

Press Release:

Celebrating 30 Years of Bringing Attention to the Plight of Injured Workers

On June 12, the Board of Governors of the Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences (PCU-WHS) marked the 30th anniversary of its early beginnings.

Although officially opening its doors in 2011 with initial degree approval in 2013, the University can in fact trace its roots back to June 1987 when a group of disabled forest industry workers, led by Wolfgang Zimmermann and supported by key leaders in the forest industry, unions, government and other stakeholders pulled together a production team and the financing to produce the powerful national one-hour documentary film titled *Every Twelve Seconds* (so named because at the time, a disabling workplace injury occurred every 12 seconds in Canada). Owing to broad interest, a 30 minute version, optimized for OS&H, training was produced and has aired internationally, has won numerous awards and is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago. It is available for viewing from the University's Video Library at: <https://www.pcu-whs.ca/video-library/>

Buoyed by the success of the documentary, Wolfgang became an advocate for more effective Return to Work and Disability Management programs, creating a jointly run labour-management non-profit society known as the Disabled Forestry Workers Foundation of Canada (DFWFC) which was committed to researching and promoting innovative accident prevention, rehabilitation and Disability Management initiatives. Wolfgang's passion for this work came from his own personal struggle having broken his back at the age of 20 while falling an alder tree just five days into a new job at the MacMillan Bloedel's Sproat Lake Logging Division.

At the June 12 event, Peter Lawrie, founding employer co-chair of the DFWFC, told the group how Wolfgang had called him in his capacity as a Human Resources Manager for MacMillan Bloedel asking the company to be a corporate sponsor of the video project. "After listening for five minutes I found I could not say no, something I have learned over the years is impossible for anyone to do when it comes to Wolfgang."

By 1993, the DFWFC had developed a model for implementing a Disability Management Program in the workplace and a pilot program was implemented at MacMillan Bloedel's Somass Sawmill in Port Alberni. The results of the pilot convinced the company's management that a disability management program was not only the right thing to do, it made sense financially.

Peter Lawrie explained to the group how Wolfgang was not content to just keep the DM Program in Port Alberni. "Wolfgang dreamed big; in fact, some of us at the time thought he dreamed the impossible. He had the idea of establishing a centre that would provide education, training and research to assist employers and unions to implement workplace-based re-integration programs across Canada and around the world. He convinced leaders in business, labour, education, insurance and rehabilitation to assist with the financing and management, and in October 1994 the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) opened its doors."

With Wolfgang as Executive Director, and a hands-on Board of employer, labour (Brian Payne, fr. President of the CEP was founding labour co-chair), workers compensation and other relevant experts from across Canada, supported through an International Advisory Council and a small staff, NIDMAR's accomplishments over the next couple of decades included:

- Development and delivery of a Certificate Program in Disability Management and licensed to Canadian and international educational institutions.
- Development of a Consensus Based Disability Management Audit tool which then led to a set of assessment tools to measure workplace Disability Management / Return to Work programs
- Canada's first consensus-based Occupational Standards in Disability Management and development of professional certification examinations to meet those standards for Certified Disability Management Professionals (CDMP) and Certified Return to Work Coordinators (CRTWC)
- Canada's first Code of Practice for Disability Management (this work shaped the development of an ILO Code of Practice)

- Hosting the first International Forum on Disability Management in 2002
- Formal alliances with Disability Management organizations to date in 28 countries around the world
- Led the development of UN best practice guidelines on Return to Work

Continuing with his story, Mr. Lawrie explained, “In the mid 2000’s, Wolfgang convinced the NIDMAR Board that they couldn’t rest on their laurels, that there was more work to do. His impossible dream this time was to establish a global centre of excellence and degree-granting educational institution for workplace health sciences.”

Events moved rapidly with a Memorandum of Understanding being signed in 2005 by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and NIDMAR, the development of a business strategy through a grant by Western Economic Diversification Canada in 2006, and the Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences Act receiving third and final reading in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia in 2007. In 2009 the Government of Canada announced that PCU-WHS would be the recipient of a \$1.65 million grant under the Knowledge Infrastructure Program, and the City of Port Alberni donated a 3.5-acre parcel of land on which to build the University.

NDP MLA Scott Fraser, who spoke after Mr. Lawrie at the June 12 celebration, told the group that the private bill introduced by Liberal MLA Ron Cantelon, was a true bi-partisan effort. “NIDMAR’s board of directors had set the example of what could be done when groups that don’t always see eye-to-eye could come together and create amazing results.”

What started out 30 years ago as an idea for a documentary film to tell the story of injured workers led directly to the establishment of the world’s first post-secondary degree granting education and research institution for the special purpose of creating and disseminating new knowledge, including applied research in the fields of workplace safety, health promotion, return to work and disability management, comprehensive rehabilitation and disability leadership studies.

In addition, the professional standards in Disability Management and Return to Work (CDMP and CRTWC), developed through NIDMAR leadership, now include over 4000 members in more than 12 countries with further licensing in 16 additional countries, and are referenced in the ISSA Best Practice guidelines on Return to Work.

While Wolfgang is the first to say that he did not achieve these successes on his own, anyone who has worked with him during this 30-year journey would agree that it was Wolfgang’s vision and tenacity that got them involved and committed to the cause.

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