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A Tribute to Jim Derksen
Disability Rights Pioneer
by Diane Driedger

Jim Derksen, national and international disability rights movement pioneer, passed away July 6, 2022. Jim had a great effect on many people in Winnipeg, in Canada and internationally. To me, Jim was a friend, colleague and mentor. Jim's achievements included working on the protection of disabled people in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and on including disability as ground for discrimination in the Canadian Human Rights Code while at the Council of Canadians with Disabilities.

Jim believed in the power of the voice of people with disabilities and that one disabled person did not represent all disabled people. Organizing into groups of disabled people was a way to ensure "A Voice of Our Own", the motto of both Council of Canadians with Disabilities and Disabled Peoples' International. Jim worked tirelessly in building organizations of people with disabilities, which included the Manitoba League of the Physically Handicapped (now the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities), Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH, now Council of Canadians with Disabilities), and working on the founding of Disabled Peoples' International (DPI). In addition, Jim chaired the Manitoba Government's committee that drafted the Accessibility for Manitobans Act. I worked with Jim in these endeavors over a period of 40 years.

Jim had a great intellect, which he employed in ensuring that people with disabilities were heard. He was a renaissance man, who enjoyed learning, reading, growing plants, tending

bonsai, writing poetry, painting, performing, and of course, fighting for the rights of people with disabilities. Jim Derksen was seventy-five.

As a tribute to Jim I wrote this poem and read it at Jim's celebration of life in October 2022.

Jim

when we first met
at the office in 1981
you told me
in a mellow voice
with a buddha smile
we're doing something new
founding an international
organization of disabled people
you need to have
beginner's mind

I was a beginner
a 20-year-old volunteer
we contacted and sent
plane tickets to
disabled people in 50 countries
in Africa Asia Latin America
the Caribbean the Middle East
we wondered if the

tickets would reach their destinations

we learned
that funding didn't always
arrive on time

stress
an anvil

when we arrived
in the flower-lined streets of Singapore
for the First World Congress of
Disabled Peoples' International
the disabled people
we sent tickets to
arrived and joined 400 others
to found
a voice of our own
the organization's motto

I learned that when
people from so many countries
worked together
diplomacy was needed
Jim you were good at that

as I worked together
with you and Henry Enns, Chair
of the Steering Committee
I called Henry the dreamer
you the schemer
me the doer
you told me
that you thought of yourself
as a dreamer too

as we worked together
I wondered
how does Jim come up
with creative
conceptions of disability
ways of living
strategies for change?

when I acquired disability
10 years later
barriers loomed
exasperated looks
lack of understanding
of why can't you do this anymore
I asked myself
what would Jim Derksen do?

Jim now that you're gone
I'll keep asking that question