

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Able, Viscardi And Me

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The news did not surprise me because it seemed so appropriate – *Able*'s publisher, Angela Melledy, was retiring, and The Viscardi Center, led by Dr. Christopher Rosa, would take over the paper.

I've been writing for *Able* since just about when it began, 33 years ago. United Spinal Association (formerly Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association) and I have used *Able* to speak to the New York metro disability community for decades. *Able* has been both the conscience of, and a window into, the community. It's primarily the voice of the community, but I have used it as an assessment tool, as well. What are the issues of the day, and have we made any progress? If you read *Able*, you know.

In the beginning – at least, my beginning – was The Viscardi Center. 56 years after I first biked over to what was called Abilities and the Human Resources Center/School as a counselor/lifeguard/volunteer in the day camp, Viscardi and *Able* are one.

When I was 16, I spent the summer hanging out after the last camp bus was loaded with my fellow counselors who had disabilities (I didn't), knew how to have fun (I did too), and had driver's licenses (I didn't).

Paul Hearne (President of the first Human Resources graduating class, homebound until he was 13 due to osteogenesis imperfecta and the amateur radio counselor at the camp) and I became lifelong friends, although tragically, he passed away at age 48. Paul and I both went to law school, opened a Legal Services Corporation poverty law office in Manhattan for people with disabilities and were welcomed by the New York metro disability rights community.

I developed my rights consciousness at Viscardi. It wasn't intentional. We would enter a bar or restaurant and the host would say to me, "Don't put him there," about Paul or someone else in a wheelchair. I never thought there "ought to be a law." I just thought, "What a jerk," and I'd say, "He speaks; talk to him," in as condescending a manner as I could.

However, right after law school, ten years after I walked into Viscardi, I had a heart-to-heart with Paul about the state of the disability community in America and what could be done about it. We dreamed of using the law to change architecture and attitudes. Once we got our grant, Paul said, "You do transportation – I'll do employment." We really thought we could do something, and we did. I'm proud of that.

Henry Viscardi and I were very close. For many years, he was my father-in-law. His story is legend, but here's what I remember most. After my first summer, I was putting away equipment, and "Hank" said, "Jimmy, come here, I want to talk to you." I didn't think he knew my name.

He asked, "What did we do right this summer, and what did we do wrong?" This man, who had an amazing poverty-to-success-to-helping others story, born without the lower half of his legs, advisor to many presidential administrations, friend of Eleanor Roosevelt and courageous solo sailor, wanted the opinion of a 16-year-old volunteer.

And now Chris Rosa leads Viscardi. I have known him since he was slightly older than the students at Viscardi High. He has always been a leader and a visionary. I am confident in *Able*'s future.

I began my career and found my passion at Viscardi. I've been able to express my passion for years in *Able*. Thank you, Angela Melledy and Chris Rosa, for your passion.