decreased absenteeism and lower medical care claims. Another study showed that an exercise program facilitated job-related task performance even in adults with mental retardation (Croce & Horvat, 1992).

Recreation and recreation facilities attract tourism. In Alberta, tourism is the third largest industry. For example, it has been estimated that the economic value of bringing the 2001 World Track and Field Games to Edmonton is in the order of \$ 1.4 million. Recreation produces employment and economic value through the provision of parks, open spaces and facilities for recreational opportunities. A billion dollar industry has been built up around recreation and leisure, and for some, their leisure time pursuits have become their profession e.g. professional sports, body building, etc.

Recreation has long been used as a means of engaging youth in positive activities, thereby reducing the community costs of crime. This has been repeatedly demonstrated. For example, in Phoenix Arizona, a summer recreation program for teens conducted by the Parks and Recreation Department and the Library Department, resulted in a 52% reduction in juvenile crime (Phoenix Parks, Recreation and Library Staff, 1994).

Recreational Activities Can Promote Environmental Well-Being

Species preservation for both native and endangered species are the main focus for recreational facilities like zoos. Edmonton's Valley Zoo for example, has made species preservation as one of its prime goals. Education and appreciation about the importance of preserving our environment are not only a focus for zoo programs, but are also a part of many recreation programs, including daycamps, playground and enviro-park programs. Conservation and reduced environmental pollution are stressed in these recreation programs teaching young and old how to achieve sustainable environments for ourselves as well as future generations.

Bird-watching is the fastest growing recreational activity in Alberta. This has required an improvement to urban habitats for wildlife, such as birds. Overall, recreation goals and activities are enhancing our quality of life.

Criteria For Selecting Successful Initiatives

In selecting Edmonton initiatives and projects to present as examples, I examined the underlying principles that many recreation therapists use as they work towards improving the quality of life for persons with disabilities and the elderly. These are:

- **collaboration** - Collaborative efforts have the characteristics of: mutually shared vision; shared decision-



making (client/customer/citizen or community); trust; teamwork and empowered staff are prerequisites. There is a holistic approach to service delivery and partners contribute resources commensurate with their capacity to do so.

- **prevention** - The characteristics of prevention are that it stops further deterioration and circumstances from becoming more acute and avoids social problems from occurring in the first place.
- **community development** - Community development characteristics include: community members define problem/opportunity and solutions; building skills and knowledge at the local level; shared power; trust and openness; and a respect for all (diversity).

Examples From Edmonton Initiatives - Fourth World

For almost two decades the Fourth World Program at the A.C.T. Aquatic and Recreation Center has been a successful example of how recreation can enhance individual and social well-being for persons with mental disabilities. The program is conducted seasonally for 10 weeks on Wednesday and Friday evenings giving mentally disabled adults an opportunity for a safe, positive recreational experience. The philosophy of the program focuses on exposure, social interaction, skill development, leisure educational skills, providing a sense of belonging to a group, and fun. The program is divided into "Clubs"; everything from outdoor pursuits to fit night, drama and social night. There are over 150 members. The program's continued growth is leading to its expansion with new partners to other parts of the City. The Edmonton Community Living Society is planning an outing club this fall in central Edmonton, and a new committee concerned with leisure for adults with mental/developmental disabilities, is planning dances in the Bonnie Doon area.

Fit For Your Life

The first workshop for the Fit For Life program in Canada was held at the Northgate Lions Senior Center in partnership with Dr. Sandy O'Brian Cousins of the U. of A.'s Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation in 1996. The program uses small hand weights and adjustable ankle weights to improve their functional independence and mobility. The success of this program has skyrocketed. By the end of 1997 over 300 seniors will have benefited from this program. The Center for Weil-Being is a new partner in the program and will be promoting it province-wide as part of OPERATION ABLE. Presently there are 15 partners including hospitals, long-term care facilities, lodges, and the City's leisure and senior centers, all collaborating to share resources. There is a continued effort to find funding so that this cost-recoverable program could also be provided to low-income seniors. A significant part of the success has been the measurable improvements in functional fitness, self-rated health and quality of life.

Northeast Youth Teen Project

The drive for the establishment of the Northeast Drop-In Center began more than two years ago in response to a growing increase in youth-related issues such as violence, racism, delinquency and crime indicating that the needs of youth were not being adequately met. Youth were asked for their ideas and reaffirmed their interest in a drop-in center where the activities of their choice could be conducted. This collaborative involves community leagues, the area council, two not-for-profit social service agencies, the Boys and Girls Club of Edmonton, two city departments (Police and Community Services) and of course the teens themselves who share resources, staff, and have gained the financial support of business, foundations and government for their efforts. The goals of the Center include the provision of recreation opportunities for teens, developing opportunities for youth to develop, promote and enhance their leadership skills, and to increase youth self-sufficiency. An informational and referral goal is also being pursued to connect youth with the Birth Control Clinic, suicide prevention and Legal Aid etc.. The center serves 30-50 at-risk youth



between 13-17 years of age. Thirty to forty percent are school drop-outs, unemployed and fifty percent are aboriginal. Many of the youth come from homes with poverty, abuse and assault. Twenty a day are fed through a food program that has been developed. The benefits of the program seem obvious, but are stated as:

- youth are exposed to a population diversity and the opportunity to interact and learn through socialization and recreation to become fulfilled, productive adults;
- increased social skills, self-esteem and self-image;
- ability to make life decisions;
- empowerment;
- increased skills;
- opportunity to interact with positive role models;
- gets them off the street into a safe, non-judgmental environment

Healthy Children, Healthy Families

This program provides accessible aquatic recreation programs to children, youth and families who are economically disadvantaged in Northeast Edmonton. There are 11 partners in the program which has served almost 2900 persons. This program is community based, building on the strengths of families and reducing risks. The outcome focused strategies of this program have resulted in the following benefits:

- physical; increased competency and strength endurance in water; progressive skills development; eye-hand coordination etc.
- social; increased cognitive/reasoning and listening skills; role modeling from instructors
- emotional; proud parents of children's achievements, increased children's self-esteem
- intellectual; water safety techniques, and applied safety
- spiritual; families having positive, pleasurable experiences together.

Partners For Youth

In 1992, as one of the recommendations from Edmonton's Safer Cities Initiative, two school based, interdisciplinary service models were piloted in Edmonton. Wellington Junior High School, was one of the schools selected for the pilot. The youth in the school were considered at-risk by all service providers and was the northern catchment school for youth with mental disabilities, with over 25 severely disabled youth attending daily. The partners included 3 city departments, 3 provincial departments, the two school boards, the Board of Health, Glenrose Hospital and the YMCA. Collaboration, prevention, and community development were the basic principles of operation and within two months of launching it, the program was responsible for saving the lives of two youths. At the end of its first year, the students (grade 9) showed an amazing improvement in their scholastic tests, which had a recent history of gradual decline. They significantly surpassed their averages in the four subjects being tracked and in fact doubled their scores in two. The attitude survey was even more impressive with the students' feeling of safety increasing by 46% and 80% of the remaining elements increasing by over 21%. The unique assistance that was provided by the therapists from the Glenrose Hospital and the tutors from the YMCA were extremely valuable. The success of this pilot is seen today in its expansion, as well as it being used as a model for integrated service delivery. The expansion is being funded by community funds, through the Area Council, which also speaks to its value to the community.

Today, Partners for Youth has expanded well beyond the two schools, serving a number of schools. It still maintains the principles upon which it was built: collaboration, prevention, community development focused, and multi-sectoral. It is decentralized with empowered staff and community involvement in



decisionmaking.

General

I could describe several other successful initiatives that exemplify the principles of collaboration, prevention and community development. However, one of the most crucial points that needs to be made here, is that none of this could have been possible without the tremendous commitment and effort from front line professionals. Edmontonians in particular have greatly benefited from the support and assistance provided by our partner organizations such as the Glenrose Hospital, AADAC, Alberta Hospital, the YMCA, Edmonton Police Service, community leagues, the Capital Health Authority, both school boards, and Alberta Family and Social Services. But none of it would have worked without the dedication, the risktaking and the energetic persistence of the front-line workers who made it work often in spite of their systems and organizational hurdles.

How can we continue to learn from these initiatives? Success is within our reach, but how do we expedite it? Here are a few tips to ensuring that recreation rises to the top of government, corporate and community agendas.

How To Market The Benefits Of Recreation To Decision Makers And Others

Politicians

- Help politicians understand the importance that recreation plays in the economic, social and environmental fabric of the community. Overall, if they understand the importance of recreation for the quality of life in the community, they will support it. However, with the shrinking tax dollar today, the question is, how can we ensure that recreation sits high on the priority list of a politician? Why would politicians support such issues? They need to feel convinced of its value, that it meets the needs of their constituents, it fulfills what they stand for, and it gives them profile and recognition.
- To influence the priorities of politicians, become involved in helping them formulate their platform. Work with politicians prior to elections helping them determine what they stand for and their platforms.
- Meeting the needs of their constituents is important for politicians. Help them to realize the value of recreation to their special constituents e.g.: inner city youth, elderly, specific organizations, etc. Provide them useful information, facts and statistics, and testimonies.
- Sometimes politicians have a very personal appreciation for the value of recreation and may be convinced to become a patron of a particular aspect e.g. the arts, recreation opportunities for the disabled, a particular facility (Fort Edmonton Park). In such situations, politicians will be able to consider the impacts of policy decisions as well as proactively carry the banner for their chosen cause.

Corporations And Businesses

- Corporations and businesses will become involved in recreation activities, because of the benefits it brings to their business. These benefits include the profile as a corporate citizen or increasing the profile of the corporate head in the community. Name recognition or branding and loyalty also helps a company with increased product sales and eventually the bottom-line. There may be other reasons for companies to become involved in recreation activities. A parks and recreation department could package a number of activities together for sponsorship by companies or corporations. Companies have also become involved in recreation for their employees. Studies have shown that recreation has



the potential to improve productivity in their business.

Special Interest Groups

- They can play a role in education and public awareness, recognition and rewards, specialty help, advocacy and lobbying: e.g. ATRA, ARPA, CPRA, Advisory Board for Persons with Disabilities, and Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability.

Service Organizations

- Organizations whose purpose is to raise funds for community improvement projects appreciate sound proposals through which they can meet their objectives for community service. Service clubs like the Kiwanis are involved in fund-raising for a playground in Edmonton. The Kinsmen Club of Edmonton together with the Kinnettes, recently built a children's fitness center in one of Edmonton's sports facilities. Recreation workers need to be consistently on the look-out for opportunities and possibilities, by which recreation can serve a dual purpose within the community.

Benefactors/Partners

- Establishing foundations, associations, and advisory groups to support specific recreation issues, projects or endeavors will assist the recreation professional in innumerable ways. This may include: advice, advocacy, financial support, public education, operational support, volunteers, etc.

Employers And Supervisors

- Employers and supervisors need to be convinced about recreation's value for money. They need to understand how recreation helps them achieve their outcome goals. They will also require proof as to the economical benefits of recreation and how it contributes to long term cost controls (e.g. WCB, health care costs). Recreation professionals have a responsibility to continually inform supervisors and their hiring agency about the benefits of recreation. To take it for granted that they should know may be fatal when it comes to funding decisions. One of the most important ways in which employers can see the benefits of recreation is through user comments. Compliments and testimonials from users, customers and clients enables the agency to hear first-hand about the value of recreation. All too often recreation workers are modest and they do not share such information from users and customers with their supervisors.

To Summarize, What We Need To Do Is

- Continue to raise public awareness about the benefits of recreation. Good tools include the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association's Alberta Kit (1994) which provides excellent how to tips and resource materials for speakers etc.
- Collaborate with social scientists and acknowledge that we must put into practice both Quantitative research techniques as well as the Qualitative analysis.
- Become active in marketing the benefits of recreation. There are a number of different ways in which each of us can become involved in promoting what we believe.
- And finally, take good care of ourselves, so we do not burn out. We, in the helping professions, must pay attention to our own health first. We must exercise, play, laugh and have fun, learn a new skill, and take time to appreciate the nature around us. In short we MUST recreate!!!!



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