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Love is Blind gala promises to shed light on living with a disability

By Brenda Anderson - Langley Times

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Zosia Ettenberg and Margot Thomson model the black-out masks guests at the Love is Blind gala will wear as they dine with the help of volunteer guides. The April 2 event is intended to raise both funds and awareness of what it's like to live with a disability.

Brenda ANDERSON/Langley Times

A quick glance around Zosia Ettenberg's South Langley home tells a story.

Thick ropes are taped securely to most doorknobs, a dumbwaiter on a crank waits to lift items onto the porch, a sign outside requests that delivery packages be left on a nearby table and not the floor.

All of these items are intended to make life a little easier for Ettenberg, who contracted polio as a child and now lives with post-polio syndrome. As the nerves which took on the load of the ones killed by her disease burn out from over exertion, she grows increasingly weak.

Ettenberg's service dog, a gentle yellow lab named Rumour, uses the ropes to tug the doors open and closed and picks up items that are too low for Ettenberg to reach.

The Langley woman can only be on her feet for a few minutes before she must sit, and so these days she relies on her motorized wheelchair to get around.

These are Ettenberg's circumstances, but they do not define her.

"My disability determines what I can do, but I'm a person first," she says.

For many people, encountering someone with a disability — and not knowing how or even whether to offer help — can be confusing and uncomfortable.

It's something Ettenberg has encountered for years.

But between her beautiful dog, her bright teal-painted fingernails and thanks to plenty of experience, she is at ease engaging strangers in conversation.

The first two are natural conversation starters, she says. And by the time the discussion has covered both topics, she has taken shape in the person's eyes as more than simply a figure in a wheelchair.

But sometimes the best way to understand what it's like to live with a disability is to experience it for yourself.

That's precisely the intent of the Love is Blind gala, which happens on April 2 at the Fort Langley Golf Club.

The event, hosted by Langley Pos-Abilities Society, is both as a fundraiser and an opportunity to educate people about what it means to have a disability.

"If you can experience what it might be like to have a disability, you can understand you don't have to be afraid of it," said Ettenberg, who founded the society in May, 2010 and is spearheading the upcoming fundraiser, helped out by her administrative assistant, Margot Thomson.

For guests, it will be a chance to see the world from a blind person's perspective.

As they arrive, guests will be given a decorative mask — its eyeholes blocked out with black felt.

After cocktails, which will include the opportunity to look over the live and silent auction items, they'll be asked to don their masks and will then be lead into the dining room.

Throughout the course of the meal, the masked diners will face the same challenges as someone who is blind.

Each table will have its own sighted guides, trained by the CNIB, to help guests navigate the perils of "dining in the dark."

Among the challenges diners will face will be claspig drinking glasses without tipping them over and determining how much liquid is in the glass, as well as figuring out just what is where on their plate.

Even something as simple as sitting down can create its own set of problems.

Most people bend forward at the waist and then drop backward into a chair. When you can't see, chances are you'll do a face plant into your wine glass — but guides will be there to prevent that from happening, she said.

The idea is to take people out of their comfort zone, but in a safe environment.

The gala will also include remarks from a trio of speakers — two blind athletes (a Tour de France rider and an Olympian) along with one of their spouses — who will offer insight into their lives.

Bibs will be provided and guests will be given the ornate masks to take home.

"It's going to be a classy affair. It has to be — we're charging classy prices," she said.

Tickets are \$150 each. Langley Pos-abilities, which formed last May, is currently working on getting charitable status, meaning it cannot yet issue tax receipts.

A number of items have been donated for the live and silent auctions, including two airline tickets to anywhere WestJet flies.

Money raised at the gala will help the non-profit agency to provide assistive devices to people who cannot afford them and are unable to secure funding from other sources.

For the first gala, Ettenberg hopes to draw 100 people "because we're not all that well known."

She hopes to make the fundraiser an annual affair, each year allowing people to experience the sensation of a different disability.

For ticket information, call 604-961-0117 or go to langley.pos-abilities.org

Society was formed to explore Pos-Abilities

Langley Pos-Abilities Society was established to help residents of Langley who have disabilities but do not qualify for government or private assistance as well as for people who are unaware of what services exist.

It is their goal to act as a bridge to these programs, as well as to provide assistive devices.

It is a non-profit, volunteer supported agency, that is still relatively young, explains its founder, Zosia Ettenberg.

"We've only been in existence since last May. I think we've done an awful lot in that time.

"We have a very small board — just four people," she said.

The society aims to create awareness and promote education to help the community understand, value and relate to residents with disabilities, including those living with mobility issues, hearing loss, loss of sight and other conditions which require assistive devices.

On average, Ettenberg said, the society, which she currently runs out of her home, receives a call a week from someone who is in need of her services, whether that's to secure a piece of equipment or just to put them in touch with the right people.

One of her long-term goals is to open a thrift shop to help fund the society. Eventually, she'd like to see a gift shop and office space attached.

Then, everyone who receives help will be asked to repay it, either through time or talent.

Although she'd like the organization to serve as a blueprint for other communities, Ettenberg said Langley Pos-abilities's mandate is to serve the residents of the Langleys.

"I'd like to see community helping community," she said.

"We're raising money in our community to help people in our community."

For more information, call 604-961-0117 or email pos-abilities@telus.net.

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