

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Advocacy, Achievement, Satisfaction and Friends for Life

BY JAMES WEISMAN
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“If you build it, they will come,” is the message delivered in the mystical baseball movie, “Field of Dreams.” United Spinal Association is the beneficiary of this philosophy, at least insofar as our advocacy program is concerned.

For generations, first as Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (EPVA), a regional membership organization, then as United Spinal, a national membership organization, our mission has been to assist people with disabilities to live effectively in the community, and not in healthcare facilities. Since just after World War II, that has been our objective.

I have witnessed the most isolated and depressed people with disabilities respond in remarkable ways to social and professional interactions with peers with disabilities. When I came to EPVA, the post-Vietnam era wheelchair users I dealt with gained as much from participation in wheelchair basketball and other wheelchair sports as they did from counseling and rehab. Wheelchair sports and participation in other team/group activities builds self-esteem and the confidence to experience more new things.

Advocacy, on behalf of people with disabilities, by people with disabilities, not only makes the world a better place, but also yields the important byproduct of the camaraderie and esprit de corps that comes from group effort against a common enemy or to solve a common problem.

Success yields group euphoria and personal satisfaction. Like participation in wheelchair sports, the confidence to take on new challenges elevates the lifestyles of all people with disabilities in the community.

Most of United Spinal Association’s 59,000 members have spinal cord injuries or disorders (SCI/D), but we also invite others who share our mission to join our organization and participate in our advocacy and other programs. The New York chapter is run by Jose Hernandez, a vocal and prolific advocate, who is also employed by the national organization to provide assistance in our resource center and with our national advocacy program. If you want to be a local advocate in New York, contact info@nycspinalcord.org.

The national organization runs an advocacy program as well. You can participate in that, too. The national organization’s program is run by Steve Lieberman, located in our Washington, D.C. office. Steve, a person with a disability, worked for Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) for ten years before joining our staff.

He runs our district mobilization program, which organizes United Spinal advocates by congressional district and has more than 1,200 registered advocates from 392 of the 435 congressional districts to date, in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, with the goal of having a critical mass of advocates all across the country.

Annie Streit, who is a C5 quadriplegic, runs our grassroots advocacy network. It is less than a year old and already involves 2,000 advocates nationwide. Online gatherings about local and national issues are discussed in a social setting among peers. Advocates tell each other their war stories, inspire each other, moan and groan together and strategize.

You can sign up for our network at <https://unitedspinal.org/grassroots-advocacy-network> or contact Steve directly at slieberman@unitedspinal.org or Annie at astreit@unitedspinal.org.

Help others. Help yourself. Get involved, even if only online. I promise you achievement, satisfaction and friends for life.