

Before last year's trip here, I would not have put DC on my high priority list of travel destinations but I have become a big fan of the city and how empowering it is. Last year's event was truly one of the most fulfilling weeks of my life before and after injury. My wife and I left the event last year on a tremendous high vowing that we would come back every year. This year's event means even more even without Dana's physical presence.

My story with spinal cord injury started a little over seven years ago and it has been quite a roller coaster ride and I feel like I learn something new everyday. Two days after my daughter was born, I left my home Wednesday, November 25, 1998 the day before Thanksgiving calling my wife telling her I would be by the hospital to pick her up and take our daughter home for the first time, but I needed to take a quick detour by a client's to take a look at a placement for a satellite dish. The next call she would receive would be quite different. One that said that I had been in an accident and she needed to come to the trauma center in Houston. On arrival, a counselor told her she needed to be prepared for either my death or a very different life. And the message had also been relayed to my parents in Mississippi telling them to come to Houston and that I might not be alive by the time they arrived. I talk about in the third person because I remember very little about those first couple of weeks and that's probably a good thing. Six months, five pneumonias and one pressure sore later I'm finally able to get off the ventilator and check out of rehab to go home. I had no idea of the fight we were in for and even less idea of the fight we were capable of. I like to believe that the reason most of us are not dead is because we are such fighters and our families wouldn't let us surrender.

In the beginning, it was hard for me to tell my story and sometimes still is, but I have learned that, that is what makes it powerful and persuasive. I even hesitated putting my story in the local newspaper because it seemed like I was exposing my weaknesses and showed my vulnerability. My feeling was, try to do little as possible and not be a burden on everyone else. In the last couple of years, I've slowly regained enough confidence to realize that 90% of people really do want to help us but have no idea how to. They're often uncomfortable and would rather say nothing because they're not sure what's politically correct. I soon realized that if people here that you just have a spinal cord injury, it doesn't mean much, but if they hear about your life and family and that you're just like the next person the story has much more meaning. I heard Dana say at last year's rally that Christopher's presence in a room was all that was needed, that he commanded attention without saying a word. It soon dawned on me that everyone knew his story which was the reason that he didn't need to say anything. I'm not saying we could ever command the respect that Christopher did, but we shouldn't minimize how powerful our stories are in relating our message. And the more people that see us out telling our story, the more they will fight for us.

My main motivation for attending last year's rally was Christopher Reeve's death and to meet Dr. Young. Dr. Young has been such an inspiration of hope that just meeting him would have made the trip last year well worth it. My expectation for the meetings with our representatives and senators from Texas was pretty low. I expected them to meet with us, listen to our stories with a smile, and pat us on the back as they gave us a little push out the door. I had a preconceived notion that there's no way a couple of individuals going into a 20 minute meeting could make a difference. As we went to the first meeting and introduced ourselves, and Joy and Benjamin began telling their stories, I noticed that the legislative aide was genuinely moved even to the point where it looked like she had a tear in her eye. I was looking around wondering if a plant was blooming in the office and she had allergies. After a quick scan around the room double checking that there wasn't a window open or something, the pleasant surprise was that... She sincerely cared about our issues. Instead of ending our meeting after all stories and politely escorting us to the door as I expected, she

actually began to ask us questions about other issues and what their office could do to help us out. Our next meeting went pretty close to the same way. My preconceived notions were very wrong. I think we hear so much sometimes about the politics involved and the money involved that we lose sight of the fact that most of the politicians got into politics with good intentions and really do want to help.

That brings me to to my last point and one that I think means the most...If you ask for nothing, that's exactly what you will get! That's why we have to be bold and ask. I often think back to my days as a sales representative and what led me to being one of the top salespeople over the years. It really had nothing to do with how talented or how smart someone was. The key trait among all the top salespeople was persistence. The people who kept asking and following up were the ones who made the most sales. One of the most interesting statistics about sales I've ever heard is this: the typical person will not say yes until they've been asked five times. Putting that another way, means we can expect to hear no at least four times before getting the answer we want. And as that relates to what we're here for this week and in the future, it means that we have to keep telling our story and keep coming back and keep asking .

If we had come to Washington, DC 10 years ago asking for funding for spinal cord research, I'm sure that very few would have acknowledged that it was even possible to find a cure. Five years ago there would have been a few believers in the science, but not enough to make it a priority. Today, as we sit, it's no longer about science... Just politics and money! Those are barriers even we can handle.