

I became involved in advocacy issues four years ago when I was asked to testify at a Senate hearing about SCNT. The woman who was supposed to testify was sick, and I was asked to fill in for her. Since then, one thing has led to another.

My most recent effort was being named to a committee in Virginia that was established to study the medical, ethical, and scientific implications of stem cell research. This was a 15-person committee set up by the Virginia General Assembly. Eight of the members were either Senators or Delegates, so they all had titles before their names. Three of the members were representatives from the medical colleges in Virginia, so they were all PhDs. Of the four citizen members, one was an RN, and the other two either had PhDs, or a JD, or some combination of letters after their names. I was the only person listed simply by her first and last name. When I recognized that, I felt like I didn't belong on the panel with all of these smart, accomplished people. I sat at a meeting where they discussed things like patent laws, and intellectual property rights, and I just couldn't wrap my brain around these things. Then it occurred to me that there is something I'm an expert on, and I do have a role to play on this committee. I am an expert on living with a spinal cord injury. Each of us here is. And each of us has a story, and our stories are important.

Whatever your story is, and however you go about your advocacy - whether it's writing letters to the editor of your local paper, writing OpEds for major newspapers across the country, calling your elected officials, or just wearing your Superman dogtags and being visible, talking to your neighbors, I believe that each person has an ability to make a difference. We can't all have the impact that Chris and Dana Reeve did, and we may not all make a difference to the extent that Don Reed has in California, but I honestly believe that each of us can do things in our corner of the world to further the effort.

I know that sometimes it seems like we've taken on this daunting task, but it's like the question "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer is that you eat an elephant one bite at a time. And that is how we will pass Castle-DeGette, and that is how we will pass the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Act - one Senator at a time, one Representative at a time, we will get this legislation passed.

When I was at A Magical Evening, the gala that the Christopher Reeve Foundation held in November, I was fortunate to spend some time talking to Susie Harkema, one of the scientists who is funded by the Foundation. She was telling me about the work she is doing in her lab, and about how passionate she is about her research. She asked me if I remembered when they put butter on burns, and when I said, "No", she explained that putting butter on burns was previously thought to heal the burn. In fact, she said, it made the burn worse. She told me that she is working for the day when she and I can sit back and say, "Remember when they used to put people in wheelchairs?" Well, I want that, too. Let's go make it happen.

Kris Gulden
May 1, 2006