



THIS MAN HAS MOVED MOUNTAINS

Meet Lex Frieden, Senior Vice President of The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research (TIRR)

Lex Frieden grew up in a small, wheat-farming community in northwestern Oklahoma, “the perfect, homogeneous Midwestern town where you went to the city twice a year to buy school clothes and only old people used wheelchairs.” His mother was a homemaker, his father the civic-minded president of the local natural gas company. In 1967, Frieden was high school valedictorian, captain of the golf team, an Eagle Scout, a radio talk show host and the boy his peers voted “most likely to succeed.”

Having won a President’s scholarship, he enrolled in Oklahoma State University. A few days before winter break, a car in which he was riding had a head-on collision. After the impact, he found he couldn’t move. In fact, he couldn’t feel a thing. His neck was broken and his spinal cord seriously injured.

“A neurologist pulled my mother aside and asked, ‘Do you want your son to live?’ She said, ‘I don’t understand that question.’ He said, ‘Well, you know he’s likely to be a vegetable. He might not ever get out of bed again.’”

Even today, some Americans have a hard time believing that disabled people can be high-functioning, highly productive members of their community. For Frieden, fighting this attitude is the toughest part of being disabled.

“The first time I experienced discrimination I was devastated. After my accident, I couldn’t go back to the State University because its very old buildings didn’t have elevators.”

“I was shocked when despite my 4.0 average, my exceptional test scores and my superlative recommendations, a brand-new university in Tulsa turned down my application. When I called the admissions office, certain there had been a mistake, I was told my application had been denied on the basis of my disability, that I would be ‘too much of an imposition on other students. What if I had to ask their help getting into the few buildings with stairs?’”

After that conversation, Frieden didn’t move or speak for three days. “I was practically catatonic. I couldn’t even tell my parents. But this punch in the face strengthened my resolve. A few weeks later, I enrolled in Tulsa University, where they simply scheduled classes I chose to take in buildings that were accessible.”

Frieden graduated Tulsa University with a degree in psychology and got his master’s in social psychology at the University of Houston. In Texas,

he moved into one of America's first independent living communities. "It was the only place I could live on my own. We residents had the power to hire - and fire - the people who were assisting us. And we were able to build one of the first non-medical, non-patronizing models for physical assistance."

After completing additional graduate work, Frieden joined the faculty at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, where he now serves as Professor. He is now the Senior Vice President of The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research (TIRR)-a comprehensive medical rehabilitation center which provides a continuum of clinical, educational and research programs relating to spinal cord and head injuries and other disabling conditions.

"One of my missions in life is to spread the word about independent living. The idea is so simple. Disabled people don't need medical professionals to pull up their pants in the morning or visiting nurses to help them sip their orange juice. But that's exactly where this overmedicalized economy has driven us. By reimbursing high-cost medical services (and refusing to pay for less costly but more critical ones) we've been forced to become the kind of people that drive health care costs up - instead of bringing them down."

"When we're well," he adds, "we need non-medical assistance - help getting dressed, eating, traveling and getting in and out of bed. When we're sick, we need the attention of rehabilitation specialists who understand our particular disabilities."

Frieden wants those who are planning the health care system of the future to understand that "a better mousetrap" already exists. It's just a matter of implementing a national system of independent living and personal assistant services.

"At first, with the Americans with Disabilities Act, people were afraid that making buildings accessible would break the bank. Of course, this didn't prove to be the case. It just made it possible for that many more Americans to go to work. Providing personal assistance and independent living centers to disabled Americans is the next logical step."

Frieden should know. He was a key player in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act - the most sweeping civil rights legislation since the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 1984, Frieden was asked to direct the National Council on the Handicapped, a newly-created, independent federal agency in Washington, D.C. He knew that Congress had given the agency a specific mandate - to prepare a report that would lay out the nation's public policy towards people with disabilities.

Frieden moved to Washington and directed the drafting of a document that became the bedrock of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In 1990, only two years after the bill was formally introduced, it was passed by Congress and signed into law by President George Bush.

"Now we must ask ourselves the same question that the neurologist asked my mother, 'Do we want to let people with head and neck and other traumatic injuries die?'"

“If we don’t, it’s our moral obligation to make sure they don’t live the rest of their lives as vegetables - dependent on overstressed families for their care or wasting away in nursing homes. We have to give them what they need to lead productive lives.”

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