

Michael Bortolotto: A Rebel with a Cause

BY SUSANNE K. RAAB

Every now and then one encounters an individual who redefines the boundaries of what is possible. I had this opportunity recently when I sat down with **Michael Bortolotto**. Michael was born with cerebral palsy, an injury to his brain which affects his muscle coordination, as well as his speech. Throughout his childhood, his medical team and teachers focused on what he could not do, and painted a bleak picture of his future. He struggled through school, and eventually ended up living on the streets in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Then one day, he came across an idea which resonated so deeply within him, it changed the course of his life.

Today, Michael is a successful entrepreneur, public speaker, husband and father. He has recently been awarded the prestigious **Cathleen Lyle Murray** award by the **American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine** ("AAPDM"). The AAPDM is a multidisciplinary scientific organization made up of physicians, allied health professionals and researchers whose mission is devoted to the study of cerebral palsy and other childhood onset disabilities primarily by promoting professional education around the world to improve the quality of life for children with disabilities. The purpose of Cathleen Lyle Murray award is to recognize outstanding individuals in non-medical professions "on

the basis of their impact on society through their humanitarian efforts to enhance the lives of persons with disabilities".

In September, Michael will be attending the 68th Annual Meeting of the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine in San Diego, California to accept his award and to deliver a 45 minute presentation to physicians, allied health professionals and researchers, which will include new insights into how "resetting" can assist a person living with cerebral palsy improve their muscle control, including their speech and movements.

I had the opportunity to sit down with Michael to find out why he calls himself a positive rebel, and how he has overcome great challenges in his life to build a successful business and family life.

Q: You call yourself a positive rebel – have you always been that way?

A: Without actually knowing it, I've always been a "Positive Rebel" growing up. At approximately 27 years old, I was reading a book by **Marsha Sinetar** entitled "Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow". In one of the early chapters of the book, I read about self-leadership and people who had succeeded during the history of human kind. The people who conquered, led, won, and rebuilt societies and civilizations always rebelled against their minds' temptation to think negatively, have



Michael Bortolotto

ideas of limitations, and giving into fear. As I read this, I thought – this sounds like the way my mind works. Being a positive rebel is not easy – especially when society isn't going your way. I have to be highly creative and innovative, as well as a little bit stubborn, to overcome the challenges that I face in my life.

Q: You are careful to use the word "challenges" when you speak about your life, rather than "disabilities". Why do you make that distinction?

A: I am 51 years old, and during my years in this world, many different people have come through my life who have greater challenges than me. When the first such person came into my life – I initially saw the so-called label – "disability", but when I took time to see their heart, mind, and spirit, the "disability" faded away and I saw the "challenge".

At roughly the same time, my attention was drawn to look at the so-called able-bodied person. Soon their challenges became apparent and I thought – wow, they're struggling in many different ways as well, but nobody is calling them "disabled".

Then one day everything came into clear perspective when a person was telling everyone around me I couldn't do anything. That's when I showed it could be done.

We all have challenges, barriers we encounter in our lives, but they can be overcome.

Q: What has been the most challenging barrier for you to overcome?

A: My most challenging barrier has nothing to do with me – given time to explore, invent, adapt, create, and do things at my own speed – I can do almost everything. My biggest

limitation is society, and the bias society has toward people living with disabilities. Society's fear of uncertainty and insecurity builds canyons and mountains around me and people like me everywhere. Please let me follow my heart and I'll succeed just fine, and I promise, I WON'T NUKE AND DESTROY ANYTHING OF MAJOR IMPORTANCE!

Q: You have accomplished a lot in your life – what are you most proud of?

A: Overcoming all of the limitations my physicians, teachers and society placed on me early in my life, and living my life on my own terms. This includes building my own business which allows me to make a positive difference in the lives of others who are facing challenges of their own. Also, and perhaps most importantly, I am incredibly proud of my family – my wife **Dorothy**, our daughter **Natasha** and our son, **Quintin**.

Q: Tell me about your personal life. When you are not working, speaking, and inspiring others, what do you spend your time doing?

A: My personal life is about learning how to be a husband, father, and accountable person who shows up when the chips are down. Being accountable to me means constantly trying to stretch my abilities to do things around the home and throughout society. Being a father is more than just parenting, it is about the opportunity to explore what else, and more, I can do. This has ranged from changing diapers to landscaping, to running a chainsaw, to building an ice-cream cone and buying a new truck.

Q: I understand that you have delivered thousands of presentations to a variety of audiences, including school children, corporations, athletes, entrepreneurs, firefighters, police officers, and self-advocates all over Canada, as well as the US. What draws you to public speaking?

A: I want to show people everything is possible, not only in my life – but more importantly, in their lives. I want to be a hero to people who believe they can't and never will. I want to be an example to those people who need a leader to show it is possible, to never, never quit and to help people live their lives to their maximum.

I want the world to see my heart, body, and soul for what it can do!

Q: What's next?

A: I want to continue to inspire people to believe in themselves, to change the way they think about themselves and their abilities and to give them the chance to live their life to their fullest potential. I am publishing a new children's book called *Tour de Courage*, to inspire children to believe in themselves, at a time when they are most impressionable. I will continue to travel across Canada and the US to speak to children and adults about the power of being a positive rebel.

Susanne is a medical malpractice lawyer and advocate for people living with cerebral palsy. She practices at Pacific Medical Law in Vancouver, BC.

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