

In Memoriam: Gordon Richins | CPD Blog

JoLynne Lyon

02/14/2018

Gordon Richins, our dear colleague, advocate and friend, passed away on February 11. He leaves a hole at the CPD, and in many other places where his influence was felt. He served on multiple boards and committees at the local, state and national level, always lending his voice to the support people with disabilities.

Richins was a farmer until one day in 1987, when a heavy bale of hay hit him in the back of the neck. He was instantly paralyzed and spent months in rehabilitation before he was able to sit in a wheelchair.

"The Social Security Administration sent a vocational rehabilitation counselor to meet with me, and this began my process of rehabilitation and earning a college degree," he wrote in a post for this blog. "All through college I never really thought I would get a job with my disability."

Still, Richins had a desire to give back to the community that supported him and his family following his accident, and when a chance came to work for OPTIONS for Independence as an outreach specialist and VISTA volunteer, he took it. "It was a time of personal growth as my outlook on life changed dramatically," he would later write.

In the beginning he was pretty opinionated, said Cheryl Atwood, the OPTIONS executive director. Over time she witnessed his transformation into a strong disability advocate. "He learned to speak up for himself, which is wonderful, but he grew into speaking for people with disabilities on a higher level."

In 1996, he came to the Center for Persons with Disabilities as its consumer liaison. "I will remember Gordon as a rare individual whose experiences in life touched and taught many others," said Sarah Rule, a former CPD director. "He said that after his accident and a long period of coming to terms with the resulting disability, he chose to live actively, and set out to do just that. On his way, he guided others to find ways to do the same."

He served on the boards of many organizations, and he often took his advocacy to the public at large. He granted numerous interviews to local media on disability issues, from snow removal to housing to transportation to employment of people with disabilities.

His leadership continued on the national level. He served two terms as co-chair of the Council on Community Advocacy at the [Association of University Centers on Disabilities](#), stepping into the role at a time when strong leadership was needed. "His strength was knowing the issues and staying on point. His style served him very well," said Mark A. Smith, a past co-chair of the COCA. "This is a sad and substantial loss to the community of disability advocates nationally. Gordon personally embodied the principles of servant leadership, and we as a community stand on his shoulders, along with so many others."

Gordon also served the disability community in a personal way. Kim Datwyler, the executive director of Neighborhood Housing Solutions, remembers when Gordon showed up at a hearing on a controversial housing development—one that would impact people with disabilities. He brought several other wheelchair users in with him. He was aware of the opposition, Datwyler said, but it didn't stop him. "Gordon took it in stride. He didn't become bitter, he just said, 'They need to be educated.'"

Gordon was an executive member of the Consumer Advisory Council at the CPD—a body that advises and guides the center while keeping it connected to the statewide disability community. "He was so good at including everyone," said Connie Pehrson, a former board member. "He truly was good friends with everyone."

"The disability world will not be the same," said Atwood. "I can't imagine those meetings without him."

Over the years, Gordon served at the national level on the COCA (he was co-chair from 2004-2010); the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living; and the National Council on Independent Living. At the statewide level he was a member of the Utah Rural Specialized Transportation Association Board, the Center for Persons with Disabilities' Consumer Advisory Council (executive member); and Idaho's Center on Disabilities and Human Development's Consumer Advisory Council. Locally he served on the OPTIONS for Independence and Neighborhood Housing Solutions boards, among others.

In lieu of flowers or other gifts, the family is requesting support for the significant medical expenses accrued in recent months. Donations may be made through any Zions Bank branch to an account in memory of Gordon Richins OR donations may be sent to:

The Family of Gordon Richins
c/o Sharon Weston, CPD at Utah State
6800 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322