DEDICATED TO OUR PUBLISHER, PAT FIGUEROA
1948-2012
'Accidental' Wheelchair Inventor Seeing His Dream Gain Traction

By Mike Ervin

Two events in 1966 changed Ralf Hotchkiss' life for- ever. The first occurred near his hometown of Rockford, Ill., when the then 18-year-old sustained a spinal cord injury.

"My first cousin and I borrowed a pair of motorcycles from friends," Hotchkiss said. "As we rounded a gentle curve at about 50 miles per hour, I (hit) a patch of loose sand that had blown into the pavement, and (I) slid off the road. The bike headed down into a concrete culvert, while I flew over the concrete and tumbled in the grass."

Hotchkiss broke his back at the fourth thoracic vertebra. "The poor bike was much worse off," he said. "It broke in two and was beyond repair."

The second life-changing event occurred when Hotchkiss first went outside the rehab hospital in an E&J Premier wheelchair. He struggled, much to his surprise, to maintain his forward motion on the slanted sidewalk and not roll off the curb and into the street. He hit a crack in the pavement.

"The chair tipped forward, stopped from tipping only by the footrests hitting the ground. By sheer luck, I did not fall out. But the chair would not move forward. Looking down, I saw that the front fork had bent back until the caster wheel jammed into the side frame. I returned to the hospital by traveling in the only direction the chair would go -- backward."

Hotchkiss traveled less than a block, but he developed a personal and professional obsession with designing a rugged but maneuverable wheelchair for use on rough terrain. Today, about 50,000 of his RoughRider model wheelchairs are in use around the world, mostly in developing countries. The chairs are manufactured and distributed by the non-profit, Whirlwind Wheelchair International. Hotchkiss is WWI's director and chief engineer.

Hotchkiss is also a past recipient of a MacArthur Fel-lowship. The so-called "genius grants" are awarded annually to "talented individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction," according to the foundation's website.

One morning in 1989, the phone rang at his home in Oakland at 7 a.m. "It was an enthusiastic guy exclaiming that I had won this huge award," Hotchkiss said. "I was suspicious." He thought a friend was playing a joke.

At the time, his nameless project working with wheelchair riders in developing countries to design and build durable wheelchairs was fledgling and obscure. In the 1970s, he worked for Ralph Nader's Center for Auto Safety in Washington, D.C., but his passionate avoca-tion was designing wheelchairs. In 1981, he went to Nicaragua as part of a delegation from the original Cen-
We Remember...

Patricio “Pat” Figueroa Jr. (April 20th, 1948 – April 3rd, 2012). Figueroa, a native of Puerto Rico, was a disability rights activist, a national disability newspaper publisher and an advocate for people with disabilities.

Figueroa, of Boght Corners, N.Y., passed away at Albany Medical Center in Albany, N.Y., after complications from a recent surgery. He was 63.

He was a state employee for 19 years, lastly at the New York State Office for the Aging in Albany, from which he retired in 2003. In 1978, he founded CIDNY, the first independent living center in New York state. He co-founded the 504 Democratic Club and was the editor and publisher of Independence Today, a national disability newspaper. He also was a talented artist, author and advocate for people with disabilities, as well as a Web designer, inventor, entrepreneur, husband and father.

He was the son of the late Josefinia (Velez) and Patricio Figueroa Sr. of Catano, Puerto Rico. The fourth of 10 siblings, he was born with spina bifida. His love of art was apparent at a young age, as he began drawing at age 3 after his older brother taught him to draw superheroes.

Figueroa moved to the United States with his parents in 1958, settled in Manhattan and began his education at New York City’s High School of Art and Design. He later attended the Parsons School of Design, where he began to develop his lifelong role as a disability advocate, beginning with his work with Disabled in Action. With the help of DIA, Figueroa learned to advocate on his own behalf to obtain his own accessible apartment in Brooklyn. As a leader in DIA, he was at the forefront of advocating for equal access in education, transportation, housing and civil rights.

At Brooklyn College, he and three other students formed the Student Organization for Every Disability United for Progress (SOFEDUP), which advocated for total accessibility at that institution and, later, at other city universities. He obtained a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Brooklyn College in 1974 and a master’s in urban planning from New York University’s School of Public Administration in 1982.

As a disability advocate, he created logos for United Cerebral Palsy, DIA, CIDNY and other organizations. He was the artist who inserted a clenched fist into the wheel of the international symbol for accessibility.

Bruce Blower was the Suffolk County director of the New York State Office of Handicapped Services when he met Figueroa.

"It was my privilege to have known Pat in the early days of the disability rights movement," said Blower, currently commissioner at the New York State Commission on Quality of Care and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities. "Pat is an example of a life well lived. He was truly a pioneer in disability issues. Thousands of folks..."
Remembering Pat

The following are excerpts of comments from family, friends and colleagues on the passing of Patricio "Pat" Figueroa.

Kathi Wolfe: As a writer for Independence Today, I worked with Pat from 2006 to 2012. I considered Pat to be both a boss (an editor) and a friend. Over the years, our telephone talks were all over the map. No matter what subject or story idea I’d bring up – from Deaf culture to actors with disabilities to disabled Iraq War vets to beauty queens with disabilities – Pat knew something about it. Inevitably, he’d have the goods on everyone I wanted to interview before I did, and his memory of disability history seemed to stretch back before time. Few editors are as open as Pat was to story ideas on a wide range of topics. Nothing fazed or shocked him. He was game for most any idea I pitched. He only cared that the story be good – that it be accurate, well-written and of value to folks with disabilities.

Paul Feuerstein: He has been a great asset to the disabled community. I worked closely with Pat as CIDNY was in formation and the precursor of Barrier Free Living, Project Outward Bound, was just getting started. We collaborated to begin the New York City Coalition on Housing for People with Disabilities, which was instrumental in the passage of local law 58, at the time the most progressive building code for access for people with disabilities.

Amy Halloran: I met Pat through a children’s writing group, and he encouraged me in all of my writing -- for kids, adults, fiction and nonfiction. After my father had strokes, Pat encouraged me to write essays about my experience for Independence Today. Without his asking, it would have taken me longer to write about my feelings, and I might never have written about it. He only cared that the story be good – that it be accurate, well-written and of value to folks with disabilities.

Jim Ford: I will miss you Pat. I remember blocking streets In Manhattan and facing off against Nixon’s minions after his veto of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Remember how they stacked up furniture to block the wheelchairs in their luxury hotel? Your wisdom and warmth will be remembered with love.

John Williams: Pat Figueroa was a unique human being. He exemplified the best qualities of the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan. His compassionate spirit propelled others to care for the less fortunate among us. Because of his achievements, the world is a better place to live in. His memory will live a long time.

Brenda Brown-Grooms: Pat was a rare being. He cared, even when he didn’t have to, even when it would have been easier for him not to. Such individuals are probably what keep the rest of us breathing.

Kathleen Steele Pautler: I will always remember meeting Pat for the first time in Albany at the first statewide IL conference that I attended. He was leading a conference on home care using the model of what is now offered throughout the state that he was instrumental in leading in NYC. After that, I grew to know & respect him not only as a great leader in the disability rights movement but also as a friend, a wonderful husband & father. Pat, I know that you are resting in peace in heaven with the Lord. You are now being rewarded for all of your actions for equality for All!

Peter S. Kahrmann: He was unique, wonderfully so. Yes, he was a singular example that you did not have to stand up to stand tall in life. Yes, he was breathtakingly courageous when it came to the struggle for equal rights -- not just for people with disabilities, but for all people. But then too, there was this: He was deeply, deeply kind. I loved the person he was and did not know him long enough. But then I suspect that anyone who knew him could say the same thing, “I didn’t know him long enough.”

Donna Bader: My dear brother-in-law who had a great sense of humor and never lost his wit. There were so many things you were involved in politically and personally and you obviously made a positive difference in many people's lives. You accomplished so much, and I'm proud to have known you. You have been part of our family for so many years and I will miss you. I love you.

Brad Williams: I remember attending the 10th anniversary of the ADA gala with Pat and Denise in D.C. and having them be good enough to let me hang out with them as a fellow New Yorker. The event was held at the vice president's residence (Naval Observatory) and hosted by Al and Tipper Gore. I remember as an emerging leader in IL, I was impressed at how cool and natural Pat seemed at networking. Everyone seemed to know him, and he had no problem going at his own pace, engaging in various political discussions, then moving on. I know I felt better with their support at that event. Hopefully, I have learned some things from Pat that I can share with others in the future regarding leadership. Words cannot describe such a loss. However, good memories such as these remain.

Remembering Pat Continued on page 9
Pat Figueroa and the Battle for Independent Living in N.Y.

By Len Tarricone

The following is reprinted from a 1997 article written for Alive magazine.

Pat Figueroa is sitting placidly at his kitchen table, elbows nestled comfortably on the armrests of his wheelchair, discussing a treasured project: the collaboration with his eight-year-old daughter on an illustrated book for children tentatively titled "Melissa and the Magic Pen." His serene hopefulness for the successful publication of the fairy tale belies the tumult of his early years, now a generation removed, when this street warrior/organization guru/firebrand extraordinary for the disability rights movement in New York was working on a plot much more dramatic.

The social unrest of the sixties had spilled into the seventies, and as an idealistic Brooklyn College student, Figueroa found himself thrust into the midst of the fray. Camouflaged by the anti-war, civil rights, and women's rights movements was another battle, of similar intensity, waged by activists for people with disabilities. It was a time when reform legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act was a distant pipedream, and issues like the designation of parking spaces for people with disabilities, and the creation of curb cuts at busy corners, were timely causes. "Revolt was the order of the day," he recalls, "and there was a tremendous need for advocacy for people with disabilities. Organizations like the Muscular Dystrophy Association, United Cerebral Palsy, and the March of Dimes, while well-intentioned, were primarily cure driven, and not as prone to focus on policies and programs to help "in day-to-day life."

President Nixon's veto of the National Rehabilitation Act in 1972, a bill that proposed allocating resources to advance independent living, served as a touchstone for full-scale deployment of disability activists. In one memorable protest, a legion of wheelchair chaired demonstrators literally took over a block in midtown Manhattan at evening rush hour, causing mammoth traffic problems. Figueroa contributed to the fracas by hurling himself into the path of a city bus.

As Executive Director of the Center for Independence of Disabled in New York (CIDNY) from 1978-1983, Patricio Figueroa oversaw the prototype for the state's network of independent living centers. His spirited advocacy throughout the years is indicative of a determined battler who has been bucking the odds since birth, when he was diagnosed with Spina Bifida and given little chance of survival. He has never had use of his legs, which were folded beneath him through childhood, then amputated at age thirteen.

Born in the Puerto Rican town of Cataño, near San Juan, Pat was raised in the "El Barrio" section of Manhattan, the fourth of ten children. His physical limitations were often compounded by the 'inaccessibility of housing, which in the late 1950's was not architecturally wheelchair friendly. Most of his childhood was spent indoors and Pat was taught at home, by his parents and tutors, until he was twelve. He insists that there are few people you meet in life who make you smile just thinking of them. Pat Figueroa was one of those people.

Before I worked with him on Independence Today, I knew Pat in what seemed like another lifetime ago. Some years after I moved up to the Albany, N.Y. area from Westchester County, I was happy to learn that there was a wheelchair basketball team in these parts. Unlike the team I played on downstate, this group was friendly and open to newcomers, and no one was friendlier or more accommodating than Pat. Though, as a quadriplegic, Pat had a difficult time dealing with the pace and the rigors of the game, I was amazed at how well he played. And as his playing time decreased due to age and physical problems, he never lost his enthusiasm for the game, and his wide smile never dimmed.

I lost touch with him for a while, but when we ran into each other years later, he mentioned his plan for a disability-issue-oriented newspaper that would be disseminated around the country. He asked if I would come on board, and I accepted. As the years passed, the newspaper won more and more converts, and Pat would proudly tell me how people looked for-...
Commentary
Pregnancy as Disability? Maybe Some New Rules are Necessary
By Deborah Kendrick

When I was pregnant with my first child, my husband and I had an experience with a couple of strangers that we would recall (for entertainment) for years to come.

We had been married for three years, were established in our jobs (he as an engineer, and I teaching at a center for newly blinded adults), and the imminent arrival of a baby had us both pretty giddy with excitement. Almost overnight, it seemed, I went from being 103 pounds to 130, with every inch of me, from earlobe to big toe, showing the pregnancy.

We’d been shopping in Sears, looking hopefully at washing machines, when my newly encumbered feet called a halt to the activity and said it was time to go. Making our way through the store, we began hearing two soft voices behind us. We were being followed. At first, I couldn’t make out what the pair were saying, but eventually we heard phrases such as, “Jesus saves,” “Jesus heals” and “Do you know the Lord?”

I’m blind. My husband was sighted. It was clear to both of us immediately that our stalkers perceived my blindness as a deal-breaker to be expunged. We did actually attend church regularly and were proud of that affiliation, but stalking evangelists were not on our lists of chosen companions.

The couple followed us through the store and into the mall. We walked faster and didn’t look back. They followed us through the mall, to the exit, and out into the parking lot. Incredulous, we walked faster and still didn’t turn around, but by now, they were definitely on our heels, and the phrases were loud and clear: “Jesus saves.” “Jesus can heal you.”

I was tired, pregnant and irritated. My husband was amused. We reached our car, and they were right there with us, trying to begin a conversation. One or both of us said we had our own church, but they just kept on talking. Realizing that my husband was finding the exchange and subsequent banter entertaining, I used my long white cane to find my way around the car, opened the door and got into the driver’s seat. To my utter astonishment, the woman got in after me – for a woman-to-woman chat, I suppose. She now had a literally captive audience!

She began her evangelical spiel. I politely countered with, “We have our own church, thanks.”

She pressed a bit more, and I said nothing. Then, getting to the real point, she asked in a low, dramatic tone, “How long have you had your affliction?”

Of course I knew she meant my blindness. But I was not going to engage. Blindness was not an affliction, after all, just a physical trait, in my opinion, and so, after a pause, I looked down, patted my gigantic bulge and said innocently: “Oh! You mean this? Well, about six months now.”

My husband finally tired of his banter with the male evangelist and broke free. Somehow, we got rid of our passenger. I slid into my usual passenger seat and we drove away, laughing.

At the time, referring to my pregnancy as if it were a disability was hilarious to us, but decades later, the topic is a serious one among experts in employment discrimination issues.

Jeanette Cox, an associate professor of law at the University of Dayton, has presented a paper on the subject of adding protection for pregnant women in the workplace under the Americans with Disabilities Act at a variety of law conferences. (The paper was scheduled for publication in the March issue of the Boston College Law Review.) While the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 included individuals with certain minor or temporary disabilities, Cox said, employers have yet to be convinced that the physical difficulties experienced by pregnant women fall into these categories.

The American Pregnancy Association estimates that there are about 6 million pregnancies annually in the United States. Certainly, most of these are considered normal, healthy pregnancies. Indeed, some women say they feel better when pregnant than at any other time. There’s that pregnancy “glow” of clear skin, healthy hair, perfect fingernails. As the baby grows, however, many women also experience shortness of breath and extreme fatigue.

Using my own first pregnancy as an example, I was that healthy, glowing on-to-be for the first five or six months. Then, no matter what I ate or didn’t eat, my weight kept soaring (ultimately to 142 pounds), and I developed toxemia. It was my good fortune that, as my physical health became increasingly compromised, my employer worked with me to change my schedule. I moved from full days to half days, from a schedule that included long hours of standing and walking to one that was entirely sedentary. For the final six weeks, I was in a constant struggle with my doctor to stay out of the hospital and managed to win that ongoing debate only by spending all but four hours of teaching each day in bed.

Thirty years ago, there were no laws protecting my job. I simply had the good fortune that my employer was a woman who had given birth to two children herself and whose pregnancies had been somewhat difficult. Then and now, the personal perceptions and attitudes of individual employers have some bearing on the accommodations extended to pregnant women.

A young graphics designer recently hid her pregnancy from her employer, guided by an intuition that it would not be welcome news. Where an employer finally revealed the news that was so exciting to her, she was almost immediately laid off.

Cox cited examples of women for whom no accommodations were made – such as desk duty for a pregnant police officer similar to the accommodation offered male colleagues with injuries. Some women, she said, lose their jobs due to the temporary inability to continue repeated bending or lifting or the need for frequent hydration.

For the stability of the law and the protection of Americans with undeniable disabilities, this is one very slippery and complicated slope. Most pregnant women experience physically compromising issues that could only be characterized as minor inconveniences. Some – who experience, for example, toxemia or gestational diabetes, or rare conditions that may jeopardize the life of the mother or unborn child -- definitely enter a period of temporary disability while pregnant.

So where should the line be drawn? To include all pregnant women under the ADA could, arguably, trivialize serious civil rights

Commentary
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Transition Programs Urged for Students with Disabilities
By John Williams

Why is it that students with disabilities are seldom asked, “What do you plan to do after you graduate from high school?” Students have cried as they told me they felt abandoned by a society that does not want them to succeed. Sixteen-year-old Carrie Smiths of Houston, Texas, said: “I graduate next year and no one counselor has talked to me about college. They have talked to my classmates.”

Smiths uses a wheelchair and has a slight speech problem. She desperately wants to go to college. Her mother, Carla, said that Carrie, a B student, “can make it in college if she has the opportunity.” In Los Angeles, 18-year-old Roberto Alamar has been out of school for a year and does not have the money to go to college. He wants to be a graphic artist. He is developmentally delayed, and he lives on the streets. His family members are either in Mexico or in jail. His two older brothers, Louis and Thomas, are in jail.

Alfonso Ramirez said of Alamar. “He is a good boy. He needs adult guidance and a chance. Because he is Mexican, no one gives him a chance.”

Smiths and Alamar are among tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of students with disabilities nationwide who have the ability and drive to be successful provided they have access to resources and guidance. Both perceive society as working against them.

“I am not convinced that people who don’t have a disability want what’s best for me,” said Smiths in a reference aimed mainly at her schoolteachers.

Carla Smiths said that Carrie’s teachers “have never been supportive of her goals for higher education.” Smiths’ parents are investigating higher educational opportunities for Carrie and are looking for a part-time job for her.

“It will be good to have a job reference on my history,” Carrie Smiths said.

Alamar has a driver’s license, but he has never held a job. He hungered to attend college and is looking for help. He is trying to sell his artwork on the street, but no one is buying. “I have talent, but I need schooling to build my life,” he said.

Ramirez is trying to help Alamar. He gives him a place to sleep twice a week and has investigated a variety of programs that can help Alamar go to college. “I need help from my good friend Ramirez on going to higher schooling,” Alamar said.

Ramirez and Alamar are skeptical about going to a government agency to seek assistance because Alamar, who has lived in the country for 10 years, is an illegal. ‘If I am going to make a good life for me, it has to be here and not in Mexico, where I would never get help,” said Alamar, who insisted that he is not afraid of being ostracized from his gang if he can go to school.

Willard Macklin, a former special education teacher in Houston, said: “It has always been the case that able-bodied students fare better than disabled students in academia. I don’t understand why.”

Macklin, who has taught in Texas, Arizona and Col-

For Mitte, ‘Bad’ Rep is Good
By Kathi Wolfe

(The following is one of an ongoing series of articles on actors and performers with disabilities.)

Actors with disabilities are being seen more and more on the small screen. Such is the case with Roy Frank “RJ” Mitte III.

Mitte, who has cerebral palsy, plays Walter White Jr. on the critically acclaimed AMC cable TV series “Breaking Bad.” Though Walter also has CP, his disability isn’t his defining characteristic. “He’s a regular kid,” Mitte said in a phone interview.

Walter Jr. is the son of high school chemistry teacher Walter White, who has lung cancer. But if you think the Emmy Award-winning drama is an “after-school special” kind of show – think again. The senior White, unbeknownst to his loved ones, becomes a methamphetamine dealer to provide for Walter Jr. and the rest of his family. That’s just the beginning. Over the years, the show’s aficionados have been enthralled as “Bad” has gotten darker and edgier with each passing season.

Mitte, who spent his early years in Texas and Louisiana, where he was born, didn’t get into show business until his family moved to Los Angeles in 2006 – and that was because his younger sister, Laclanne Carriere, wanted to pursue an acting career.

“When I came to L.A., I didn’t know anybody,” Mitte said. “I took acting classes as a way to meet people.”

Mitte got his part on “Breaking Bad” through a combination of being talented and at the right place at the right time. Talent manager Addison Witt was working with Mitte’s sister when he suggested that her brother audition for “Bad.”

“It’s a perfect part for me,” Mitte said, adding with a laugh, “I’m a workaholic! I like to work!”

Though Walter Jr., his char-

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Transition
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For TV Journalist Richard Cohen, Chronic Illness Fight Not Over Yet

By Kathi Wolfe

Nearly 40 years ago, Richard M. Cohen, a young television journalist, joined a PBS documentary series called "America '73." For the program, Cohen produced a film about disability rights issues.

The segment, one of the first documentaries on that topic, profiled a group of people with disabilities who were fighting for their civil rights. Judith E. Heumann (now special advisor for international disability rights at the U.S. State Department), Fred Francis (who became a leading New York disability advocate) and the late Pat Figueroa, publisher of this paper, were among those in this group. When the series was in post-production, Cohen, then 25, learned that he had multiple sclerosis. Because of the disability and living with a chronic illness, Cohen spoke by phone with Independence Today about the politics of disability and living with a chronic illness.

Q: What was working on "America '73" like for you?
A: The irony of it (is) I got very emotionally involved with "America '73." I went out to (the Center for Independent Living) in Berkeley, California, to cover the politics of disability. I met people who had disabilities from auto and surfing accidents – from congenital birth defects. They were my age. When you spend an intense period of time with contemporaries, it has a big effect on you.

Then I started having symptoms. "This is all psychosomatic," I said when I went to the doctor. I thought it was because I identified with the people I’d met (in "America '73"). They didn’t have the diagnostic tests then that they do today, but it was clear that I had MS. My father and grandmother had it. My dad practiced medicine for 40 years. He finished his life in a wheelchair and lived to be 90.

Q: Is there a copy of the "America '73" film on the disability group?
A: No -- unfortunately.

Q: When you were working on "America '73" and diagnosed as having MS – that must have been an exciting time in journalism.
A: Yes! I was covering the Watergate hearings. It was heavy stuff!

Q: Did you tell the people you worked with that you had MS when you were first diagnosed (with it)?
A: No. Later, a man who’d been Walter Cronkite’s executive producer told me that I did the right thing, because if they’d have known, they wouldn’t have hired me. Employment is still a big issue for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. They still have a terrible problem in the job.
Greg Gardiner: I had the pleasure of working with Pat at the NYS Office for the Aging. He was an amazing and inspiring man who will be greatly missed by so many!

Terry Moakley: Pat Figueroa was a true pioneer of this country’s disability rights advocacy efforts. A few days ago, I attended a viewing of the documentary film “America ’73” at the Independence Care System office in Manhattan. It was a MacNeil-Lehrer production that was aired on PBS. There on film was a younger Pat Figueroa, along with Judy Heumann, Anna Fay, Bobbi Linn and other pioneers with disabilities strategizing about the need for better federal government accessibility laws. They were planning a sit-in at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare offices, which eventually led to the adoption of Section 504 of the 1973 federal Rehabilitation Act. That was a huge victory for Americans with disabilities, and it paved the way for future access laws on all government levels across this nation. Pat’s legacy lives on for folks with disabilities every day.

Helen Hines: I met Pat years ago when we both worked for the CQC (the Commission on Quality Care for the Mentally Ill) and always admired and appreciated his helpful and optimistic spirit. Hearing his name always made me smile with affection; it still will but also now with sadness.

Deborah Kendrick: My first awareness of Pat Figueroa was in messages he posted to a list of media professionals concerned with disability rights issues. His messages were always in uppercase letters (somewhat strange to read in Braille because each word is preceded by a double dot six.) When I finally had occasion to write back to him was when he announced his launch of Independence Today. He surprised me by replying immediately with warmth and regard, telling me, as he would often in the months and years that followed, that I had a lot of fans, and that he was quite happy to have me come on board with the publication. We only spoke on the phone a few times and never met face to face and, yet, I came to value his friendship and leadership as a fun-loving, clear-thinking, wise activist with a keen awareness of our past, present and future footing as PWDs in the overall picture of human rights. He ferreted out obscure stories of profound interest with a tenacity and keen focus that often amazed me. As publisher of Independence Today, Pat was able to see the whole picture of where he wanted the publication to go in a multidimensional way. Pat was so smart and warm and opinionated, and I treasure the time I was able to know him. His messages and his life belong in uppercase. He is gone much, much too soon.

Ralph William Shields: Genius, gentleman and gentle soul. Friend. I will miss you but will never forget you or all that you fought for. Thank you for touching our lives.

Laurie Kotecki: Pat was a very good friend to me at the time when I needed it the most. I will always remember his great smile and upbeat attitude toward life. He was always concerned about me and my two beautiful girls and gave me good advice. He has been called “home” as he now has another mission to accomplish, like my daughter Kara. His good deeds are just beginning for him, and what he has accomplished in his life here is incredible. It has been my honor and privilege to have had Pat in my life.

Opal Shelton-Colvin: Pat was a good man and a loyal friend. He was fair and honest. He was also amazingly funny without making an effort at it. It was an honor to write for him and get to know him as a true gentleman and a friend. He will be greatly missed.

Hotchkiss: Continued from page 2

Ralf Hotchkiss

Hotchkiss helped some disabled Nicaraguans set up shop designing, building and repairing wheelchairs locally. By the end of the decade, Hotchkiss helped start similar shops in about a dozen countries. Hotchkiss’ own wheelchairs have been made of a collection of the best parts designed in these shops.

To this day, he has no idea how his ragtag project caught the eyes of the powers that be at MacArthur. “It was an outra-
Starting Over
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published is not up to me. What is up to me is what will or won’t get written. And as for community involvement, there is no doubt I will form new friendships, and that is a good thing.

I know of no one who wakes up in the morning complaining about having too many friends in life.

Peter Kahmann is an advocate for people with disabilities and writes a blog on disability issues. He resides in New York state.

Memories
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their actions would lead to; and what effect they would have not only on those in the disability community but everyone. Once Pat got going on a topic dear to his heart, he was like a runaway locomotive – you couldn’t stop him. And so many times, my innocent question would turn into a 45-minute dissertation – occasionally interrupted by a comment from me – about the state of the union, about injustice somewhere in the world, or about the politicians he thought had no concern for anyone except themselves. And afterward, he would apologize for having taken up so much of my time.

"I’m sorry," he’d invariably say. "I get carried away sometimes." Pat was nothing if not passionate.

Like so many of his friends and family, I will miss Pat’s passion. I will miss his warmth, his deep concern for people who needed assistance or support, and his abiding wish to bring justice and accessibility to all.

Though a realist, Pat never lost his optimism, his belief that things would get better. And by founding and guiding Independence Today, he made it his mission to expose injustice and unfairness in society.

Pat could get worked up when he felt the need to express his opinion, which was often. Pat needed to talk because he loved people, he loved being around them, and he loved helping them. Pat knew a lot of people, and he helped a lot of people. I was lucky enough to know him. And, like so many who knew him, the memory of that makes me smile.

Mike Piekariski, a writer and editor, is a copy editor for Independence Today.

Richard Cohen
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market. People (employers) don’t want to take a chance. As I see it, people with chronic illnesses (and disabilities) would work harder to prove themselves – to be the best employees.

Q: So you don’t think things have changed much since “America ’73”?

A: The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) is terrific in terms of accessibility, public accommodations and blatant discrimination! But when you’re applying for a job and get turned down, you don’t know why you don’t get it. You’d be hard pressed to go into any court and argue that there’s been (employment) discrimination against people with chronic illnesses and disabilities.

Q: So there’s still discomfort with and fear of people with chronic illnesses and disabilities?

A: Americans still don’t want to know about chronic illness and disability. Getting anybody’s attention – getting anybody to treat you fairly – is a challenge. They’re uncomfortable with illness. It’s more pronounced in this bad economy. People are less patient – less flexible – because times are hard. They think they can’t afford to take a chance on you. I don’t think people are mean-spirited. They’re scared. They just don’t want to go there. It’s probably worse in other countries. Our oldest kid lives in China. We were visiting him in Shanghai. We didn’t see any disabled people. I talked to China experts. They said people with disabilities stay home there. There’s shame attached to it (disability).

Q: What’s your take on the controversy surrounding the Obama administration’s

Pregnancy
Continued from page 6

protection for others. Yet, clearly, some pregnant women do experience disabling circumstances and significant discrimination. A case-by-case disability classification supported by a medical professional is one solution. A separate and distinct law protecting pregnant women in the workplace would be another. To include pregnant women as an entire class under the ADA minimizes the effect of the discrimination directed toward people with "real" disabilities.

Three decades ago, I joked about my pregnancy to sidetrack a religious fanatic who wanted to cure my blindness. And maybe that uncomfortable situation could serve as one more measure of whether pregnancy is a disability. People want to heal you, cure you, fix you, or change you if they see that you are unable to see or walk or talk or open a door. Those conditions are still often enough met with pity. I called my pregnant stomach an "affliction" that long-ago day because the notion was so absurd, because pregnant women, unlike people with disabilities, are generally greeted with joy.

Deborah Kendrick is a newspaper columnist, editor and poet.

Richard and wife, Meredith

Richard Cohen, Continued on page 14
Commentary
Time Has Come to Embrace Disability Justice Movement
By Janine Bertram Kemp

The younger movers and shakers of disability nation are challenging the movement. They are asking tough questions and pushing the traditional leaders of disability rights to act with integrity in the interests of the whole community. Savvy leaders should listen to them and facilitate significant growth in the disability movement.

Community is at the core of the movement for disability justice, and it is in rather stark contrast to the basis for disability rights. The disability rights movement was founded by college-educated people of European descent. They used the model of individual civil rights as applied to the disability community. The independent living movement was a logical extension. It was a progressive model for its time. Independent living and the slogan “Nothing about us without us” was progressive policy for people with disabilities who were treated with pity and abhorrence by the non-disabled.

Now, decades after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and more than 40 years since the passage of the Architectural Barriers Act, most nationally recognized leaders in disability rights are white. It is fair to say that the movement has done a poor job of recruiting people of color in a way that is not tokenism.

Disability justice is a movement founded by younger folks with disabilities, the majority of whom are people of color. Several are part of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community. Greater inclusion is one of the core values of disability justice.

Leroy Moore is a San Francisco Bay Area artist with a disability who was drawn to the movement for disability rights, the majority of whom are people of color. They used the model of individual civil rights as applied to the disability community. The independent living movement was a logical extension. It was a progressive model for its time. Independent living and the slogan “Nothing about us without us” was progressive policy for people with disabilities who were treated with pity and abhorrence by the non-disabled.

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Leroy Moore is a San Francisco Bay Area artist with a disability who was drawn to the movement for disability rights. He is of African-American descent. “Through my art and activism, I have always been involved in disability rights, but I have also always questioned how welcome people of color are in that movement,” Moore said.

Moore is an artist who was deeply involved in the issue of violence against people with disabilities, especially police brutality. He believes that police brutality is an area that current leaders of the disability movement avoid. Moore does a monthly article for POOR Magazine, whose name is an acronym for “protest, organize, observe and report.”

“POOR Magazine is on the front lines with social justice,” Moore said. “Disability justice is challenging the disability rights movement to open up their thinking on how disability affects poor people of color and (gays who have a) disability.”

Disability justice was the brainchild of Naomi Ortiz, a young disability activist of Hispanic descent. In 2009, there was a disability justice Labor Day retreat in Michigan, where the principles and program were created, articulated and thoroughly flushed out. Rahnee Patrick of Chicago ADAPT participated in it by phone.

“One of the most powerful components of the disability community is our ideal of inclusion,” Patrick said. “For us to realize inclusion, we have to address white privilege. We need to address economic oppression. This may be hard for us to do. We talk about inclusion as a core principle. The disability justice movement is extending an invitation to the disability community to challenge ourselves and really do inclusion.”

Participants at the Michigan retreat who called themselves the Disability Activist Collective mentioned groups traditionally excluded from the disability rights power structure, such as Native American, Pacific Islander, Latino and Middle Eastern communities. The independent living philosophy doesn’t always resonate with all cultural groups; in some cases, they are forced to conform to Caucasian ideologies or methods and then go back to

Product Review
Kindle Fire Shines Brightly for People with Disabilities
By John M. Williams

I am a voracious reader. Biographies, history books, novels and politics consume my unsatisfied appetite for reading and learning.

My favorite American president is Abraham Lincoln. I have more than 28 books on him in my library. My favorite mystery writer is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. My favorite humor writer is Mark Twain. I have books either on them or by Doyle, Twain, Charles Dickens and others in my library.


I received a Kindle Fire, a tablet computer version of Amazon.com’s Kindle e-book reader. Once it was set up, I downloaded for free a book about Sherlock Holmes, “The Life of Abraham Lincoln” and “The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.” When I finished reading them, I purchased the trilogy “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,” “The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest” and “The Girl Who Played with Fire.” These six books are on my shelf in my Kindle. I can’t imagine having these other books with me either in paperback or God forbid, hardcover.

Buying books to read on the Kindle is cheaper than buying them in a store. I purchased the trilogy for much less than I would have paid for the books in hardcover or paperback. Books can be downloaded in fewer than 90 seconds.

I am reading “The Life and Sporting Legend of Jim Thorpe” by Kate Buford. Before I purchase a book or download one for free, I can download for free two or three chapters.
their communities to translate.

According to the collective, other excluded groups include:

- People with intellectual disabilities
- People with chronic health disabilities
- Young people
- People with high levels of support needs
- People with multiple disabilities
- People with invisible disabilities
- People in institutions
- Older adults
- People who are interested in things besides rights
- People who can't work
- LGBT people
- Poor people
- People who speak English as a second language
- Disability-specific communities (such as deaf, blind and little people)
- Women
- Members of the HIV/AIDS community
- Substance- or chemically dependent people

The Disability Activist Collective identified power brokers in the disability community as middle-aged white folks identified with physical disabilities; research centers; national organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness, AAPD, NCIL, UCP and MDA; government programs; disability studies; doctors; parent communities; and Special Olympics.

Disability justice isn’t an indictment of who is in power. Rather, it is an invitation to each organization and individual to evolve into a progressive movement that holds the core values of community and interdependence as opposed to individual rights and independence. For centers for independent living, the Silicon Valley Independent Living Center (SVILC) is an example of a group that has adopted the core values of disability justice.

Sarah Triano, executive director of SVILC, said, “The struggle of disabled people to build ‘an infrastructure of freedom’ that ensures civil and human rights are protected is ongoing, and our quest for a proud, collective disability identity is far from over. At the same time, a third phase of the disability movement has been evolving, called ‘disability justice.’ Primarily led by younger, disabled people of color, the disability justice movement has raised questions about the intersections of class, race, sexuality, gender and age in disability politics and has confronted the reproduction of power and privilege within the disability rights movement. SVILC was first introduced to the disability justice movement by Naomi Ortiz and the Disability Activist Collective, who taught us that disability justice is not just about what we have a right to, but also what we are responsible for.”

Following SVILC’s lead, what would disability justice suggest for NCIL; other national organizations such as AAPD and NDRN; and local centers for independent living? What if every conference and meeting had disability justice workshops that explored organizational and individual self-analysis on issues such as inclusiveness in terms of race, LGBT, economics, youth and so forth? What if we took action to examine ourselves as a movement and as individuals in relationship to the environment, bioethics, and other social justice issues? Leaders in the disability justice movement — like Ortiz, Patrick and Moore — could be hired to facilitate and provide training.

Early in 2000, several progressive young leaders attended their first national ADAPT action in Seattle, Wash. Following the action, they released a letter describing how they had felt excluded and unwelcome by the existing power structure of ADAPT. Well before that action, ADAPT leadership had been working toward youth mentoring and expanding the national leadership, but for the new youth who attended that action, the existing workshops and training sessions were not sufficient.

The fourth season of “Breaking Bad,” has CP, his disability isn’t overemphasized, Mitte said. On the show, Walter Jr. “is treated like everyone else,” said Witt, now Mitte’s talent manager.

When he’s not filming “Breaking Bad,” Mitte keeps busy sorting through offers for movies, Witt said, because “so many filmmakers are inspired by him. They face their own challenges.”

The teenager recently finished a stint in Portland, Ore., where he worked on a movie “House of Last Things.” The thriller is scheduled for release this year.

Mitte gets fan mail from people with and without disabilities, Witt said. “Some of them (the fans) say ‘you inspire me’ in some way or another,” Mitte said. “I’m happy if I’ve inspired somebody to get up and do something.”

People are starting to be more accepting of people with disabilities in the arts and media, said Mitte, a spokesman for the IAM PWD (Inclusion in the Arts and Media of Performers with Disabilities) campaign. “As times goes by, we’ll see more people with disabilities on TV,” he said. “We’re working so that actors with disabilities will get auditions like everyone else.”

Hollywood is challenging for any actor, Witt said. “It’s difficult to get roles.”

“This industry is a business, Mitte said. “To get one part is a great honor.” It can be overwhelming, “but everyone has talent in (his) own way.”

Mitte has many plans for his future. “I want to direct, produce — to study acting and all forms of art. You can’t understand just one part of acting. Acting is made up of many different processes.”

The fourth season of “Breaking Bad,” was “a game-changer — a rough time for my character!” Mitte said. “You’ll have to see what happens!”

For more information on “Breaking Bad,” go to www.amc.com.

Kathi Wolfe is a writer and poet. She is a contributor to the anthology “Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability,” a Publisher’s Weekly Top Ten Fall 2011 poetry book.
the sounds of the neighborhood bustling below his window did not bring about any feelings of resentment or exclusion. "I wasn’t angry: I accepted what was given and concentrated on the things I could do, not thinking about those I couldn’t."

The real passion for this youngster was art. Although he worked hard at scholastic achievements, it was his artistic ability that had the biggest impact upon his career aspirations. He was recommended by a number of grade school teachers for acceptance by the High School of Art and Design and became the only disabled student in the school. The logistical challenge of attendance was comparable to the course work demands, what with lugging supplies to and from class through frenzied hallways and city streets.

Nevertheless, his performance was exemplary. After graduation, he went on to become the first state politician to recognize the political clout of the disabled. "Struggling for disability advances has been akin to guerrilla warfare," he explains, "and at times my tactics had some people labeling me the 'Che Guevara' of disability."

He may not have left a legacy as storied as that of the iconic Bolivian rebel leader, but his five years as CIDNY’s director saw proficil enhancements in resources and outreach to the disabled in New York City and across the state. What began as an office of three full-time workers laboring on a shoestring budget has evolved into a staff of 21, operating with an annual budget of $4 million by the time Pat left. From this, the first state-funded living center, have blossomed 35 more throughout New York at present count. The unceasing efforts for legislation, policies, programs, and funds for empowerment, equality, opportunity, and accessibility began to take their toll on Figueroa in the early eighties. He grew particularly weary of the political infighting and bureaucratic shenanigans inherent in his post, and also realized a compromising of his private life. After resigning his directorship, he moved north to Albany in 1984 and has held assorted state jobs, presently as a representative for the Office for the Aging.

Pat Figueroa lives with his wife of 21 years, Denise, and their daughter Melissa, a charming and engaging eight-year-old upon whom some of Pat’s artistic ability has apparently rubbed off. As for Denise, she is a longtime, accomplished advocate for the disabled in her own right. In fact, the couple first met at a meeting of S.O.F.E.D.U.P. back in their Brooklyn College days. She is currently the Executive Director of the Independent Living Center of Hudson Valley.

Pat looks back with pride upon the accomplishments of the disability movement and realizes the job is never fully completed. "I would like to see is the government guaranteeing a job to every young disabled person in this country," he says, and adds that he has formed an alliance called The New York State Institute on Disability for the purposes of exploring economic op-
The Kindle offers many features to like. When I want to stop reading, I can bookmark where I stopped, and the next time I open the book, I open it to that page. When I finish reading a page, I lightly touch the left-hand corner of the page, and the next page automatically appears. I can go back to pages by lightly moving my finger or stylus to the right.

I can enlarge the print or make it smaller by touching an Aa icon. There are eight print sizes. I can also adjust the line spacing, brightness and page margins. For people with vision challenges, these features are a plus.

“The accessible-reading features induce me to believe the needs of visually impaired people were considered in designing it,” said Sharon Gallagher, who owns a Kindle and is visually impaired.

In addition, there is ample lighting on each page, so you can read in the dark.

The Kindle offers thousands of books to read. Some of its offers include Kindle Singles, Editors Picks, 100 Kindle books for $3.99 or less, Kindle Owners’ Lending Library, New York Times Best Sellers, Children’s Picture Books and Comic Books. The number of categories in Kindle’s lending library astonished me.

The Kindle, though, offers more than books. It has newspapers, magazines, comic books, music, videos of movies and TV shows, web access and apps (including ones for email and audible.com). A touchscreen keyboard allows a user to search for books, songs, movies and TV programs and to access the Web. Amazon.com allows users to buy from a slew of available products online.

The audio quality of the videos and music is superb. The same excellence applies to the visual quality. When watching a video, I can pause it; I also can adjust the volume and the brightness. I rented "The Iews of March" and "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" and I paused each of them for 30 minutes. I was able to resume watching both movies where I paused them.

I enjoy listening to audio books when I am traveling. I intend to make great use of audible.com.

Walter Adams, who owns a Kindle and has a hearing problem, said: “I listen to a book a week with pleasure. Audible.com’s sound quality is a boon for me.” He has told his hearing-impaired friends about audible.com’s features, and he has encouraged them to buy a Kindle.

My Kindle cost around $300. There are cheaper ones, but they don’t do as much.

I am thrilled to have my Kindle. It houses more than reading materials. It is a unique, versatile, expansive entertainment center. It is a communications wonder. It provides many wondrous benefits to people with disabilities.

To comment, write to jwilliams@atechnews.com. John Williams’ website is www.atechnews.com.

Richard Cohen
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Richard Cohen
Continued from page 10

health care law?

A: It will be interesting to see what the Supreme Court does about the individual mandate provision of the law. I think there will be many versions of it (the health care law).

Q: How many people in this country have chronic illnesses?

A: About 130 million people have a chronic illness. They range from minor problems to heart conditions to cancer. Because of the aging baby boomers, there will be more people with chronic illnesses.

Q: Do you worry about the current state of journalism?

A: Yes. I got in on the good years! Journalism will survive, but it’s been cheapened a lot. It’s not as serious. The line between news and entertainment has gotten too fuzzy.

Q: Do you like writing a column?

A: Yes. It’s solitary and it’s yours.

Kathi Wolfe is a writer and poet.

Transition
Continued from page 7

rado, said there is a solution. “We need first-rate transition programs that enable disabled students to transition successfully from grade school to high school to college, and from college to the job market. In high school and college, we need to make sure that disabled students have jobs. Working is important to their success.”

How do Smiths and Alamar feel about transition programs?

“I want to be successful, and so I need to be involved in transition programs now and in the future,” Smiths said. Alamar agreed. He said he knows other youths like himself who need transition programs from school to jobs.

Maria Perez, a rehab counselor in Los Angeles County, agreed with Alamar on the need to help Latinos with disabilities graduate from high school and transition into college programs that will help them get jobs.

John Williams can be reached at jwilliams@atechnews.com.

Pat Figueroa
Continued from page 13

opportunities for the disabled. And he would still like to make a career of his art. He dabbled a few years ago with designing greeting cards (“it never took hold”), and has high hopes for “Melissa and the Magic Pen" and subsequent illustrated endeavors. For now, his lasting contribution to the craft will remain an interpretive design that he created back in the mid-seventies that typified a movement, and a man. An alteration of the universal symbol for disability, it depicts the stick figure in the wheelchair… raising a clenched fist.

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Len Tarricone is a freelance writer who lives in the Albany area.

We Remember
Continued from page 8

“IT’s an umbrella for a variety of things that Pat did and we will do in his name,” said Denise Figueroa, executive director of the ILCHV.

Pat’s Place will offer disability advocacy training and techniques, nurture creativity, and sponsor programs and classes in the fine and performing arts, expository and creative writing, graphic design and storytelling. It will publish and disseminate news and feature articles of the type that Figueroa created and promoted, and it will train a cadre of communicators and journalists to help continue his vision.

Donations to Pat’s Place may be made to ILCHV. For further information, contact Barbara Devore at bdevore@ilchv.org or by calling 518-274-0701.

Compiled from various sources.
### What an Idea! Woman Moves Robotic Arm with Her Thoughts

**The Washington Post**

A paralyzed Massachusetts woman picked up a bottle of coffee and sipped it from it by moving a robotic arm with her thoughts, researchers reported recently — the latest advance in the race to restore movement to people who have lost control of their muscles.

The moment marked the first time in 15 years the 58-year-old, who had suffered a stroke, had been able to pick up anything of her own volition.

Using the Braingate neural interface system, a paralyzed woman was able to use her thoughts to control a robotic arm and serve herself coffee for the first time since she became paralyzed nearly 15 years ago.

Researchers called the advance the first demonstration of reaching and grasping by a brain-controlled prosthetic arm. In recent years, other paralyzed patients have high-fived with a different robotic arm and moved a cursor around a computer screen simply by thinking about it.

While the scientists involved cautioned that it will be years before such devices will be widely available, they hailed the advance as a milestone.

"Things in this field are exploding right now," said Andrew Schwartz, who is developing another thought-controlled robotic arm at the University of Pittsburgh but who was not involved in the recent advance. "You're going to be seeing much more in the near future — much more natural movements, faster movements, approaching what normal (people) can do."

In the new study, researchers implanted a tiny electrode chip — the size of a baby aspirin — into the brains of two patients. Both had suffered strokes in their brain stems that left them in a "locked-in" state. While their brains worked normally, connections to the muscles below had been severed, leaving them quadriplegic and unable to speak.

Placed on the motor cortex — a sliver of brain that controls movement — the chip listened to signals generated by the patients' brain cells as they thought about moving their own arms. A computer read that signal, interpreted it and sent movement messages to the robotic arm.

"I just imagined moving my own arm, and the (robotic) arm moved where I wanted it to go," the second patient, a 66-year-old man, told the researchers in response to questions submitted earlier by journalists. He can slowly communicate by moving his eyes as an assistant points to letters on a board.

A cable attached to the skull transmitted the signal.

"They're basically plugged in," said John Donoghue, a Brown University neuroscientist involved in the new work, which was reported in the journal "Nature."

Ongoing work seeks to remove the cable, making the system wireless and more practical, Donoghue said in a teleconference with reporters.

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### Which Race? The Human One!

**By Peter S. Kahrmann**

When my daughter was pregnant with my first grandson, someone asked me what race the child would be (my grandson's father, a young man I love very much, happened to be black). I responded to the question with pure truth: the human race.

The heart-wrenching Trayvon Martin tragedy has brought the subject of race to the fore. But the problem with the conversation about race is this: We continue to talk about this issue as if there is more than one race, and by doing so, we, in some cases unwittingly and in some cases purposefully, feed an "us versus them" scenario. Carving humanity into races serves the same purpose as the role of religion: It promotes the insidiously destructive "us versus them" and a "we've got it right; they've got it wrong" mentality.

It seems to me that by casting people into what are essentially fictional categories separate from some fictional category we've designed for ourselves, we create a buffer that serves, or so we think, to protect us from fully absorbing and understanding the horror those in the so-called "other categories" go through. We should not be spared the experience of our fellow human beings.

In my opinion, the bottom line with Trayvon Martin is both simple and brutal: A 17-year-old child was executed in cold blood. There is no doubt in my mind that that poor child was screaming for mercy with a voice on fire with terror. It chilled the blood when one realizes that the moment the shot is fired, the screaming stops.

And then there is this: I know that terror. Just months after being held up by a teenager and shot in the head in 1984, I was held up again at gunpoint. I begged for my life. My hands shook, I cried, and I begged to be allowed to live. I can tell you that when you are living in a moment in which you have no say over whether you are going to live or die, you become nothing more than a buffer that serves, or so we think, to protect us from fully understanding the horror those in the so-called "other categories" go through. We should not be spared the experience of our fellow human beings.

From time to time, someone will ask me the color of the kid who shot me or the color of the man who held me up just months after the shooting. I never answer the question. Those closest to me in life don't even know. And why don't I answer the question? Because pigmentation matters. Those closest to me in life don't even know. And why don't I answer the question? Because pigmentation has never made a decision in its life. The kid who shot me and the man who held me up at gunpoint belong to one race and one race only — the human race.

And now, my country (and parts beyond) is grappling with the fact that a 17-year-old member of the human race — your race — was murdered. If there is anything that all of us need to do, in addition to pursuing justice for this child and his family, it is to move the discussion away from the notion that there are different races and place it squarely in the reality that there is only one race, the human race.

Peter Kahrmann is an advocate for people with disabilities and writes a blog on disability issues. He resides in New York state.
geous stroke of good luck! All the work so far had been very low-key. We were just a group of disabled folks in Nicaragua, the San Francisco Bay Area and a few backward countries who had this fantasy that they could build their own wheelchairs.”

The $270,000 award came in checks spread over five years. “I had the choice of paying substantial income tax on all of it, or spending it on my wheelchair project,” Hotchkiss said. “That choice was easy.”

The influx of money and publicity was a major turning point. That same year, Hotchkiss founded the Wheeled Mobility Center at San Francisco State University, which changed its name to Whirlwind Wheelchair International in 1997. Hotchkiss is the principal instructor in the Whirlwind wheelchair design class.

In the 21st century, Whirlwind’s business model changed. Hotchkiss said that organizations such as the Wheelchair Foundation, which employed the charity model, were distributing hundreds of thousands of chairs around the world. This created a far greater demand for chairs among potential users and an equally heightened awareness of the need to distribute chairs among funders. This also meant an increasing void when chairs broke and were not repairable. In order to keep up, Whirlwind had to produce and distribute the RoughRider on a larger scale.

Today, RoughRiders are produced in factories in South Africa, Turkey, Indonesia, Mexico and Vietnam. They are shipped in lots of 300 or more. The purchase price of $799 per chair is usually paid by non-profit organizations that distribute them to users for free.

But RoughRiders are designed and built to be universally repairable. For example, the frames are made of steel rather than less-available metals, allowing them to be serviced by any bicycle repair shop. “Most countries have bicycles,” Hotchkiss said. “I feel that we are finally getting traction.”

For Hotchkiss, the primary lesson learned, as it is with the independent living movement, is that people with disabilities are their own best experts when it comes to meeting their own needs. Hotchkiss thinks his more than 40 years of riding wheelchairs is his chief qualification for doing what he does. “I certainly have learned more from that than from going to school.”

Mike Ervin is a writer who lives in Chicago. His blog, Smart Ass Cripple, appears at smartasscriple.blogspot.com.

**Correction**

In a commentary in Independence Today issue 32, Peter Kahrmann wrote at press time that Rick Santorum had lost January’s Iowa caucuses by nine votes to former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, a result that had been reported nationwide. On January 20th, after certifying the results, the Iowa Republican Party announced that the former Pennsylvania senator had won the caucuses by 34 votes.