

Aquatic therapist says belief and persistence makes it all possible

By Lisa Gervais

Aquatic therapist Audrey Collins stands in a swimming pool, helping Juston Hutchinson into the salt water. He has left his wheelchair poolside and is getting out of a lift that has lowered him into the 92F water.

“Alright, are you ready Freddie?” Collins asks, with a French-Canadian accent.

She begins their 30-minute therapy session by warming up Hutchinson’s legs with gentle stretches. As the treatment continues, she loosens the muscles that his muscular dystrophy has tightened.

Near the end, she holds onto Hutchinson as he stands in the water. “Oh, you’re stepping out of your comfort zone,” she comments as the seconds tick on the clock on the wall.

“When’s the last time you stood that long?” she asks, and Hutchinson smiles. Finally, the strain gets to him and he has to lower but the accomplishment is not lost on the therapist or client.

“Wow, that was amazing. I’m going to say you stood for a whole minute. That was a super good session,” Collins comments.

The two met when Collins needed signage for Audrey’s Aquatic Therapy and Rehabilitation. Hutchinson runs Joe’s Custom Signs. She found out about his muscular dystrophy and despite him having a fear of water, encouraged him to try a free session. He’s been coming since.

Hutchinson said he was looking for more mobility, and finds his body is looser as a result of the sessions. There is obvious trust between the two. “She’s got a nice way about her, and always has a smile on her face, offering encouragement. She’s lovely and nice to work with,” he says while towelling off.

Collins said because she is in a swimming pool and at eye level with her clients, it is a great equalizer.

After some “hiccups” – including COVID-19, a car accident which left her concussed, and the death of her mom – the business is fully up and running, with the therapist pretty much maxed out with clients.

The pool is on her and husband, John Collins’, expansive property just outside of

Gelert. They met when Collins was working summers at Kilcoo camp and bought the property 11 years ago. They have three young children.

However, in all that time, Collins commuted to Lindsay and Peterborough to ply her speciality trade. She started working with motor vehicle accident victims in Lindsay, loved the modality, but realized she needed to learn more. She first went to the Canadian Aquafitness Leader Alliance, then Canadian Aquatic Rehab Instructors (CARI). She said CARI founder, Alison Bonnyman, told her she thought she was a “gem” and encouraged her to do the same training she had done at the Valence clinic in Switzerland. So, she did.

When she came back, she taught for CARI across Canada, did therapy in Lindsay and Peterborough, and made house calls. But COVID hit, shutting down the public pools where she practiced her trade.

“So, that’s when I said, ‘okay, it’s time now or never to put this together. And, so, I did it.’”

She elaborates about the “hiccups.” COVID supply chain issues wreaked havoc with getting the materials she needed to build the pool and the building that houses it. The delays required, “patience, perseverance and persistence,” she says.

Then she suffered the concussion when she was rear-ended in her vehicle. She took about four months off of work. She came back and started seeing clients the first week of February 2022.

Through it all, she never let go of a dream. “I always wanted a pool for my kids and we don’t live on the lake. Swimming is very fun and I’m a water baby myself. And so, I just thought, why not do it here? I felt I could see more people, cater more to the local people ... because I told myself, I live here, I play here, I would love to work here.”

She visited other pools in her practise, so she knew what she wanted and did not want. She was the general contractor, with help from her husband and a team they assembled. They received the custom building in pieces and had to figure out the jigsaw puzzle.

As for clients, Collins said up to starting her



Audrey Collins helps Juston Hutchinson stand in the water. Photo by Lisa Gervais.

own business, she worked mainly with motor vehicle accident victims. It’s shifted to more stroke victims.

She said the challenges, particularly her concussion, have given her a better understanding when working with clients who have had traumatic brain injuries.

“I want people to see that it’s still possible.

If you believe. If you persist. It will happen. Right?

“It was a very long journey but I’m happy that I went through this journey because I grew a lot from that. And I’ve learned a lot from it. So, there’s a lot of positives coming out of it.”

Contact her at 705-457-6323.

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