

Enabling others to reach their goals

Gift from Russ Myer '75-'77 will help students help others

Creating opportunities for others is a passion for Dr. Russ Myer '75-'77.

A retired clinical physical therapist and a former elite bi-athlete (that's the sport of cross-country skiing and rifle combined), he has been introducing Nordic sports to Paralympic athletes in a number of ways for decades.

As executive director of the Capital Region Nordic Alliance located in the Albany, N.Y., area, Myer introduces athletes with disabilities, many of whom are veterans, to the Nordic sports of biathlon, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, trail orienteering, Parabobsled and paraskelton. That last sport is akin to the childhood practice of going down a hill headfirst on your father's sled, except the sled is no Flexible Flyer and the hill is the bobsled/skeleton sliding track at Lake Placid or elsewhere in the world.

A new sport offered is riding fat-tire bikes over hard-packed snow. "You just kind of float," Myer said

of the fat-tire biking, which uses large air-filled tires for extra traction and stability on snow.

In the sport of trail orienteering, athletes use a map and a compass to select the right orienteering control on a course.

"It is one of a very few sports where both the able bodied and those with disabilities compete on equal terms. Accessibility and inclusion at its very best!" he said. Recently, Myer's organization has introduced those who are blind or low-vision to orienteering using an auditory application, such as Microsoft Soundscape.

"My gears are always burning, turning and looking to innovate, to include and to increase accessibility," he said.

In May, the Capital Region Nordic Alliance was the host organization for the USA Trail Orienteering Championship held at the Philadelphia Naval Yard, where Myer insisted awards be

made in Paralympic categories as well as open categories with both sets of athletes competing alongside one another. He knows well the capabilities of orienteers with disabilities after serving as a coach for the U.S. Paralympic team in trail orienteering and championships Paralympians competing alongside athletes without disabilities. "Equity, inclusion, acceptance and respect are at the core of every initiative CRNA involves itself in," Myer said.

Myer has also traveled all over the world with the International Paralympics Committee to classify athletes for national and international competition in XC Skiing and Biathlon.

In Paralympic sports, he explained, athletes with similar disabilities compete together. However, one athlete might still have more advantage or ability than another. Classification determines in which group an athlete should compete. It also measures the impact of an athletes' impairments on

their performances. Those with greater impairment are assigned an advantage through a scoring or time compensation, which enhances both fairness and quality of competition.

Classification involves a detailed examination by a medical professional, and it is required for Paralympic athletes to compete. For that reason, Myer finds classifying an especially rewarding activity.

"Many of these athletes have been shunned or ostracized by their communities," he said, "and once they are classified, they can return to their home wearing their countries' uniforms and compete internationally. It's a tremendous source of pride."

Now Myer is creating new opportunities for others through his estate. He has included in his will Pitt-Bradford, the University of Pittsburgh School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences and the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, which protects wild land, working forests and farms in the area of northern New York state known as Tug Hill.

Myer said that after talking with his wife Rebecca, he set aside 6% to 8% of his estate to give to each of his three choices.

Why did he include Pitt-Bradford? "As the director of a non-profit and my work with specific Paralympic sports, my objective every day is to provide the optimal environment in which identity can be developed and affirmed," he said. "That's what Pitt-Bradford did. Even at that time - in the '70s. It was through the faculty and activities. The faculty just created that inclusive, inspiring classroom environment."

Indeed, as a student at Pitt-Bradford and Pitt, Myer knew he wanted to study physical therapy, but was also able to pursue his passion for music, playing the lead role in "Stop the World, I Want to Get Off" with Toby Beckwith as director at Pitt-Bradford and playing in a jazz



Russ Myer, left, and Paralympian and retired U.S. Army Sgt. Julius Schram stopped for a photo in San Jose International Airport on their way home from the U.S. Trail Orienteering Championships at Cabrillo College in Aptos, Calif., in 2019.

ensemble at the Pittsburgh campus. He would twice win the Dr. Robert C. Laing Creative Arts Award in theater and dance and names the longtime English professor among those who helped him develop his character, along with Beckwith, Alan Slovenkay in music and Dr. June Pfister-Gray in chemistry.

At Pitt-Bradford, he would also meet his wife, Rebecca S. Finlan '76-'78, and when she took a class in cross-country skiing, he accompanied her in an outing and fell in love with the sport.

"There are certain things that guide my behavior," he said. "Those come from people that I still internalize, remember and reflect on, such as those I met at Pitt-Bradford. They don't know it, but they are with me each and every day. I use them as my beacon and standard bearer." —*Kimberly Weinberg*

For more information about including Pitt-Bradford in your will, contact the Office of Philanthropic and Alumni Engagement at 814-362-5091 or upb.pitt.edu/giving.

INVESTING BEYOND A LIFETIME

Those who remember the university in their estates are inducted into the Founders' Society, members of which are listed below.

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