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## CINDY OUELLET: OVERCOMING THE ODDS AND RISING TO THE TOP

*Every athlete competing at the Paralympic or Olympic Games takes a unique journey on their way to the top. While talent, great coaching, and years of hard work are elements almost all have in common, the elite athletes who represent our nation at the highest level often need to overcome seemingly impossible barriers to create opportunities for themselves. This is Cindy Ouellet's story.*



Wheelchair basketball veteran, Cindy Ouellet, is no stranger to representing Canada on the global stage. Having already competed at five Paralympic Games and four Parapan Am Games, she is one of Canada's biggest wheelchair basketball stars. A Team Toyota athlete since 2019, Cindy's story is one of overcoming the odds and excelling.

Born in Riviere-du-Loup, Quebec, Cindy was always driven by two things: education and sports. From a young age, she participated in multiple sports, showcasing her athletic talent. At the age of 10, while skiing and witnessing Quebec alpine skiers compete in the Olympics, Cindy's dream of competing in the Games began to take shape.

But at age 12, a sports injury led to a devastating discovery. Cindy was diagnosed with bone cancer and told she had a less than five percent survival rate.

Against all odds, Cindy beat cancer after 28 rounds of chemotherapy. But it came with a heavy cost: Cindy lost the use of her left leg. After spending two years in the hospital, Cindy returned to high school only to face a different set of challenges, including bullying and ridicule.

"I was excited to go back to school, but it ended up being a really rough period for me. I was bullied a lot. People were taking my crutches and would laugh at me for being skinny and not having any hair. The impact stayed with me throughout my life."

Witnessing the loss of friends who had succumbed to the same cancer, being subjected to cruel bullying, and experiencing a drastic change in her physical abilities also took a tremendous toll on her mental health. But, with the unwavering support of her parents, who were her rock, Cindy found a glimmer of hope when she met two Paralympians.

"Before I was introduced to two amazing Paralympians, I hadn't had any exposure to Para sport. I hadn't even seen or known anyone with a disability. Suddenly, I saw all that was possible through them. Both in athleticism and in their post-sport careers. From that point on, sports became the escape I needed."

At 15, Cindy was introduced to wheelchair basketball and fell in love. She quickly progressed. After representing Canada at her first Parapan Am Games in Rio at age 18, she received an athletic scholarship from the University of Alabama, and later became one of the few Paralympians to participate in both the winter *and* summer Paralympics.

Now a seasoned athlete, Cindy's long list of accomplishments stretches well beyond the basketball court. A lifelong learner, Cindy recently completed her doctorate in Biomedical Engineering and is now pursuing her second doctorate with the goal of researching prosthesis for amputees. Out of season, she also devotes a few hours each week to her parents' business, Evo Concept, which designs and manufactures adapted sports equipment.

Cindy's also a passionate advocate for anti-bullying initiatives, mental health, diversity and inclusion, and Para sport.

"Being hurt by other kids your age was a very hard experience. But looking back at it as an adult, I realize that sometimes kids just don't know any better. Which is why I work with Sport'Aide to combat bullying. We created a comic book with my story that can be a resource for parents, kids, and teachers. Understanding the impact, how to intervene and when to ask for help can be life changing."

And what advice would Cindy give to her younger self?

"Carpe diem has been my life motto. So, I would tell my younger self: 'Don't wait to do anything. Just do it and seize the day.'"

As a *Team Toyota* athlete, Cindy is now focused on the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, training and preparing, all while remaining a fierce champion of Para sport and helping others see beyond disabilities.