

AGOSCI Biennial National Conference 2009

Keynote address

Moving Through Life As a Blabber Finger

Gus Estrella

Hello and good morning. I seriously hope that everybody had his or her share of coffee this morning. I know I did! Can't you tell? No wait, my constant movement is due to my Cerebral Palsy. Not the ten cups of coffee I had with breakfast. Those ten cups are causing another problem. I just hope the lines to the restrooms are short after my speech! Then again, there is always the outback down under! Americans, can't take them anywhere -- can't import them either! It is a good thing for me I am originally from Mexico, que pasa! This means 'What's Happening?' in Spanish, something you will wonder a lot about through this presentation.

It gives me great honor being asked to address you today. I would like to thank the conference committee for inviting me to do this keynote address. I especially want to thank Professor Sue Balandin, Chair of the Peer Review Panel, for her personal recommendation.

My first goal is to share with you the significance of what it was like growing up in a verbal world with a speech disability and without a real means of communicating clearly. To do this I will tell you about the significant events that occurred which had a large impact on my life and what

it took to overcome them. Keep in mind, the majority of these following significant events in my life occurred when I was very young and when very little was known about disabilities. It was a time when inclusion was only a fantasy.... and certainly technology was more than a century away. As I go along I will also share with you the methods and motivations that got me to this point in my life. I will go into detail with you on such issues as doctors, attitude, therapists, technology, and last but not least acceptance . My main focus will be on acceptance which will be the central focus of this presentation. I will introduce that later in this presentation.

The first significant event in my life occurred one night in the early nineteen-sixties, when my parents decided to go out for a romantic evening of bliss. There were also a couple bottles of tequila and a backseat, included in this mystical night! Oh wait, I think I just told you a family secret, please delete that from your memories! All kidding aside for a minute, the reality of how I obtained my Cerebral Palsy is not a pretty thought if one were to really think about it. From everything that I have been told and heard about my birth, the doctor, in his great wisdom, used forceps to grab my skull to move me around when he realized I was coming out face first. As a result, he did some damage to the part of my brain that controls the motor movements of the human body.

Keep in mind my parents' situation at the time wasn't ideal, to put it mildly. In the early nineteen sixties according to

American folk lore, they could be found somewhere in Mexico running after trains attempting to reenact train robberies they had seen on TV the night before!

When I was born, my parents resided in Nogales, Mexico but fortunately for me I was actually delivered in the United States portion of Nogales, in the state of Arizona. So as you can imagine, in the early sixties, the last place you would want to live if you had any type of significant disability was anywhere in the country of Mexico. Don't get me wrong, I love the place, it is where a large part of my family lives and some relatives still reside, but with a disability back then, there was no hope for an existence outside the home, not for me, my parent's first-born son. In this culture I was born in, that is a significant role to play. My parents were no different than others in their belief I should have only the best.

So in 1966, when I was three years old the second most significant event occurred in my life. My parents and I decided to move to Tucson, Arizona in the USA where I could have access to doctors and therapists that knew what they were talking about when it came to disability issues. At first, as luck would have it, we ended up with the roommate of the doctor that delivered me. When we first met him, something was telling me I should have stayed in my mother's womb three years previous! It did not take him long to prove to me and my parents, that indeed, he got his medical degree from box of Cracker Jacks and he didn't really know what he was talking about. I can say this because of what he had suggested to my parents, that they

do with their son. And that was. “You might want to consider putting your son in an institution since he won't amount to much.” This last statement makes me want to burst into tears, considering what he wanted to do with a little boy he just met! To make matters worse, my parents knew very little English at the time! Imagine moving to a country with the best medical system in the world and being told in a foreign language that you should just give up your son outright! Que pasa!

Now you have to remember that at that time, my parents knew very little English and knew even less about Cerebral Palsy so they could have gone along with whatever the doctor might have suggested and they almost did. So how did I escape being placed in an institution? I have always believed that God, and I don't mean the Cracker Jack doctor, was watching over me, and for many reasons, he still is! Hence the 3rd significant event in my life. Just as I was entering pre-school, I strongly believe that He temporarily placed a very special speech therapist in my life. In case you did not know this already, a good speech therapist is a rare commodity. This one very special speech therapist was named Mrs. Sumner and it was because of her that I escaped the joyous wonders of life in an institution! She was able to take the Cracker Jack doctor's report and translate it for my parents, then she was able to tell my parents what she could do for me which opened up my whole world. I can honestly say that Mrs. Sumner is one speech therapist that knew what she was talking about!

Sadly I say 'temporarily' because few years ago back in Tucson, I was watching the local news and they started talking about a small plane crash and mentioned the names of the persons who hadn't survived. Suddenly I found myself with the chills in the middle of summer; I couldn't believe what came over the news. The persons who died in the plane crash were my very special speech therapist and her husband. It's hard to explain what I was feeling when I heard this terrible news, but it was like losing my personal guardian angel, one who had seen an ounce of hope in me when she first met me and would not let anything stop me from being the best I could be.

So now many years later after graduating from high school with honors in 1983 and earning a degree in Creative Writing from the University of Arizona in 1991, two of the biggest events in my life, I sometimes wonder, did that doctor really know what he was talking about? I don't think so, but what do I know? I'm just a person with a disability. Don't get me wrong. There are a lot of good doctors out there the world over. But when it comes to disability issues, most of them should never counsel parents without doing a lot of research and making a lot of inquiries beyond their normal perspective, especially if they don't have much experience dealing with the long-term ramifications of the condition they are evaluating. If the doctor had done this it could possibly have been very helpful back then in my situation.

At this time I am going to jump off my time line for a while and talk briefly about my main methods of dealing with life

along with some of my motivators. This part of my discussion also includes one of my favorite topics, attitude. You will know it when you see it!

In everyone's life, there should always be something or someone motivating or pushing you to reach for your ultimate dream. Your ultimate dream can be as simple as opening a can of pop, which in my case would be a can of pop and a bottle of Bacardi! Or ... your ultimate dream can be as elaborate as finding a job that pays a six figure income, and who doesn't dream about that job? A lot of the time, marriage is the ultimate dream. I know it was one my dreams. If you have a disability in this world, any of these dreams can seem unlikely and unattainable. Having something or someone that motivates you to strive for the ultimate dream is key, but you have to want to do it for yourself first and foremost and that is the bottom line, doing it for yourself!

In my personal life, there have been a couple of things that have pushed me to strive to be the best that I can be. One was to prove that idiot of a doctor I mentioned earlier wrong. The way I figure it, for someone who wasn't supposed to amount to a hill of beans, no ethnic pun intended there, I'm not doing that bad, que pasa. I mean I just have a college degree and worked in Washington DC, nothing too special! And most important, I couldn't disappoint Mrs. Sumner. So wherever she might be, I know she's watching me and telling me to swallow, like a typical speech therapist.

In life, there are no guarantees except for death, and of course, taxes. I realized this a few years ago in 1996, when my father, my best friend, passed away all of the sudden. In trying to find the words that best describe my father; the following words come to mind: compassionate, loyal, trustworthy, and caring. A little later in my presentation, I will go into a more detail about him and the very important relationship I had with him. From this important individual in my life I got most of my attitude that I carry with me today. The man saw and processed everything, both good and bad, and yet he didn't let much go by without bringing humor into it.

In general, most people lead pretty mundane lives, where for the most part, things fall into place. They go through life without worrying about a whole lot of little things in life. I'm not saying they don't worry, because they do, just not anywhere near as much as those of us in the disabled world do. If everyone was in wheelchairs, we would not have to worry about finding the accessible entrances, because every entrance would be accessible. As people with disabilities, we see what others do not have to go through and it puts us at a disadvantage. If we do not have the right attitude. For everything an able bodied person has to do to cope, there is an additional, or many more additional, angles we have to cope with, we learn to juggle early for survival, especially in we want to live in the real world and be an integrated part of it.

The reality is we do not have the same physical freedoms as the rest of the world and that can be not only physically

exhausting, but also mentally wearing in the long run without the proper support, motivation, and yes, attitude. A simple example is using a pay phone. I, personally, cannot use a simple pay phone, if you think about it. Physically, just trying to put the coins in the tiny slot takes some dexterity for the most able bodied of folks. For me having a meaningful conversation on a pay phone would have to be with divine intervention, since I would have to juggle the receiver and work my augmentative communication device both with one hand. In spite of all that, I don't want you to think that my life is gloomy with a dark cloud floating above my head. At the same time, to say I lead a pretty normal life would be absurd since nobody knows what a normal life actually is and I have been told mine is most certainly not anywhere near normal. My wife's favorite descriptor for herself and me is the word unique.

The following two short scenarios will help put an even more interesting spin on my unique attitude. I actually have learned through the years to respect most therapists, yet at the same time, you have to remember some of my most insane moments in childhood came with a therapist involved. I honestly feel that most therapists can be the biggest motivators, regardless if they are a Foster away from a whole six pack or not. Hint, I have many friends who are therapists. The gentleman assisting me on this trip has decided to become one, so now you know what company I keep.

Without stating the obvious, your attitude is your key to living with a disability. So what has my real life been like? I

would have to say, humorous. Humorous, because ever since I can remember, I have been asked to do some pretty silly things. I can remember in grade school being asked by a physical therapist, to climb up into a regular adult chair. Now, if you think about that concept, you would conclude, that is the most stupid thing that you could ask a six year old to do, especially if he has CP, and he has as much balance as a drunk after a night out on the town. But wait, it gets better. After I had used up all of my energy climbing up into that over sized chair, she asked me to jump off the chair and break my fall with my arms. The purpose of this exercise was to teach me how to fall and still have all my teeth. And the six year old just sat there looking at the physical therapist wishing he could say. "You know if I don't do this stupid exercise, I will still have all my teeth." "So why take that chance?" Ridiculous or idiotic? Take your pick!

Then there is my favorite therapist, the speech therapist. Just call me crazy if you don't already. After today, most of you will! From the beginning of my recollection, it was pretty obvious that I wouldn't be able to communicate clearly using my own voice. So I often wonder why on earth, did speech therapists insist on me making strange noises and funny faces? I don't know for sure, but maybe it was their way of getting back at me for spitting in their faces. Do you know? I finally realized just a short time ago, when I got married, why they wanted me to master making those interesting sounding noises! Actually, I found out long before getting married, but I'll leave those details to that to your imaginations, since my wife was helping me write this presentation and I did not want her to start one of her

famous lectures, I would not have the time to include it in this presentation.

Now I am going to bring in technology that goes with the humor, attitude, and motivation I have been talking about. By pulling in the technology at this point, I can explain how I overcame some of my most trying life altering adventures. As I go along I will also pull in my education and subsequent work assignments.

I am going to get back on my time line and go backwards for a short while, then I will jump forward on it. It wasn't until one of my first Special Ed teachers in grade school in the early 1970's took out an old word board to see if I would be able to use it, that day I discovered my first real means of communicating with others. This was one of the most significant events of my younger life. A few days later, the teacher must have started to regret taking that board out. I did not shut up for months. Yet, she never said anything. I think I gave new meaning to the term, 'non verbal student'. Nevertheless, this word board became my first real link of telling people what I was thinking, and yes, even gave me the freedom of telling a few choice individuals where to go. Not that I would do something like that, mind you, thinking about it is enough to sooth the sole. There are a few times now and then when the hearing world doesn't need to understand what you are saying. Que pasa!

Clearly that word board was very low tech and simple, but for the first time in my life, it was something for me to use to successfully convey my thoughts, my needs, and yes, even

my desires without hours of interpretation of grunts, groans, and body gestures. Eventually, this word board became responsible for getting me through all my high school courses, including physics in 1983. Now ask yourselves, did he say, physics? Doesn't everyone take physics? All those wonderful exponentials, complicated compound equations, and other higher powers! Makes me quiver inside! But wait a minute, was I crazy? What was wrong with me? Nobody warned me that a high school student with cp shouldn't take physics without long in depth consideration. Nevertheless, when I graduated from high school I could say that I took physics and passed and everyone involved lived to tell about the enduring experience.

After graduating from high school, I gave my mother even more reason to believe I am insane. I was just crazy enough to start going to college right after high school. To this day I'm not sure what came over me when I made that decision to start advanced education immediately, nonetheless, I found myself going to college at the University of Arizona in 1983 with my faithful, crusty, old word board. When I met with a college guidance counselor, he gave me some options regarding what to major in which would lead to my chosen solid, enduring, degree and a subsequently promising career. At first I decided to go on the ten year plan, but I discovered an easily accessible coffee house in close proximity to the college dorm. Now suffice to say, Starbucks hadn't reached Tucson at that time, but that local coffee house endured enough to be my ongoing caffeine fix for the duration of my self prescribed college incarceration. And wouldn't you know it, caffeine helped to speed things

up and I graduated in eight years! I started off majoring in information technology , the way to mega bucks. But something happened soon after I started college and I ended up in creative writing, the sure-fire way to waiting tables. Something strong just told me that computers were not a viable option for me and that writing was it, my road to future success.

Technology was right around the corner at this point in my life. In 1986, four years after I started college, an AAC was first introduced to me, the Touchtalker with a software program called, Word Strategy. At first glance, this device looked like a foreign object that was left on this earth by mistake. Wouldn't you think the same? I mean if you saw a box and it started talking when you pushed the buttons? I had my doubts about this device, considering I had been using the word board since grade school and I knew where every word, symbol, and number was. I doubted that it would fulfill my every communication need. To add fuel to my doubts, I was handed the Touchtalker with manuals and no training planned on the agenda. There I was with a shiny new talking box and I had no clue on how it worked. I slowly started playing with it and found myself composing short phrases, in total amazement on my part. It was a number of years before it was fully integrated into my life, well beyond my higher education.

After I received my university degree in 1991, I started to substitute teach in the Tucson School District, which I subsequently got many funny looks for. I wonder why? I figured it was a physical disability thing, or something like

that. Nevertheless, I actually did receive assignments. I remember one assignment in particular where I was supposed to substitute at a high school in an economics class. When I arrived at the school, I reported to the assistant principal's office, which was an eye opening experience on her part. As she was turning around her jaw dropped. Personally, I was just glad her false teeth stayed in place! Once she got her jaw back in working order, she proceeded to ask. "May I help you?" "Yes, I'm here to sub for this teacher", I replied, which threw her for another loop, to say the least. After she had composed herself from the additional shock, she exclaimed. "But you're disabled!" I just sat there smiling, not wanting to risk losing the assignment but thinking, how observant! And I bet your first clue was my distinguish way of speaking, right? Once thing was for sure, I was certain she took a while to compose herself after that! That I was mature enough at that point in my life to not laugh at her was good! If she could have read my mind it would have been a different matter all together.

For the most part, I mainly worked in Special Ed. as a substitute teacher which led to my now subsequently previous job position in the Tucson School District as an Augmentative Communication Assistant in 1993. I was very much involved in creating this position and made sure I had all of the job's qualifications to ensure that I would get the position when it was incorporated as a full time position within the school district. I would work with students who used, or who were starting to use Augmentative Communication devices. This was my first taste of mentoring, and I loved it. I was helping instead of being

helped for the first time in my life, and I was being paid to do it!

This brings me to the position I held proudly for a number of years; I was the first recipient of the Prentke Romich, Semantic Compaction Systems UCP Leadership Development Fellowship. Now that is one hell of a Pathfinder mouthful, if you ask me! For those of you that have fallen asleep again and are in need of more coffee, the Pathfinder is the AAC device I am using to give this presentation.

Back in 1994, I was sitting on my couch relaxing after a long day at work as a teacher, when I received the announcement about the fellowship. At first, I wasn't really sure if I wanted to apply, it sounded like it would be a good learning experience and it could broaden my horizons. Well, without boring you with the details, let's say I ended up submitting the application and you can fill in the blanks after that. So what made me apply for the fellowship? I mean I'm from sunny and warm Tucson, Arizona, I had a decent paying job, a comfortable living arrangement, a lot of friends, especially of the female persuasion, and I was willing to give all that up to move to Washington DC? I must have had brain damage after all, something that has been a topic of debate for many years. I mean who would want to experience more politics than a person could ever imagine, or handle for that matter? And one mustn't forget the nice winters that everyone brags about in that part of the USA! And if you believed that line, you probably have spent too many days in the Outback with the kangaroos and tigers! I

guess basically, I was looking for a change of jobs and surroundings, to pursue some of my other dreams, my path to my ultimate acceptance.

Now I am going to digress away from the time line again and talk about my favorite topic in detail, acceptance. In my opinion, acceptance is to encompass life as it comes, but it doesn't mean just sitting back and letting things pass you by. To me it can mean having the ability to modify your attitude in order to survive the changes that life throws at you. It also includes having enough of what others have to feel fulfilled. Whether or not you agree, being accepted as you are is very important and striving to be accepted is one of the main motivators in all of our lives. In my life up to this point I had just followed the path that was placed before me living in Tucson AZ, however, somewhere inside me was a need to pursue some of the other dreams I talked about earlier when I introduced motivation.

I'm not saying that I haven't wondered what would it be like not to have a disability, or, wished for some reason that there could be a miracle drug, because there have been periods in my life where I wished I didn't have physical limitations, and I think that is normal. So rather than feel sorry for myself and do nothing with my life, I have accepted my cerebral palsy for what it is, a big pain in the booty! I also haven't let it stop me from living life. I think with time, everybody learns how to deal with the disability of their own or of a family member, or even of a friend. Now I'm not saying it is easy, especially if you see friends running and

playing around, and you wonder, “why can't I do that too”! I know I did and even today, I still wonder why. But I think it's natural to want to be like everyone else most of the time. That brings us back to the word ‘normal’! I will let you define that.

A prime example of this acceptance is getting married. For the longest time, I can remember watching friends meeting their future mates and doing things as couples. And I would find myself wondering if that would ever happen in my lifetime. I wondered if I would ever find that special lady, who would turn my world upside down and end up marrying me. Well, I did meet that very lady and her name is Laura-Jane. Yes, my world has been turned upside down. Just ask my service dogs, Boz and Yukon, who had to put up with two electric wheelchairs. But wait, if putting up with two electric wheelchairs wasn't enough, they also have to put up with two very strange cats. Now that's devotion!

Meeting Laura-Jane was actually unexpected. A few years ago in 1999, at the ripe old age of 35, I was presenting at an awards dinner for Date Able, a local dating service in Washington D.C. for people with disabilities, and Laura-Jane was also in attendance. Since she had liked what she saw the night before, a gorgeously handsome service dog included, the next day she started inquiring about my availability status and me! Two weeks later, I received a call from the matchmaker at Date Able with Laura-Jane's request for an introduction. Of course, I said, yes, once the matchmaker told me a beautiful and intelligent blond was inquiring about me. We started with e mail and quickly

determined how insanely compatible we both were. The details of our e mails must remain a secret since we don't want everyone to know how insane we really are!

Within a month we took it to the speaker telephone and it was an eye opening experience for her, since she had never spoken with someone that uses an augmentative communication device and thought phone conversations was impossible. Needless to say, she was pleasantly surprised how well I could use my fingers on my augmentative communication device.

We all know what it takes to keep a relationship going, not to mention a marriage. Along with marriage also comes the in laws. Being the smart individual that I would have you thinking that I am, I'm not going to go that route any further. Now add to that equation two very different disabilities and tell me if this isn't a serious undertaking on our part. Acceptance is one of our key coping strategies. As you know, I have Cerebral Palsy pretty bad which means I need personal care attendants to assist me in my personal needs, like showering and other fun things like that, including being fed. Now she, on the other hand, is a paraplegic and can do everything for herself. At the same time, she also suffers from Fibromyalgia among many other physical challenges, which adds an interesting twist to our lives. Fibromyalgia is a chronic disorder characterized by extreme pain and tenderness in multiple muscles and joints. Now if you put all of these conditions in to a marriage, including other 'normal' baggage, most people would have given up the relationship and marriage would have never

crossed their minds. We accepted each other as unique individuals from the beginning with no hesitation. Devotion or insanity, you can decide on your own.

On top of dealing with our different disabilities, there are other issues that we have to tackle regularly, and many other types of acceptance. The biggest one is dealing with personal care attendants, because of our unique situation. On one hand, you have a person that needs all kinds of help that ranges from assisting him with the simplest thing, like tying his shoes, to something more delicate as shaving, which can be a hair raising experience for both participants. And on the other hand, you have a person who can do everything for herself. Plus, she also can do things around the house, such as, cooking and cleaning as long as things remain accessible and others stay out of her way. Now since we're both in wheelchairs, everything has to be in a particular spot and positioned in a particular manner in order for us to function in our own home. And here's one of the battles we have to tackle every time we hire someone new. No matter how many times we ask them to put things back where they got them, they still seem to put them wherever they feel, or think, they should go. Things eventually end up placed in unreachable areas in our home. I guess they figure we have stretchable retractable arms and need another challenge in our mundane lives. But seriously, personal care attendants are a very big issue in the lives of people with disabilities, especially with people with severe disabilities, like me. Acceptance works both ways in this scenario, we both have to accept the idiosyncrasies of the care attendants and they have to be

accepting of our limitations before we begin to work together.

Now Laura-Jane and I are able to do everything that we do, despite our disabilities, and despite what the general public feels and thinks about people with disabilities. We are able to do the things that we do, because we have accepted our lives, as they are, nothing less. If our lives weren't challenging enough, God decided to put a few more challenges in our path. The first one came in the summer of 2000 Laura-Jane underwent what at first seemed like a successful surgery only to find a few months later that she was never going to work again. That realization made us even more determined to continue on with our lives as normally as possible. This occurred just before we were married, most people would have taken it as a warning sign, clearly we are not most people.

Acceptance of our situation and being accepted as normal was mandatory in our lives at this point in time. Our next challenge was our double wedding ceremonies in 2001 and keeping to a manageable budget. There was one judicial wedding in May at a Maryland courthouse, and one church wedding in Tucson, Arizona, in June. All of this came with minimal expense and fuss and a lot of friends and family pitching in to help out. Of course it meant a lot of compromises and letting go of a lot of decision making activities, but we determined what the most important things were in the beginning during the initial planning stages, and we were willing to let others make a lot of the other decisions and follow through on their ends. Our ultimate

goal was to get married and verify we could move on despite our physical difficulties.

In April 2003, my working life was terminated with a not so successful surgery of my own. The life events from that point in my life were painful and tested the true nature my relationship with my wife and forced me to face the reality yet again in my life that things never stays the same and that I must adapt quickly and efficiently to keep going! Acceptance took on a new meaning during this phase in our lives.

That 2003 surgery put me flat on my back and out of daily circulation for over a year. During all the pre-surgery visits not one doctor visit out of the six plus had mentioned that neurological surgery with Cerebral Palsy can have dire consequences. It was not until things went horribly wrong post surgery that we found this important factor out. It made it clear to us also that there is not a strong support network in place in the real world for developmentally challenged adults past childhood. It was with the help of family and friends that we too made it through this stage. Acceptance took on yet another new meaning in our lives. We had to accept that our reality was changing, but we had to accept the fact that we needed to change how we do things to survive and not loose ourselves.

My post surgery situation became more of a nightmare than anything else I had had to deal with in my adult life to date. To put it briefly, my wife and I had to deal with a medical model not designed for the physically challenged and the

battle with the insurance companies was exhausting and frustrating, something that will not get better with the current economic situation in the USA right now. That battle included being admitted into an inadequate nursing home that had no idea how to deal with someone with Cerebral Palsy. My wife ended up spending nights sleeping in a second bed in my room to keep me safe and making more phone calls than our cell phones had ever seen before. It not only put me in a seriously harm full situation, but it put my wife in a vulnerable position as well. I could go on and on from here, but you get my point. The last three quarters of 2003 where a spiraling vortex of coping with doctors, nurses, medical insurance companies and other medical providers. In the end we were told I would probably never work again and my wife and I decided it was time to move from Washington Metropolitan Area.

The bottom line is that we did not give in to the establishment and we fought our way beyond my medical issues to build and own a fully accessible home across the USA in Tucson, AZ. This involved moving across the country to live near my family in 2005 whom I am going to now talk about.

It is most important for parents to accept their child and their disability as one very unique person! This is a key issue because your child will know if you have a problem with the disability, and he/she might think less of themselves, or think because he's different that you don't want to do anything with him! Now on the other hand, if you treat your child like a child, basically, and do all the

important things with him, then his outlook on life will be positive and who knows how he will turn out to be! I can tell you with all certainty my mother had no problems with having a son with a disability, but my father, on the other hand, couldn't handle it at first. I know when I was born; the last thing on his mind was having a son with a disability, which was pretty normal. I'm putting it pretty mildly when I say, it threw him and my mother for a loop when they realized their son wasn't normal. Then again, my two sisters are far from normal, but their problems are not physical!

Now keep in mind that I'm talking about the early sixties and I was his first son, and the first born son, in a Mexican family, should be normal. So as you can imagine, realizing that you have a son who will never lead a normal life, even though you don't really know what that might be, is one of the hardest things you can ask a new father to accept, no matter what race he might be. It took my father several years before he could accept my disability, but he finally did! I'm not saying that he woke up one morning and everything was perfect, because it wasn't that simple. Basically, it was through my mother's strong will, determination, and constant praying that helped my father come to terms with my disability and accept it. For the first several years of my life, it was my mother that did everything for me from morning until bedtime. I can't say what exactly or pin point the exact time in my life when my father and I started to do things together, like a father and son team, but I do remember how great it felt knowing I had a father that saw nothing wrong with his only son! The relationship I had with my father could be considered to be unique and a little on

the wacky side. I don't think there was a time when I asked him for something, and he said no! And of course, there are things we did together that my mother doesn't know about, and for some reason, I don't think she would have approved of them! Knowing I had parents who would supported me with whatever idiotic idea that I could think of, and trust me, some were really off the deep end, is one of the most enlightening and uplifting feelings a person can have. This encouragement helped me see that there weren't really limits to what I could do, if I put my mind to it!

In closing, I sincerely hope my little talk hasn't scared you in to thinking that you have to be totally insane to survive in this world of ours with a disability, because you don't. It just helps! It is highly important to develop the skills that will enable you determine when to take something seriously and knowing when to let it go. At the same time, when it comes to handling the serious events, you can either chose to avoid them, or chose to deal with them and be able to roll with the punches. Yes, you will have to deal with a lot more obstacles than your able bodied contemporaries, however, there is a lot more satisfaction to knowing that you handled the same life events as the next person, and you made it successfully despite the added limitations that your physical status imposes on you.

In my personal life, there have been a few punches that just floored me. A prime example was my father's untimely death. Most of us grow up thinking that our parents will live forever, I know I was thinking that and I knew a few dreams of mine wouldn't come true with his passing. But I know if I

would stop doing the things he was so proud of, he would be so pissed with me that he would come back down to earth to beat the crap out of me. Then he would buy a six pack, of Fosters of course! And have it with his son. Knowing this about my father, it has helped me to keep going with my life, and fulfill every dream I had when he was alive. Because deep inside, I know he's still with me, pushing me to go for all that life has to offer. I think this is what everybody should strive for, the best that life has to offer. Regardless if you have a disability, or have a child with a disability, or acquired a disability later in life, it doesn't matter if you fail or not, what matters is how you deal with it and move on. Life is a series of punches and it is up to us to know when to duck. But more importantly, it is up to each of us to stand our ground and take that one punch that was intended to bring us down and stop us from reaching our ultimate dream, whatever it might be. Thank you.

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