

As an individual living with a severe neuromuscular disability, I've become accustomed to the myriad of obstacles and naysayers you inevitably encounter. As I've grown older, I've also begun to truly appreciate the import of overcoming these seemingly insurmountable obstacles. However, if I'm encountering such significant pushback, how difficult is it for those disabled individuals without a law degree to scale these walls? It's this question, and its solution, which serve as the impetus for my decision to join the amazing team at the Disability Independence Group.

The disabled constitute the largest minority group in the United States. Moreover, two-thirds of the disabled are under the retirement age. Independence and equal opportunities are the bedrock of success in America, as they pave the way for income, self-sufficiency, upward mobility, and the ability to contribute back to one's community. In reality, the disabled aren't forced to sit in the back of the bus, instead they aren't even allowed on the bus.

Our community is faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles to living each day as independently as possible while avoiding becoming an institutionalized ward of the state. According to the Office of Disability Employment Policy, as of August 2011, only 21% of people with disabilities participated in the labor force versus 70% of people without disabilities. Furthermore, only 40% of people with disabilities who have college degrees report working full or part time versus 76% of people without disabilities. People with "severe disabilities" reported employment rates of only 4% and were ten times less likely to be employed than people with "slight disabilities." 42% of the severely disabled live in poverty, compared to 15% of these without disabilities. By focusing just a little energy and resources on resolving these issues, worries such as how to get out of bed in the morning or managing the exorbitant day-to-day costs associated with being a gainfully employed disabled individual could simply be wiped away, opening the door for the next generation to achieve independence while being self-sufficient.

How do we move the needle in the direction of resolving these glaring problems? It's time for our community to take the mantle of the civil rights movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while leaving behind the mindset that we're somehow "broken."

To co-opt a well-known slogan, "Nothing about us, without us." Policy, quality of life, or funding decisions directly impacting the disabled cannot be made *solely* by those without disabilities.

This is the reason I joined the Disability Independence Group, Inc. As a member of a distinguished group of national advocates, DIG is on the front line of social advocacy with the principal goal of equal opportunities and inclusion for all disabled individuals. While we are responsible for partnering with others in our community to achieve these ends, we must also ensure that we gain the support of society as a whole in pushing these issues to the head of the table and resolving them once and for all.