

My Mother, My Inspiration

Shared by Tarra Nystrom



I don't have a degree in social work or vocational rehabilitation. I don't have a posse of well-connected colleagues who can lend a name to increase notoriety. I don't have amassed wealth from which I can donate to the initiatives supporting people with disabilities. I do have a voice. And I have a lifetime of disability awareness and advocacy combined with successful employment experiences in corporate, nonprofit, and entrepreneurial environments, as well as job development and job coaching expertise for people with disabilities. I understand issues of disability inclusion in the workplace.

My Mother is my rock and inspiration for all of these accomplishments. At the age of 18, an accounting major at The Ohio State University, she walked for the last time at a football game of her beloved alma mater. She contracted polio in 1951.

I grew up never knowing my Mother any other way but in her wheelchair. I never knew the concept of 'barrier.' I never knew that 'accommodation' meant something other than a reference to a hotel room. I never saw her challenged by disability, nor did I ever hear her complain. I never witnessed anything but courage, and yet I never knew that's what I was experiencing daily. It wasn't courage or nobility or dignity; it was just my Mom. And that courage is what motivates my advocacy for individuals with disabilities today.

The clichés "Cut down in the prime of life," "What a tragedy," or "... poor thing," never applied to her. From her wheelchair, my Mom married a grade school classmate, immediately boarding a plane to Bermuda where the newlyweds were stationed with the Navy for two years. She raised a family, two daughters, tucking us into bed every night in middle-class suburbia. She was active in her church mentoring as the high school youth group leader for more than ten years, and set the example as the advisor for our 4-H Club as well as for a 4-H Club at a lesser-advantaged school in Columbus. She was adventurous and traveled extensively—visiting all 48 contiguous states of the U. S., touring throughout Europe, Mexico, and Central America, and sunbathing in the Caribbean while journaling most of her trips. And she sewed all the time. Independently, she drove her own car with hand controls designed and installed by my Grandfather in the late 1960s. She met the President! During his re-election campaign, President

Nixon stopped his motorcade, exited his car and walked two blocks to shake my Mother's hand on the streets of Columbus. And imagine expressions on the faces of the country club clique at the sorority house in 1982 when my Mom rolled into parents' weekend, wheeling across the plush white carpets and leading not only the social conversations but the intellectual ones as well. She taught herself how to use the computer at the age of 56. Our home was the gathering place every July 4th and during the Christmas holidays, and birthdays were always an event with a homemade cake. And when the challenges of life and family reared their ugly heads, she was the voice of reason and the thread that mended my family's fabric. My parents lovingly celebrated 50 years of marriage. And somehow, she found the time to work for almost 30 years! My Mom passed away in 2002. And although I miss her most days, I am inspired by her every day.

Growing up, I never realized that disability inclusion wasn't the conversation. As an adult, I realize that I can broaden the conversation with the intention of helping to expand the awareness of the ROI of disability and inclusion. I can do this regardless of roles throughout my careers or the concentration of my degrees. The theme of my advocacy, this conversation, focuses on the idea that if it was this easy in the 1970s to hire someone with a disability, why is it so difficult in the 2018?