

Joy is all in how you play your cards

IAN GILLESPIE, The London Free Press

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Motivational speaker Robert Pio Hajjar, who has Down syndrome, has received an international award. (DEREK RUTTAN, The London Free Press)

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Two days after she'd given birth to her only child, a doctor walked into Janette Hajjar's hospital room and made a pronouncement about her infant son.

"He's Mongoloid," the doctor said. "He'll be profoundly retarded. He'll never walk or talk or do what other kids do. Put him away, forget about him and have another kid."

Hajjar ignored the advice.

And this week, that infant - now a 34-year-old motivational speaker and [YouTube](#) sensation named Robert Pio Hajjar -- was one of five people honoured with the World Down Syndrome Day Award from Down Syndrome International, a U.K.-based international charity committed to ensuring quality of life and human rights for people with Down syndrome.

The award given to five individuals with Down syndrome for "outstanding self-advocacy" was announced March 21 -- a day chosen because the notation 21/3 refers to the three copies of chromosome 21 found in people with Down syndrome.

This year, the day was officially observed for the first time by the United Nations.

The other four award recipients hail from India, Peru, South Africa and Spain; all five winners have been invited to a formal presentation at the 11th World Down Syndrome Congress in Cape Town, South Africa, in August.

Of course, Robert Pio Hajjar takes this all in stride.

"I want to be headline!" declares the London man during an interview. "I don't like it -- I love it!"

As founding director of the non-profit registered charity Ideal-Way, Hajjar delivers his upbeat message about 150 times a year. He recently addressed a crowd of 7,000 people in Miami, Fla., during a conference for the Council for Exceptional Children International.

Hajjar's presentation usually kicks off with a rousing rendition of the Black Eyed Peas song *I Gotta Feeling*, and is filled with exhortations like "I can, you can" and "The cards that I was dealt are not as important as how I play them."

"My advice to you is to be happy," he tells me, just before challenging me to a game of Scrabble. "Dance for joy in the morning."

Rendered in stark black and white print, the phrases may seem trite. But frankly, you have to see and hear Hajjar in person to understand his infectious appeal.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that he calls me "handsome." (Although a few minutes later, he leans over and assures me the "handsome" remark was just a joke.) Hajjar's uncle, Don Yeo, says his nephew reminds people their problems can be overcome, and that the key is attitude.

And the message seems to resonate.

"We want mainstream people to be aware these people (like Hajjar) are out there," Yeo says. "In our mainstream arrogance, we're so hung up on IQ that we completely undervalue EI (emotional intelligence). And they ace us in that. They're so loving and caring and mutually supportive, that we could learn from them. But we don't listen."

Clearly, though, Hajjar is being heard.

"I'm a voice for my peers who can't speak," Hajjar says. "And I love my life."

Ian Gillespie is the Free Press city columnist.