

John Hunkin's Speech to Terry Fox Hall of Fame Induction Ceremonies

November 14, 2001

On behalf of CIBC and its more than 40,000 employees, I am pleased to be part of this year's Terry Fox Hall of Fame induction ceremonies. Dr. Amy Doofenbaker, Ms. Ivy Granstrom, Dr. James MacDougall and Mr. Tom Hainey deserve national recognition for what they have accomplished. And we can also take pride in what this celebration, today, represents. More than ever, the Terry Fox Hall of Fame, its inductees and its sponsor are a marker of our collective progress...our evolution as a diverse society advocating openness, fairness, and inclusion.

The word 'diversity' means 'variety'. In the last decade or two, its meaning has expanded to include a sense of social proaction. It's become an acknowledgement of the value of differences in a healthy, progressive society.

As a species and as individuals, our most terrible moments and our finest moments have come from how we have reacted to diversity, be it a different religion, a different race, a different opinion or a different ability. In the last century, as the world's population has increased, more people have come face to face with people and beliefs that are different. Many societies have chosen to acknowledge the value of diversity and to take steps to protect and celebrate it.

For example, Toronto is one of the most multi-cultural cities in the world. Different religions, races, politics, abilities and lifestyles co-exist to produce the cachet of a world-class metropolis. Diversity is an important accomplishment, and it is something that we are celebrating, here today.

I think all of us share certain ideas about the kind of country we want Canada to be: a society that is fair and open and respectful of people's differences; a place where everyone has an opportunity to contribute and succeed.

At CIBC, we want to have a diverse work force because it's fair, because it's reflective of our population, and because it makes good business sense. So we have many policies to ensure that it happens, including a global accommodations service for individuals with disabilities. Yes, we still have a way to go, but we're working hard at changing that.

Mario Ros is a business monitoring specialist at CIBC. He randomly scans the telephone calls of sales reps in CIBC call centers to ensure that the service we're providing is appropriate to customers' needs. If a call seems inappropriate, he presents his recommendations to his supervisor. This is a very important job to CIBC for a lot of reasons that have to do with our reputation, customer service, legal obligations and financial performance.

Mario, by the way, is physically disabled. When he was twenty, his retinas detached, leaving him for all intents and purposes, blind. When he applied for a job at CIBC, his offer to us was this: let me try the job for three months, and let me see if I can do it. We took him up on his offer. By using a computerized speech system, Mario can hear all the data that most people get

by looking at their screen. Mario believes that employers only have to do one thing for the disabled: give them a chance. And he believes that the disabled person also has an obligation. He says, "You can't just say I need a job because I'm disabled. You have to say I deserve the chance to show I can do it."

Miguel Aguayo works in CIBC's Human Resources department as a consultant. He was born a hearing person but was deafened from a bout of spinal meningitis. Today, he works out regularly. He most recently ran the CIBC Run for the Cure 5K in 24 and a half minutes (I ran it as well. My time was over 30 minutes and I'm not going to be more specific than that!). He takes his daughter to swimming lessons, pays taxes and does all those things that people without disabilities do.

But he has had challenges, and a significant one has been barriers to job opportunities. When Miguel graduated from college as a social worker, his classmates all got jobs while he was considered for jobs related to deafness or disability. Instead he chose the hard road of contract work with its limited opportunities. It took him several frustrating years to break out of that typecast, but in his words, "here I am!"

Miguel is very generous in his praise of larger corporations for their initiative in recruiting people with disabilities – and he insists that this isn't because his performance review is just around the corner! But his experience as a vocational rehabilitation counselor made him aware that these companies only hire a finite number of employees. He thinks that the real breakthrough will come when medium and small companies become more active in hiring and retaining physically disabled people.

Gordy Publicover works in our Human Resources group and pre-screens applicants interested in positions in CIBC call centers. He's a graduate of St. Mary's University and has a B.Comm in accounting. He lives independently, shoots pool and is active in wheelchair rugby, track events and weights. He also does volunteer work in support of people who have recently suffered spinal cord injuries. He does this to show others that it is possible to overcome serious injuries like quadriplegia.

He says that people don't know how to approach disabled people, and are often timid and even uncomfortable about his disability. Gordy was recently invited out to lunch by two able co-workers. He agreed, and as they made their way out of the office, one of the co-workers veered off, heading for the stairs. Gordy said, we'll meet you in the lobby. The co-worker was overcome with embarrassment that she had not considered his disability. "People can be overly sensitive," says Gordy, "She didn't realize that by forgetting I was a person with a disability, she was treating me as an equal."

Humans have been on this earth for four million years. In the last 100 years – a mere speck of our time here -- many countries have seen the emancipation of women, the abolition of slavery, laws to prevent or punish discrimination based on religion, race, sex, and physical disability, among others. However imperfect the implementation, our desire to do what is right and correct what is wrong can't be disputed.

This desire has smoldered, been snuffed out and rekindled many times over the course of our odyssey on this planet. Indeed, most of our life here on earth has been slow, violent and intolerant. But through all the smoke and misery that's marked our short time here on earth have emerged truly astounding and life changing events: the emergence of great philosophers, the

invention of mass-produced books, and important concepts like democracy, public education, individual liberty and diversity.

Of course, these happier developments are not universal ones. For example, there is no equivalent Terry Fox Hall of Fame in Afghanistan. And in our own country, we still have work to do before we can claim to be an inclusive and diverse society.

Humanity has made huge progress in the last century, but diversity is still a social value heavily dependent on its affordability. It is the first value to be compromised in the face of economic and political desperation. Its eager substitute, intolerance, is ready to seed and grow whenever a society is stressed. Even in Canada, random and profoundly misguided incidents against Muslim citizens show how quickly intolerance can spring from cracks in our sense of well being. In countries far less fortunate than Canada, intolerance is used for its economic conciseness: its ability to reduce ambiguity and choice, judge who is acceptable and unacceptable, and quash opposition.

We are coming face to face with the realization that in this global village, those who despise and punish diversity cannot be dismissed as someone else's problem. They impoverish us all.

I think that our continuing opportunity is to help people and communities – inside and outside our borders - to reach the point where tolerance is feasible. This is the only way that we can lay claim to being a truly enlightened and diverse society. Yes, we've introduced a lot of light into our own villages. And we're broadening our view of many things: what our society is, our definition of who can and does make a contribution to the general good, and what our world responsibilities entail.

John F. Kennedy said that if we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. In a world that of late feels dark and shadowed, the Terry Fox Hall of Fame is one of the lights that warm us with a reminder that fairness, caring and diversity are more than aspirations.

Thank you.