

Sink Or Swim | CPD Blog

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So many times, as an individual with a disability, I have been told what my physical limitations are and too many times I believed them. But an experience I had while going to college changed all that for me. Let me explain.

At the age of two I was involved in a farming accident that left me paralyzed from the waist down. I was fortunate enough to be raised in a family who tended to overlook the disability and treated me just like my other brothers and sister. One thing we, as a family, looked forward to were those nights after a long, hot day when we would go swimming at the local swimming pool. One particular evening, when I was about 9 or 10, as I crowded the side of the pool and “walked” up and down the side (my weightlessness in the water allowed me for a short time to be like everybody else—I could actually put one foot in front of the other and walk), I would watch my family laughing and splashing and diving from the sides.

My brother watched me as well and he thought that I was not having as much fun as the rest and so he decided to change that for me. He swam over to me and offered to take me to “the other side.” He told me to hold on to his shoulders while he swam me over to the far side of the pool—he said it would be fun. He was right, it was fun. I played on the other side and as long as my feet touched the bottom of the pool and my hands could grasp the side, I felt safe and secure. Then he came to take me back.

This time he veered from the shallow end and I was soon in water well over my head—my feet nowhere near able to touch the bottom. Suddenly he stopped and with a quick movement he turned and pulled my arms off of his shoulders and then said, “Okay, now swim.” Then he let go and it was a matter of sink or swim—I sunk! He thought for sure I would swim—that was how a lot of other people learned to swim. Luckily my dad had been keeping an eye on us and he was at my side instantly. I grabbed onto his strong shoulders and he led me back to the safety of the shallow end of the pool and the security of the pool sides, where my feet touched the bottom and my hands grasped firmly onto the ledge, determined never to let go again. As a result of that experience, I developed a fear of the water. I would still venture out with my family on these outings, but more often than not, I would watch from the safety of the pool-side deck chairs.

Years later, while I was attending Ricks College (now BYU-Idaho) in Rexburg, this fear confronted me again. It was my first semester there and I was in an adaptive physical education class taught by a physical therapist. The first two classes were great fun. I had established an easy friendship with the other three class members and my professor. Then the professor dropped the bomb. He casually announced that he had arranged for us to use the swimming pool for the rest of the semester. Everybody was excited—except me. My blood ran cold. We were told that for the rest of the semester we were to report to the dressing room, change into our swimming suits, and then gather around the pool.

My professor was amazing. He let us have the first couple class periods to just play in the pool—instilling in me a false sense of security! Then one day he got in the pool with us—I knew this was trouble with a capital T. He carried with him a couple of those blue floatation boards and some towels. He told me that he was going to teach me how to swim. He started by attaching the floatation boards to my legs, tying them on with the towels. This would keep my legs floating while my upper body did the rest of the work. What a scary feeling I experienced as my legs began to float and my head and upper body sank. My professor gently held me up while he taught me on how to move my arms in a rather awkward stroke, how to breathe, and how to rotate my head from side to side. Before I realized what was happening, I was swimming! What an exhilarating feeling—what freedom! Then when I thought I had accomplished the impossible, my lifeline was taken from me—literally.

Once my professor had decided that I had developed confidence in my upper body strength and “technique” sufficiently, he decided it was time to take off the floatation devices. It seemed that all the progress I had made had gone down the drain and I was back to square one. My legs sunk, I sunk, and my fear of the water returned. But with all the patience that a great teacher possesses, he patiently began the process of teaching me to swim all over again. With the strength

and technique I had already developed in my upper body, I was soon able to get up enough speed that my legs actually began to float. When I finished my first lap of the pool (my professor swimming beside me stroke for stroke), everyone in the class clapped—I felt on top of the world! Each day as I went to class, I eagerly lowered myself into the pool and began my laps. As long as I kept within arms' length from the side, I felt safe. When I would feel myself faltering and beginning to sink, I would quickly reach out my arms and grasp the side—my lifeline to reality.

The semester was coming to an end and finals approached. Each day I eagerly awaited my opportunity to swim and release the tension and frustrations from my other classes. I did not even think about my final for the swimming class—I mean, what more could I do than what I had already done? But just like life, as we begin to feel safe and secure in our little world, something happens to shatter that security.

On the last day of class, my professor calmly announced that for my final I would have to swim a mile. That did not bother me too much because I had been coming close to swimming a mile each class period anyway—what could be so difficult about that? But swimming the mile was not the only thing I had to do. When I got into the water, measuring my arm length from the wall, my professor calmly told me that if I wanted to get an “A” in the class, I had to swim in the middle of the pool—completely away from my lifeline.

My heart began pounding; the water suddenly was not my friend anymore, it became a giant monster with mouth gaping open ready to swallow me into its murky depths. My professor put his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eyes and said, “You can do it—I have faith in you. I will be right there beside you every stroke of the way.” And he was—right to the very last stroke. My eyes beamed with excitement and my heart swelled with happiness as I looked at that “A” on my transcripts.

A few years ago (about 25 years after that final), I met that professor again. He calmly told me, with a twinkle in his eyes, that he was going to give me an “A” anyway—regardless of whether or not I completed the mile in the middle of the pool. What a guy!

There are so many times in life that we tell ourselves, “I can't do that...it's too difficult...it's too scary.” We should never let anybody tell US what OUR limitations are...regardless of whether or not we have a disability. Our only limitations in life are what we give ourselves. Someone once said (and I don't remember who it was), that TRIUMPH is just a little UMPH added to try. Don't give up! NEVER, NEVER, give up...keep trying!