

Finding freedom: Adaptable Outdoors helps people with disabilities experience outdoor recreation

As seen in the [Lethbridge Herald](#), [Sunny South News](#), [Prairie Post](#), and [Crowsnest Pass Herald](#)



Adaptable Outdoors founder Steve Holly, right, and program co-ordinator Lucy Gerrand assist Angelina Froese to enjoy a scenic hike in a TrailRider.

Story by Christina Scott

Photos courtesy Adaptable Outdoors/Peter Scott

Braeson Schacher peered up at the doctor from his hospital bed, faced with a life-altering question. He knew the answer he provided would change his life forever. After a moment, the 18 year old swallowed hard, steeled himself and declared: “Take them.”

Although agreeing to the amputation of both his legs was immensely difficult, Braeson knew it was his best chance to regain the healthy, active life he once loved so much.

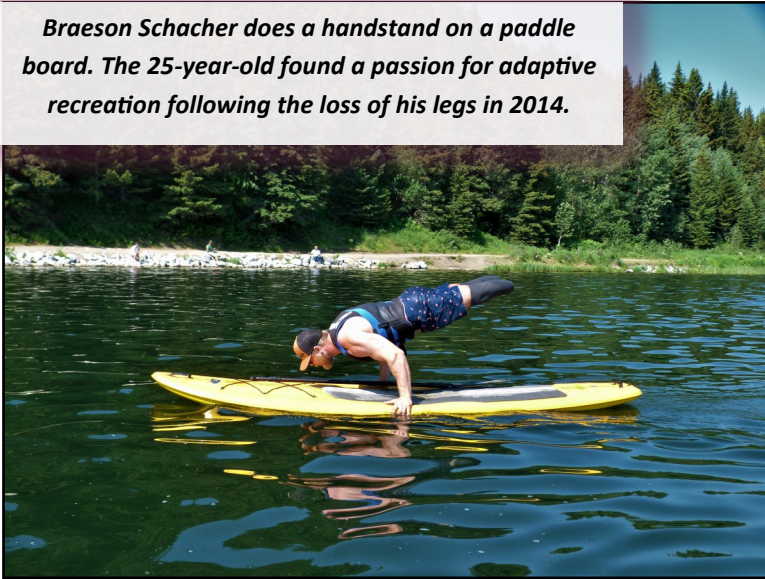
In March 2014, Braeson was involved in a severe head-on collision; the accident left the Lethbridge resident with serious injuries and an inevitably altered life course.

“It changed my life substantially,” says Braeson. “I did rehab for nine months straight.”

Growing up, Braeson wasn’t the type to sit still. Making the most of the outdoors in every season, he could be found building snow forts in winter or riding his bike in summer. So, on that fateful day in 2014, his decision was clear.

“The doctor said, ‘We can either do a club foot, and we can steal muscle from other parts of your body and put it

Braeson Schacher does a handstand on a paddle board. The 25-year-old found a passion for adaptive recreation following the loss of his legs in 2014.



there, and you would have partial mobility. Or, we can get rid of them, and you would have a lot less pain and you would probably be more adaptable'. My first question was, 'Will I still be able to ski?' And he said, 'That's up to you'."

Braeson says he was determined not to let his situation disable him. He admits doubts crossed his mind.

"There's a slower transition to getting back to doing things," he explains. "You want to get back into an old way of living, and your old way of leisure, but you're almost hesitant to do so because you're not sure if you'll be able to do it to the same extent to which you enjoyed it before. Getting over that hurdle was a big thing because I had to relearn how to do it."

After two years of painstaking personal work to regain his strength and adjust to his new all-terrain, blade-style prosthesis, Braeson began his adaptive recreation journey.

"I reached out to the Canadian Association of Disabled Skiers (CADS), and I spent the morning in a bi-ski, got rid of the tethers, and I was off to the races in the afternoon," says Braeson. "It was very liberating."

While there, Braeson met Steve and Sara Braun Holly, a couple volunteering with the organization.

Originally from southern Manitoba and armed with a degree in physiotherapy, Sara has always had a passion for recreational sports, indulging in hiking, biking, canoeing, rock climbing and skiing. During university, she would spend her summers in Canmore, and eventually move there following the completion of her degree.

"When I moved to the mountains my love for these activities just intensified," explains Sara.

It was there that Sara met Steve, who had come to Canada from Manchester, England in 2012 to participate in a wildlife conservation and biology internship. Steve also fell in love with the area and further pursued recreational sports. The couple married in 2015 and settled in Pincher Creek three years later.

In 2019, the couple founded Adaptable Outdoors, a non-profit society dedicated to providing opportunities for people living with disabilities to experience the benefits of outdoor recreation.

"I realized there was a need for summer activities that was not being met, as there were no outdoor summer adaptive sport programs in our area," explains Steve.

Having previously volunteered for different adaptive recreation organizations across the province both separately and as a couple, the two were excited by the possibilities Adaptable Outdoors could offer.

"I was blown away to see what was possible with some teamwork, creativity, and the right equipment," says Sara of her volunteer experience.



Manuel Giesbrecht is all smiles as he tests out an adaptive water wheelchair at Beauvais Lake with Lucy Gerrand's assistance.

Operating out of Pincher Creek, Adaptable Outdoors offers low-cost adaptive hiking, paddling, and fishing

experiences during the summer months with the help of program co-ordinator Lucy Gerrand and several volunteers.

“Outdoor recreation has a huge impact on my health and well being,” says Steve. “Spending time by the water, in the forests, and in the mountains is an important part of maintaining my physical, mental, and emotional health. I think that everyone who wants those experiences should have access to them. I also love the challenge and adventure of turning something that might seem impossible into a reality, like getting someone who uses a wheelchair to the top of a mountain or into a kayak and across a lake.”

To achieve this, the organization has worked hard to acquire specialized adaptive equipment. These include two TrailRiders for hiking, one of which is loaned to the organization from Alberta Parks. For paddling and fishing experiences, the organization carries a fully adaptive fishing canoe and kayak with specialized seating, a pedal-driven fishing kayak, and an all-terrain wheelchair that can be used in water or to access shore fishing spots. Additionally, a fully electric fishing reel allows users to reel in a fish at the push of a button, stomp of the foot, flick of the head or sip of a straw. Funding for this equipment comes from various sources, including grants, as well as corporate and private donations.

Securing grants and donations are vital to ensure programming can continue; the organization is currently seeking corporate sponsorships to assist with paying staff wages.

Ensuring people of all abilities can participate is vital, say the couple. Sometimes, that means getting creative, as each person’s needs vary.

“We use teamwork and problem-solving to overcome those barriers,” says Steve. “We also aim to foster an environment of inclusion and acceptance by focussing on ability rather than disability, and recognizing and the unique skills and gifts each participant or volunteer brings to our programs.”

For Braeson, having the opportunity to participate in adaptive sports following his recovery meant a great deal.

“The first thing I did with Adaptable Outdoors was go kayaking,” he says. “It’s hard to put into words. There are a lot of memories and emotions. You start noticing how much better physically you are in that moment, because of how liberated and free you feel again. That feeling is so powerful, and it’s hard to control.”

The couple have been fortunate enough to hear countless stories from participants over the past three years, sharing what these opportunities mean to them.



Adaptable Outdoors founders Steve and Sara Braun Holly. The couple started the non-profit to bring adaptive recreation opportunities to southern Alberta.

Christina Scott sets out on Beauvais Lake in an adaptive kayak.



“To me, it means we’re closer to an inclusive and equitable world,” says Sara. “Many of us will experience disability in our lives, even if we’re born able-bodied. Injury, illness, or ageing can change any of our abilities at any time. There is value in having opportunities to participate in things that give life meaning.”

Registration for Adaptable Outdoors 2022 summer programming is now open. To register as a participant, volunteer, or to learn more, visit www.adaptableoutdoors.ca.