The vehicle rolls up, comes to a stop, and the side door suddenly begins to open – not from side-to-side like most sliding doors. This door opened from the top, sort of like a spaceship. When it got to the ground, it turned into a ramp. Suddenly there appears the driver, emerging from the ship. It was Keith Bjornson. To me, a newly-disabled person in very much the same physical condition as Keith (quadriplegia) this was amazing. Up until that point I had no idea that it was going to be possible for me, a person using a wheelchair and with very limited arm function, to drive. From then on, driving became my number-one goal. It was the symbol of independence.

In Honor of Keith Bjornson
by Nate Aalgaard

November 7. He had been struggling with health issues for several years. I had the privilege of working with him for about eight years, following his retirement. Keith served on Freedom’s Board of Directors for about six years, and was very involved in peer mentoring and advocacy. He and his wife of 40 years, Sherry, were the dynamic duo of super volunteers for Freedom.

At the visitation service, I particularly enjoyed the story from Jim Stai, his supervisor at the Small Business Administration, where Keith worked for 30 years. Jim told about a snowstorm that had plugged up a lot of the streets in Fargo. Employees were calling him to say they didn’t think they could get to work for a couple of days. Jim would tell them, “Don’t worry, Keith is here.” Strangely enough, after being told that, most of the employees found a way to get to work. That just goes to show how diligent and determined Keith was to get the job done. I love the other story of meetings with bankers, and they would do a double take when they saw Keith, never imagining that he used a wheelchair.

Mayor Tim Mahoney spoke at the funeral. He related to Keith both as his physician, as well as in his capacity as mayor. He talked about the emails he would get from Keith asking him about some issue or another involving...
the city. Keith was constantly pushing to make sure everyone was included in events such as Martin Luther King Day, utilizing of parking downtown, and making sure the disability perspective was not lost. The mayor spoke about coming up with what he thought was a good solution to an issue, only to be questioned further by Keith. He would quickly respond, “But have you thought of…”

That was the essence of Keith Bjornson—dedicated, thoughtful, relentless. Once he had a goal in mind, he didn’t let go. After his passing, his wife Sherry told me that Keith wished he could have done so much more. I told her he already did so much, which is true. Some of the issues Keith brought up ended up being federal discrimination complaints. Those are still pending, and I’m sure somehow, somewhere, some way Keith is keeping track to make sure that we don’t drop the ball. I would hate to let him down.

Keith’s road to success was not an easy one. It took quite a while for him to accept his disability and move on. He was angry that such a thing could happen to him. But eventually, this anger was replaced with an ambition to be successful.

The following is the last paragraph of his personal story, as written in the book Turning Points by Laetitia Mizero Mizerud.

After the event that left me paralyzed, my turning points were opportunities provided by individuals or experiences that I engaged with and learned from. It is my fervent hope and prayer that other people can learn from my story and see their own potential for a significant, full life experience. This is possible for all people with life challenges, whether they are physical or emotional, and regardless of how serious they are.

From Where I Sit

I have written about this topic several times before, but I think it is particularly important to acknowledge the passage of President George H.W. Bush on November 30. He signed the Americans with Disabilities Act on July 26, 1990. It is the first comprehensive Civil Rights Act for people with disabilities in the history of the world. Americans can take pride in the fact that we are leaders in disability rights and in giving opportunity for all of us to join the mainstream of life.

Even though the final votes in Congress for the ADA were overwhelmingly positive, this was not an easy task. Disability advocates around the country worked long and hard to convince members of Congress that this was a necessary law whose time had come. There was fear on the part of the business community that it would lead to endless lawsuits and cost them lots of money in terms of renovation and other accommodations. Some religious groups did not want the government interfering in their business. Many other people simply saw no problem with leaving things as they were.

There were attempts to carve out certain groups from the protections of the ADA, but the disability community and the President held firm that everyone needed to be covered. Someone affected by HIV was every bit as worthy of legal protection as someone with a physical or sensory disability. Every group had experienced the common problems of being excluded, devalued, and left behind. Too many barriers existed, both structural and attitudinal. We still have barriers and inequality in America. Far too many people with disabilities are unemployed or lack essential services.

But for now, we celebrate the life of President Bush. We thank him for his willingness to sign this historic act and take a chance on us – people with disabilities. In listening to the attributes from various people around the country, they by and large will say that one of the most enduring characteristics of President Bush was his generosity of spirit. He respected everyone alike. He was also a humble man, never taking the credit for himself. In fact, at the signing ceremony that day he made it a point to thank Democrats and Republicans alike, and especially the disability advocates who made this possible. He instilled a love for public service in his family.

He was famous for his hand-written notes. He would send Christmas greetings and condolences. I have a photo of him signing the ADA with best wishes and his own signature. 1990 seems a lifetime ago, both in terms of everything that’s happened in the disability community, but also in our politics. Maybe we can start to get back to that spirit of cooperation that we saw in passing the ADA.

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Brighten Your Holiday Season by Helping Others

By Cindy Gabbert

I reached out to a few of my co-workers to see what they do to prepare for what can be the busiest, but also most stressful, month of the year. Here are some of their tips to make the most of December,

*Reaching out to others offers vital help to people in need, worthwhile causes, and the community, but the benefits can be even greater for us. Helping others can help you reduce stress, combat depression, keep you mentally stimulated, and provide a sense of purpose.

*During the hectic holiday season, we try to bring back tradition. When I was young, I would bake with my grandma and mom. Then we would box up our holiday goodies and deliver them to family and friends. Now with my grandma gone, it is my mom, my daughters, my granddaughters and me. It is a fun-filled messy weekend with lots of laughs and reminiscing of past events. This is one of my favorite parts of the holiday season.

*Some very unsuspecting person generally gets a nice handmade flannel blanket from me. And I do mean UNSUSPECTING. They quite often do not know me.

*During the busy holiday season, I look at what can I do to help others. I do this by volunteering and making donations to specific organizations in honor of friends. I always make sure to take time with family and remind myself how blessed I am.

*One thing that I do is to reach out with communication. In person is the best; however, phone calls are the next best. I plan a time, at least once a week, to contact that person. I have made plans for lunch or supper, then pick them up and take them home. Many people who are alone for various reasons say: “The worst is not having someone to share a meal with.” I have also made a personalized stocking for them and filled it with some necessity items and some fun items. Spending time with others is priceless.

*For the past two years, I’ve decided to start holiday traditions focusing on memories rather than gifts. This past weekend my nieces, nephew, boyfriend, and I built a ginger bread house, made Christmas decorations, and created some wonderful finger paintings. My niece explained that she didn’t know Saturdays could be so fun! Sunday my boyfriend and I cut down a Christmas tree with his father and girlfriend. These are memories I’ll cherish forever!

Introducing...

Travis Johnson joined Freedom Resource Center in November of 2018 and will be working as the Integrated Employment Specialist. Travis spent the last nine years helping people find and maintain meaningful employment in the Fargo Moorhead area. Travis enjoys the ability to get out in the community and meet new people and feels that the relationships built in the community will continue to benefit others in the future. When he is not at work, Travis enjoys spending time with his wife and two small children.

Meet Freedom’s Board Member

Greg Toutges lives in Moorhead with his wife Marilyn and their 2 dogs. Greg retired in June 2018 after 18 years as the Director of Accessibility Resources at Minnesota State University Moorhead. Greg has also worked as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor in the public and private sectors. During his 35+ years working with persons with disabilities, he has had multiple occasions to engage with the staff of Freedom Resource Center regarding issues such as housing discrimination, accessibility and advocacy. Greg is serving his second term on the board at Freedom Resource Center and believes that Freedom Resource Center is the best kept secret, acknowledging that this needs to change given the positive impact the center has on the lives of persons with disabilities.
What’s Wrong With This Picture?

Tis the season for snow removal. What does the ADA say about snow removal? Nothing directly, but the ADA contains this information: (a) A public entity shall maintain in operable working condition those features of facilities and equipment that are required to be readily accessible to and usable by persons with disabilities by the Act or this part. (b) This section does not prohibit isolated or temporary interruptions in service or access due to maintenance or repairs. The following is a list of towns and time for snow removal. Fergus Falls, Valley City and Fargo say - 24 hours of end of snowfall. Moorhead – by 9pm after snowfall stops. West Fargo – within 48 hour of end of snowfall.