On the Anniversary of the ADA, People with Disabilities Remind us that Only Abilities Matter

On July 26, 2012, the nation commemorates the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). When President George H. W. Bush signed the bill into law 22 years ago, the ADA was the first piece of legislation to ensure equal rights and opportunities to people with disabilities. In other words, they now had a chance to achieve their American Dream.

Throughout the years, we’ve seen great advancements in access to education, community, and transportation. In fact, the 2010 Kessler Foundation/National Organization on Disability Survey of Americans with Disabilities revealed that less than a 10 percent gap remains between individuals with and without disabilities who are graduating high school, earning a Bachelor’s degree, and going on for a post-graduate degree. But one area of persistent concern is employment. Just last month, the Department of Labor reported that only 20.5 percent of working age people with disabilities are employed as opposed to 70 percent of those without disabilities—an unacceptable figure.

To raise awareness of the abilities of people with disabilities, Kessler Foundation launched its ongoing “Only Abilities Matter” campaign in October 2011. The campaign features public service announcements by former football player Eric LeGrand and actors Daryl “Chill” Mitchell and John Larroquette, who explain the importance of seeing abilities before disabilities. Individuals with disabilities also post their abilities on Kessler Foundation’s Facebook page. In recognition of the ADA, the Foundation is releasing sample postings by people with disabilities from around the country. As you read on, you’ll find people with disabilities exceeding expectations when given the opportunity and finding alternative solutions to obstacles.

We all have abilities. What are yours?

The strength of a veteran…

John I. – “On December 14, 2003, I was riding as a gunner in a HUMVEE while serving in Fallujah, Iraq. I was the trail vehicle and as we rounded a turn, my vehicle was hit with an Improvised Explosive Device or IED. I suffered minor shrapnel wounds to the left side of my head. What I and the military did not know was that I also suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury. I continued duty and slowly started to experience the affects of a TBI. I had memory loss, excessive appetite, mood swing, loss of concentration, excessive fatigue. After being seen by many neurologists, they determined that I had suffered a TBI and also had ADHD. After starting medications, everything started to work out. Since then, I began working for a Congressman on Veterans issues and will have my degree completed around the new year. I never looked at my disabilities as something that would prevent me from doing something. I used them as a tool to learn and better myself. In the process I have had
the opportunity to use my lessons learned to help other veterans in the same situations. It's not a disability, but an ability to do things differently than everyone else."

Sgt. John Irwin found the position with the Congressman through Project Connect—a collaborative effort of Jewish Employment Vocational Service (JEVS), Jewish Vocational Service, and Tip of the Arrow funded by Kessler Foundation. Project Connect works closely with veterans to ensure that they receive support services and medical care to help them be part of the community and return to work. Employment services include vocational skills assessments, transition preparation, referrals for skills training and internships if needed, and job placement. Sgt. Irwin, who was awarded the Purple Heart for his service, also volunteers for Tip of the Arrow and has placed more than 40 veterans in full-time employment. Thank you for your service, Sgt. Irwin, both oversees and at home.

Cultivating a better planet...

Kessler Foundation provided seed funding to launch Arthur & Friends and continues to support this growing social enterprise. Wendie Blanchard had the idea to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities when her nephew Arthur, a young man with Down Syndrome, couldn’t find a job. Individuals with disabilities, who earn market wages and have room for advancement, primarily operate Arthur & Friends. They grow produce hydroponically and sell it to local businesses. The community gets to see their abilities as they enjoy the fresh produce and interact with them. What started out with one greenhouse has expanded to three around the state of New Jersey. Read the abilities of some of the amazing employees.

Lauren C. – “Everything has changed for me since I started working at Arthur & Friends and not just that I make money. I can help others and I learn from them about their disabilities and learn about mine too. I am now going to college, I have a boyfriend, and I am doing good in the world for others. There is so much I want to say. I am not my disability anymore. I am 100% me and my disability is more like a purse I carry around. My skills have so much improved and there is so much I can do for others and myself. My life is great.”

Joshua H. – “Arthur & Friends is the best thing that ever happened to me. It is a great program that is doing great things for the whole planet. Our produce is the best and everyone who tries it loves it. It is good for you and grown without pesticides and with lots of love. I wish I was there every day and that others from my group home could work there too. Being in a wheelchair may seem like being a hydroponic farmer is not a job for me. But I can do almost everything everyone else can and some things even better. I love giving tours to people and explaining what we do. I will work here for the
rest of my life. When senators and government people come to see what we do, I always tell them that we need more Arthur & Friends everywhere and not just because it helps people with disabilities but because it helps everyone to eat better and to have good jobs.”

Arthur B. – “I know I am blessed because of Arthur & Friends and I have a life now that is fun and rewarding and I think people see me differently.”

Todd R. – “I had a very successful career in IT and owned my own company and then one day I had a brain aneurism. I spent months in rehab and in the hospital. The brain I once had was gone and I thought I would never work or drive again. My wife found out about Arthur & Friends and I started working there a few days a week. My brain started up as I had to learn new things and new ways of working. The warm and happy environment plus seeing others overcome their disabilities inspired me and made me happy to be alive. I am driving again and my family says that the old me is coming back.”

Matt M. – “I used to sit and watch TV all day and wait for my friends to get home from work… Now they wait for me! I have been promoted and have a great deal of responsibility. I train others and manage about 12 people most days. I feel and most people I know feel that there is nothing I can’t do. I tell them there is one thing I can’t do and that is feel sorry for myself. We went to see the new batman movie a few days ago and the cop told me I could park in the handicapped space. I told him no… I don’t need it. You should have seen his face.”

James B. – “Some people ask me what is wrong with me. I tell them nothing and ask what is wrong with them. I now am going to college to get a degree in agriculture, I have two jobs in two greenhouses, and I became an Eagle Scout this year. I feel very smart when people ask me about hydroponics. I don’t think they expect me to explain about pH or the science part of what we do.”

Serving a higher power…

John H. – “As a person with a visual disability (20/300 corrected) man wont employ me but God did I am a pastor of a local church. You are only disabled if you choose to be.”

Advocating for people with disabilities…

Chris M. – “Hi, my name is Chris Miller. My disability is [cerebral palsy] but I do not let that stop me from living life. I am vice-chair of the NJ Council on Developmental Disabilities and going to college to get my bachelors degree in political science with a minor in public policy. My abilities are stronger than my challenges.”

Chris Miller completed an internship in Washington, D.C., at the Washington Center for Internships & Academic Seminars, where
Kessler Foundation funds internships for students with disabilities. While interning for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Chris worked on developing airport screening guidelines for people with disabilities and helping them understand and go through the airport screening process to lessen the stress. He was able to prove his abilities while presenting the guidelines to a Chinese delegation—a country that usually institutionalize people with disabilities. Chris will continue to use his abilities to advocate for people with disabilities.

Paying it forward…

Kevin G. – “I am Kevin Greene and I am 28 years old and I suffered a spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury six years ago…despite my limitations, I have been able to return to work, drive, and live life. I volunteer with Kessler foundation in their program ThinkFirst where I educate grades K - 12 about safety and injury prevention. I was not too grateful to whomever about my injury at first. I can honestly say now I am glad [I] did not give up because I cannot imagine my life not lived!! My job consists of working in a lab for two endocrinologists (Sugar doctors lol) and I attend school full time online to obtain an associates degree in allied health sciences to continue my laboratory career. I want everyone to know that life does not stop; it only changes. Life is not about what you can and cannot control but how you react to life! Keep your chin up and never feel useless and YOU WILL SUCCEED!! I PROMISE THIS.”

Kevin exemplifies what Kessler Foundation is all about. As he struggled to find employment after his injury, he completed a laboratory technician training program at JFK—which was funded by Kessler Foundation. He is now successfully employed. With Kevin using a wheelchair to get around, it’s easy to forget that he also has a traumatic brain injury (TBI), which he says is more disabling than the paralysis. To assist in finding ways to improve the lives of people with brain injury, he also participates in TBI research studies at Kessler Foundation. He knows that the research findings will help individuals who acquire a brain injury in the future. In addition to treating disabilities caused by brain injury, he also wants to be a part of the solution to prevent injury. Through the ThinkFirst program, a national injury prevention program in which Kessler Foundation has sponsored the NJ chapter for more than two decades, Kevin teaches students to respect their health, avoid engaging in risky behavior, and the lifelong consequences of injury.

Student, sister, activist, volunteer…

Laura W. – “Hello, my name is Laura Watson. I am 22 years old and living with Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type II. I was diagnosed at 9 months old. Despite all the heartbreaking news the doctors gave my parents at diagnosis, they…chose to do anything it took to give me a normal life. I use a motorized wheelchair for mobility, I require physical assistance with all activities of daily living, and I have a daily respiratory care regimen to keep my lungs healthy and strong. Despite all of my limitations, I have
never looked at myself as having a disability. I currently attend Rutgers University where I am pursuing my Bachelors degree in Journalism and Media Studies. I am an active member of my sorority, Delta Gamma. With the help of around the clock nursing care, I am able to live on my own in an off-campus apartment. In addition to school, I hold a part time job as a data clerk for Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. In my free time, I enjoy having a good time with my family and friends. I also volunteer [and mentor students with disabilities]. ONLY ABILITIES MATTER!”

Showing the world the power of believing…

Eric L. – “Hi my name is Eric LeGrand. I am living with a spinal cord injury but I will never let anything stop me from doing what I put my mind to. Recently I just signed an endorsement deal with Subway, I was drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, I won an Emmy and an ESPY. That right there shows you that if you put your mind to something and work hard, the sky is the limit for anything in this world. bELieve.”

Eric LeGrand has proved that nothing is impossible with hard work and determination. In an effort to regain function, he is currently participating in the locomotor training program at Kessler Foundation—part of the Reeve Foundation’s NeuroRecovery Network (NRN) in which individuals with spinal cord injury are harnessed over a treadmill as therapists move their legs in a walking motion in an effort to retrain the nervous system. Kessler Foundation, in collaboration with Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, is one of only six centers in the nation to be in the NRN. Despite the high level of his injury, Eric is experiencing great results. He is improving his balance and movement and expects to continue his progress.

Discovering new abilities…

The Opportunity Project, located in Milburn, NJ, provides community support and resources to people with brain injury. Kessler Foundation is a three-time funder of the project. Individuals at Opportunity Project feel empowered about their futures and are encouraged to work. They brush up on their resume, interview, and job skills with vocational counselors. Services also include job sampling and job matching. Members work and volunteer in companies around the community. Read some of their abilities.

Mark H. – “I suffered a ‘major stroke.’ I was in a coma for 2 weeks. Then I slowly recovered to this point. I can speak about my ability to recover and be very positive to
everyone I speak to. I now am trying to start a speaking business as a result of my experience with my injury.”

Kathy G. – “[Traumatic brain injury] resulting from a car accident. I have honed my writing skills; I have pursued and successfully completed a Masters Degree in Counseling. I became a mother; I further cultivated my social skills; Finally, I have come full circle and have found myself in the position of care-giver, not care-receiver.”

Creating beauty…

Madinah G. – “Who knew that being a disabled person I would find a new meaning for life through Art.”

Working to help others with disabilities…

Lauren S. – “Hi, I'm Lauren Scrivo. I was born with a form of muscular dystrophy. By the time I was a year old, I needed a respirator to breathe and a year later, I became the youngest person to use a power wheelchair to get around. Doctors expected me to spend my life without leaving my house but my parents were determined to give me a "normal" life. I graduated from college, went on for my master's degree, and now get to work every day for Kessler Foundation as a communications specialist. I love working for an organization that improve the lives of people with disabilities. While I've had to overcome obstacles throughout my life, I see every challenge as a new opportunity to prove my abilities. I'll never let my disability stop me from achieving my goals!”

Lauren Scrivo began as a communications intern for Kessler Foundation in January 2010 while she was completing her master's degree. Upon graduating, after a year and a half, she was hired as a full time employee of the Foundation. While she uses a power wheelchair and has a speech impairment as a result of using a respirator, she overcomes her limitations and is a productive member of the team.

Kessler Foundation supports abilities…

Kessler Foundation advances the abilities of people with disabilities through rehabilitation research and funding innovative employment initiatives. While scientists make discoveries that improve function, health, and independence for individuals with brain and spinal cord injuries, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and other neurological conditions, it’s important to also think about what comes next for people with disabilities. Through its grants program, the Foundation answers that question. In seven years, the Foundation has distributed more than $25 million in grants, which has put more than 3,000 individuals with disabilities to work. Grant dollars fund the creation or expansion of job training, social enterprises, and the accessibility of businesses to integrate their workforces.
While Kessler Foundation can do its part to promote the abilities of people with disabilities, employers also need to be open to recognizing their abilities and including them in their workplaces. Society should also see the abilities first and realize that the disability is a part of them but doesn’t define them. With individuals with disabilities always proving their abilities, they show that only abilities matter. Read more stories on Facebook!