

Leading k

by John McCosh

Kristen McCosh became Ms. Wheelchair America on January 1, 2008 — exactly two years to the day that she made a New Year’s resolution to get in better shape. Now she’s traveling across the country to promote the platform that helped her win the crown: *Proactive physical fitness for people with disabilities*.

“I try to encourage people in wheelchairs to take control of their lives, and to remain as active and healthy as possible,” Kristen said, adding that she exercises regularly at a local YMCA. “Working out has improved my life in so many ways, it’s tough to even know where to begin.”

K Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

Injured at the age of 15, Kristen has spent more than half of her life using a wheelchair. Although she’s been socially active and maintained excellent health during this time, she was sedentary for over twenty years before joining the YMCA in 2006.

Being immobile for so long had begun to take its toll on Kristen’s body. She was experiencing negative side effects from her SCI, such as increased spasticity, fatigue and weight gain. When these complications began to compromise her functional capacity — such as the ability to drive her van — she decided she had to make some changes. “My spasms became so severe that I couldn’t even drive to work some days,” Kristen said. “I knew I had to do something about it.”

K Her plan

At the urging of her husband, Kristen joined the South Shore YMCA in Quincy, Massachusetts. They have an extensive

by example



exercise program there for people with disabilities called the “Partnership Program.”

Coincidentally, a research project studying the effects of activity-based therapy on people with chronic cervical SCI was also starting up at the Y during that same month, and they were looking for participants. Kristen signed up for the “First Five Program” and began working out with a group of peers three days a week for the six-month study.

Her exercise routine consisted of Functional Electrical Stimulation (FES) Bike, Nautilus weight training, mat work for balance, and getting up in a standing frame. She saw noticeable changes within months.

“I feel ten years younger since I joined the Y,” Kristen said, adding that she turned 40 in May. “I lost over thirty pounds, have fewer spasms, increased energy, and much more confidence.”

Today, Kristen continues her fitness routine with the help of a volunteer personal trainer, James Finn, a former US Marine and competitive body



builder. James helped to develop an individualized workout plan based on Kristen’s mobility and he helps her train once a week.

Fringe benefits

While the primary health benefits of proper nutrition and exercise are obvious, the secondary effects are often overlooked — but they may be just as important. These ‘fringe benefits’ include decreased isolation and depression, as well as increased self-

esteem and self-confidence.

Working out in a gym or fitness center also gives people with disabilities more opportunities for social interaction, providing an arena to form new friendships with disabled as well as able-bodied people which may lead to new adventures in sports, recreational activities, trips, and leisure events.

Kristen's platform for her reign as Ms. Wheelchair America is *proactive physical fitness for people with disabilities*, because it's something she believes in very strongly.

"Becoming fit is not about looks; it's primarily about health. Although I do believe that when we look better,

we feel better," she says.

'Physical fitness' describes an ideal set of achievable assets, including endurance, strength, and flexibility. These assets are achievable through proper nutrition, strength training, aerobic exercise and a positive attitude. She chose to put "proactive" in the title because this term means to take control of a potentially negative situation.

"Being in a wheelchair for an extended period of time leaves people open to insidious complications, such as weight gain. This is an issue that people with disabilities need to be aware of and try to prevent," Kristen says.

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Leading by example

As a woman with a disability, Kristen knows firsthand the challenges of trying to fit into a society that has not always been so progressive. She sustained a C6 SCI in a diving accident at the age of 15, and she admits that she faced a long, difficult road to recovery.

She went back to an inaccessible high school in a wheelchair, went on to college (where she graduated Magna Cum Laude with an English major) at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, gained meaningful employment, and then got married.

She's hoping to have a positive impact on people with disabilities in her role as Ms. Wheelchair America by sharing her personal story of suc-

cess.

"When I was injured in 1983, there were no opportunities to work or socialize. It was years before the ADA was passed, and access was extremely limited. If there were any ramps, they were literally at the back door," she says. "It's a different world today."

Kristen works full time as the Editor of an eMagazine, Solutions, which helps facilitate employment for people with disabilities. The magazine can be found at www.hireds.com. She is also writing a novel series that features women in wheelchairs as heroines and protagonists. She believes that fiction is another area where role models are needed.

"I want to read about a wheelchair chick who is a jet-setter or a vixen," Kristen laughs. "Someone who is like me — or someone I could aspire to be. I hope the publishing industry is willing to take a chance on me."

Kristen also works-part time at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston as an early intervention peer mentor. She helps newly injured SCI patients adjust to life using a wheelchair, and also leads a weekly wheelchair aerobics class there.

"I didn't have any role models to look up to when I had my injury," Kristen adds. "That's why I want to give something back."

The power of the crown
 In her role as Ms. Wheelchair America, Kristen represents 52 million Americans with disabilities. She has the unique opportunity to reach a broad audience all over the world, including the disabled community, lay people, business leaders, and politicians.

Her message is more about empowerment than inspiration, and she advocates for programs and services that allow people to maintain control over their own lives and health.

"I believe every YMCA and gym in the country should include equipment for those who have mobility limitations. That is my long-term goal. I think that I exemplify a successful

outcome; I'm living proof that exercise makes a difference to people in wheelchairs."

Kristen speaks across the country about her physical fitness platform, and so far she has been met with encouraging results.

"I already have a number of fitness facilities on board to make modifications and add accessible equipment to their gyms. We still have a long way to go, but I'll keep on spreading my message to anyone who is willing to listen."

Visit Kristen's blog at www.mswheelchairamerica08.blogspot.com or email mswheelchairamerica08@yahoo.com *

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