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May 15-17, 2015 five DSAH members had the opportunity to attend the Canadian Down Syndrome Society's (CDSS) annual conference in Edmonton, Alberta. All agreed it was an inspirational and informative weekend. In the fall, these DSAH members are planning an information session where we will share what we learned from the conference workshops. But to give you the highlights here... the conference started and ended with incredible speakers and messages for us all to learn from.

Highlights

Motivational speaker, [Spencer West](http://www.metowe.com/speakers-bureau/view-all-speakers/spencer-west/) (www.metowe.com/speakers-bureau/view-all-speakers/spencer-west/) started the conference. He guided an audience of more than 300 delegates to see beyond his obvious disability and to “redefine possible”. Spencer West has a rare genetic disorder that led to his legs not growing. When he was a child, both his legs were amputated above the knees - but this never stopped him from achieving his goals and inspiring all those around him. He encouraged the delegates to create social value in everything we do and reminded us how asking for help is not a bad thing. There will always be times for us to help others and for others to help us. He discovered this fundamental lesson while climbing Mount Kilimanjaro with a fundraising team. He and his team made it to the top – an incredible achievement for anyone, let alone a person who did it on his hands. Despite his determination that he would do it all on his own, there were times when his hands were so sore and tired that he needed other team members to motivate and even carry him on their backs. On the last day as they approached the summit, many of his team members experienced altitude sickness – he did not. He talked and supported his friends through that last day and together they reached the top. Spencer West captured the emotions and admiration of each person in that room. He reminded us all that disabilities do not stop what is possible – in fact a disability can inspire what is possible.



Tara McCallum from Happy Soul Project, (<http://www.happysoulproject.com>) an Ontario parent who started a blog when her daughter Pip was born with Down syndrome, led a session and was the pre-end note speaker. The love and enthusiasm she and her adorable daughter Pip brought to the room were palpable. Her session titled *21 things having a child with Down syndrome has taught me* and her endnote talk were excellent. Tara spoke with raw honesty, at times she cried and most of the audience (including myself) cried along with her. She eloquently told the story of how she came to celebrate the differences her daughter was born with. And how she came to accept and celebrate who Pip is and who she will become. She



told us how we are all stronger than we think and how we should not worry about the 'what ifs' and how we should all dream bigger for children. Her messages were simple yet powerful and would benefit everyone who heard them - be that a professional, parent or a self-advocate.

The grand finale was a presentation by VATTA (Voices at the Table for Advocacy Committee). VATTA is made of ten self-advocates from across the country whom have helped to guide and influence the work of CDSS. Four long-standing members of this committee were retiring having served their 10-year tenure. Their many contributions and accomplishments were applauded. What an impressive bunch! New members (including the first French speaking member from Quebec) were formally welcomed to VATTA and each member had the opportunity to speak. I encourage you to look at their website and learn more about them and their many achievements. <http://cdss.ca/network/vatta/>.

VATTA have created a video where members talk about who they are and what they are accomplishing (to be released widely shortly). It was shown at the end of the conference. It was moving, inspirational and quite simply amazing. As a parent of a three year old with Down syndrome, hearing these young adults speak about their abilities and challenges, and what they have each achieved was the most poignant part of the entire weekend for me. They allowed me to see what is possible for my son's future and all the other children, young people, and adults with Down syndrome that we support here in Hamilton.

Watch for our information session in the fall and come out and hear more details about the conference. We want to share our learning with you.