



Spotlight On Alex Elegudin

After I incurred my spinal cord injury six years ago when I was 19, I thought I'd never be the same person again. I was correct in thinking that, but for totally different reasons than I imagined at that time. In October 2003, I sustained a C5-C6 spinal cord injury stemming from a car accident caused by deer running onto the roadway. It occurred while some friends and I were on our way from New York back to Pittsburgh where I was a student at Carnegie Mellon University. After the accident, all my future education and career plans would have to be put on hold, as I had figure out how I was going to live as a quadriplegic.



I had an extensive stay in the ICU unit of a Pittsburgh hospital and then moved on to do my rehab at Mount Sinai. The whole concept of

being paralyzed really hit me when I first got into a wheelchair upon starting rehab. That's when I realized this was going to be the hardest and longest battle of my life. From a physical perspective, I think my experience as a high school and college football player greatly helped me with the rehab process. As a former athlete,

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I knew what it felt like to push my body to the limits, and in rehab that's basically what you are asked to do on a daily basis as you try to recover as much as you can. From an emotional standpoint, I had an uncanny support system of friends and family that did anything and everything to help with my rehab process. Of course, I was very self-motivated, but on those days where self-motivation just was not quite enough, seeing the relentless hard work of everyone in my support system toward my recovery drove me to keep pushing because I felt that was the least I owed them for all the sacrifices they had made for me. And if that still wasn't enough, one of

the strongest motivations in my life is my sisters. Six months prior to my accident, my mom gave birth to twin girls and just two years ago another set of twin sisters were added to my family. The presence of my four sisters in my life gives me the strength to go out every day and strive for success.

After five months in rehab I was sent home and had to face the world outside the disability-friendly confines of Mount Sinai. For months while in rehab I was surrounded with disabled individuals constantly and always had the presence of a 'call button' if I ever needed help; both those aspects changed dramatically upon my getting home. Although it was difficult to adapt, I knew I had to keep progressing on the life path I had set out for myself. My next major challenge was going back to school. At the time of my accident, I was studying biomedical engineering. When it was time to return to school, I decided that pursuing an engineering career would be difficult as a quadriplegic and I turned my career goals to becoming an attorney. Making this decision was difficult, but based on the fact that I had previously thought about possibly going to law school after finishing undergraduate engineering, combined with the fact that I saw the legal field as being more disability-friendly than engineering, I thought it was the correct decision at the time. Next, I needed to apply and register for classes at a university somewhere. However, I had no idea how going to school with a disability worked and I wasn't ever sure it was possible. So, at first I registered for one class at Brooklyn College for the Fall 2004 semester, just to try it out. On the second day of that semester I registered for five more classes and I haven't looked back since. I realized



on that very first day that attaining my education was not foreclosed by my disability and it was just a matter of me putting in the necessary work to accomplish

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Now, five years later, I have graduated from Brooklyn College and Hofstra Law School, and recently passed the New York Bar Exam. The next mission I'll be taking on is finding employment as an attorney. There is an important fundamental difference, especially relative to being disabled, between getting your education and being employed, at least in my opinion. When you are getting your education you are paying someone for those services, and in turn you are paying for the accommodations that are being granted to you by the academic institution. Whereas when you are employed, someone is paying you for your services, and the employer is the one footing the bill for any accommodations you may need. Yes, the law protects us from discrimination based on disability, but the enforcement of



these laws is often impracticable because getting into the mind of an employer is impossible, and thus, proving discrimination becomes very difficult. I believe, I may be right or wrong in this, that there is an inherent unavoidable 'don't want to deal with' attitude that many employers

possess with relation to disability, and it is not discrimination per se, but it definitely acts as a barrier for a disabled individual joining the workforce. Personally, I have experienced this attitude on many occasions, never explicitly stated, but I've been on enough interviews and interned at enough places to know when it occurs.

Now, am I suggesting that getting a job when you become disabled is not possible and it should not be your goal? No, certainly not. With adequate searching the right place of employment exists for everyone, and I myself can attest to that as I have been able to obtain several great internships and short-term jobs during my time in law school. Yet, what I am saying is that on the road to conquering, or dealing with, your disability (however you chose to phrase it) obstacles and unpleasantities will inevitably arise, and you have to be

prepared to overcome them, and that doesn't only go for finding employment, but for all aspects of life. I'm not one to use cliché quotes often, but I think John F. Kennedy phrased it best during his famous speech in 1962 explaining why we need to go to the moon. He said "we choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard... because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too." My attitude to achieving my goals in life is very similar to that which Kennedy was describing. I know the goals I have set for myself are going to be difficult to achieve, but I am prepared for that and will persevere until I succeed; or until failure is the only available option left, at which point I move on to the next goal on the long list that I've made.

Becoming disabled has also been a very empowering experience for me. Prior to my disability, not many people outside my mom or my girlfriends cared about what I had to say. I feel like disability has given me a stronger voice than I've ever had. I have been asked to be a speaker at numerous awards or celebratory dinners, asked to testify and consult as to disability policies at various universities, asked to speak about spinal cord research on numerous occasions, among many other speaking engagements. Along those lines, I've also been able to use my experience with disability to help those just beginning to deal with their disability. I enjoy this new power that disability has given me and I know it will only become stronger as I progress through my life. I really look forward to using my voice even more strongly in the future to promote as many good causes as I possibly can.

One of the first things I heard someone say while I was on the rehab unit at Mount Sinai was that you will be the same person after your disability as you were before. Initially, I didn't understand it and this sounded very wrong to me. How is that possible, I asked. Everything is different, I am paralyzed, nothing will ever be the same again, I thought. Yet, as time has passed, not only do I understand what they meant, I strongly agree with that statement. It is true that now I need a wheelchair to get around, that I need help doing certain tasks, and that I don't have same career path as once had, but those are all just adaptations I've made to accommodate my disability. However, deep down at the core I am still the same person as I've always been. The people I hold closest in life are the same, the things I enjoy are mostly the same, and the aspirations I have are the same as they have always been, just the way I pursue them now may be slightly different.

