

# Taking the “Dis” out of “Disability”

by: Paul Stuart Wichansky

*It's amazing what you can do with a positive attitude.*

When I started learning to walk at seven years old, many orthopedists who examined me believed that I would never be able to walk normally. At the time, my parents refused to accept this assessment and believed that, one day into the future, I would be able to walk like everyone else. Recognizing that our attitude should always be shaped by how we choose to live our life rather than reacting to situations, I agreed with a very special orthopedist, Dr. Roy Nuzzo, who helped me understand that my cerebral palsy was only a unique challenge that I could overcome. By remaining positively focused, my parents prevented me from becoming discouraged by my limitations and instead encouraged me to develop a motivation to overcome them. I was determined to become more than merely a spectator and view life from the outside, but become a relevant participant and experience life's moments front and center.

The most enduring quality which my own parents have passed on to me is the ability to identify and set realistic goals which were, they believed at the time, just beyond my reach. This idea of self-motivation became ingrained when I first learned to walk unassisted when I was then seven years old. There was the moment when my parents would take me to a supermarket where I would frequently fall – right in the middle of the aisle. My father would encourage me to get up on my own, while at the same time, insisting that my mother or my grandmother not be allowed to kneel down to pick me up. Of

course, it can be an emotionally painful event to witness, when assistance is usually denied to your own child or grandchild. However, this can illustrate a crucial moment in the development of the child's personality – the birth of independence. If we fall down, and our family and friends are there to always offer us help, we will never learn to get up on our own.

When I was ten years old, playing a sport was important to me, just like my friends did after school. My choice was to play soccer on a team of children, also with disabilities. I chose to play the position of goalie. Because our team was so good, the ball was always at the other end of the field during the game. I could take a nap and still defend this goal! After standing in front of the net for two whole hours, waving to my parents beaming in the bleachers, the coach – with a stern expression on his face – ran across the field and, with his expression morphing into a huge smile, presents me with a trophy. I was a little surprised that I was receiving this award, so I questioned him: “All I was doing was standing here for two hours, doing

nothing – and you present me with a trophy?” The coach replied that this was exactly the reason why I earned the trophy, because he had never seen me stand up for so long. I looked down at my own legs and exclaimed, “Hey, look, no more wheels!” I felt a tremendous surge of pride, because this was the first time that I was able to stand up for an extended period on my own, rather than have someone push me around. The goal of walking, while seemingly so far into the future, had



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actually become one step closer. I realized that you need to stand before you even learn to walk!

When my mom and dad were children, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were among their heroes. Their television show made it easy to tell the good guys from the bad ones. Did you know that Roy and Dale were both parents of a child born with Down's Syndrome? In an era where children with disabilities were often sent to institutions, we must applaud Roy and Dale for the inspiration that they provided – through their songs and stories. Similar to Roy and Dale, my first television hero sang a very similar song. For four years on NBC in the 1980s, I was captivated by a television show having the theme that “one person can make a difference.” Every week, I became inspired by this fictional character who championed the causes of the people who were overwhelmed by adverse circumstances that they faced. While this hero never asked me to believe in him, he was the first television character who taught me to believe in myself and to try to come out a winner. The show was Knight Rider. One man's crusade to bring positive change to his community. Michael Knight and his prototype car, K.I.T.T., working together, were a fantastic team to an 11-year old Paul. Just imagine all of the success that can result when parents and schools focus their energies to improve the day-to-day lives of children who have disabilities. Never forget that you are – and always will be – a hero to someone else.

So we have essentially become the new heroes of our generation. We do not need to have our own television show. Our names will not become household words. We will not receive thousands of letters of support or greetings while walking down the sidewalk. But we will give of ourselves to keep doing the best that we can for as long as we can do it. There is nothing more fulfilling than to hear our child exclaim, “I've had fun!” or “I feel good about myself!” or “Yes, I Can!”

We must therefore provide guidance to a living treasure worth much more than gold. Raising a special child requires much more than simply unconditional love, compassion, and devotion. It also requires patience. Your patience will surely be tested at times and occasionally taken to the extreme, but it

is an especially valuable quality to possess. Patience originates from the recognition that your child will need constant care and encouragement from you to reach his or her own goals. After all, a person with a disability is no less a miracle than a person without a disability. In the process, you will learn valuable techniques to provide encouragement while maintaining realistic expectations that these individuals will develop at their own pace – and not be unfairly judged against peers or even their siblings. So it's not the team with the best players that counts – but rather the players with the best team!

*What keeps me going each day is a passion to inspire students during my school programs; some of them I truly admire. Last year, I was fortunate to be invited to a new school district, and during my first presentation, John became very excited. He began asking a lot of profound questions. John wanted to educate himself and share his feelings about growing*

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*up with his own disability with me and with his fellow classmates. His upbeat personality, compassion, and love towards others are why his friends and family enjoy being around him, reasons why John always has a smile and thinks of the needs of others. For a bright 10-year-old boy to exude this level of confidence and optimism – qualities that are rare in people at any age – I can only hope to return half of the inspiration and confidence which he has given to me. Because of experiences like this, you can understand why I sincerely want to get students excited – not about me – but about themselves, to provide the encouragement and motivation so that they can achieve whatever they want to achieve!*

I encourage you to always challenge your children to be the best they can possibly be! Convince them that they are indeed winners for accepting the opportunity to compete, not with others, but with themselves. They must accept that to reach their own goals they will surely trip and fall many times, while learning from their mistakes. No one should ever tell them that they do not deserve what they want. If they strive to be the best they can be, their perseverance will faithfully guide



them through the fiercest storms to the brightest sunshine of life.

As parents we must continue to deliver that message of tolerance, a spirit of compassion, and the knowledge that comes from educating ourselves. Getting your children to become proud of their achievements means giving them more than emotional support and encouragement. They need to be surrounded by the company of family and friends who have realistic expectations of them. Your job is to accept the lesson, love the person, and put what you have learned to use. Because the message of accepting others for their abilities rather than their disabilities is indeed the greatest school of humanity. I am privileged to join Cerebral Palsy Magazine on this most important mission. As a reader of this magazine, I encourage you to continue to open your mind, your heart, and your world for others to emulate. For the sake of everyone in your state and for everyone in this great country.

**Let's take the “dis” out of “disability” – together.**

***Mailing address:***

*Paul Stuart Wichansky*

*143 Lancaster Road*

*Freehold, New Jersey 07728*

***E-mail:*** *pstuart@eden.rutgers.edu*

***Web site:*** *www.justthewayyouare.com*

***Biography:***

*Paul Stuart Wichansky is a meteorologist and Ph.D candidate at Rutgers University. Born with ataxic cerebral palsy, he has devoted his time to educating children, parents, and teachers about the perspectives and realities of growing up with his physical challenge. By sharing personal experiences with humor, while encouraging others to ask questions that can help positively shape their understanding of people with disabilities, Paul tries to instill the hope, energy, and inspiration that motivates them to realize their own dreams. His program series has even reached the Special Olympics as well as the United Nations and U.S. Customs Service.*

*Paul has been a motivational speaker since he was ten years old. He is now a member of a unique speakers bureau, A Vision in Motion, that specializes in experienced motivators who have overcome tremendous adversity and enjoy sharing their insights with others. For more information about Paul, visit his web site at [www.justthewayyouare.com](http://www.justthewayyouare.com)*