

# Spinal Cord Injury 101

by Liz Treston

My name is Liz. Of all the things I did not plan on was becoming an expert in spinal cord injury and diseases. I am an expert through life not books. My methods of teaching vary dependent upon my audience. If you're in an elementary class at Career Day, I'm not going to go into details about proper bowel evacuation. I will, however, always be honest.

Honesty can be brutal at times. Depending on how long you've been in the exclusive club of SCI/D might also effect whether you read my article further. How did you get here? Did you fall out of a tree, miss a turn, smack a shoreline, a gene screwed with your body's makeup, or you slid on silk sheets out of bed?

It doesn't really matter. You are here. In that sense, that's the first step on any journey. Being here. I can either be your mentor or the crazy lady with the dog. It's perception. Isn't that what we deal with every day? Society's perception of our abilities? Our strengths and weaknesses? It can get exhausting being judged all the time. I should know. It's one of my faults, judging people. I'm working on it.

After a SCI/D, we all go through our own personal journeys. It's complicated. That's a weak word. It's beyond complicated, but you already know that. Eventually we figure out how to maneuver through the hallway again. We adapt to a life that was not planned. Frankly, nobody's life is set out on an agenda. We ride along with varying hills and mountains. Sometimes we come across a crevice and just want to fall in, but we don't. We adapt.

We return to work, school. We return to our prior roles of mother, wife, husband, student, athlete, friend, employee, employer, artist or lawyer. Eventually we begin to transition to a new normal. One of the things about being human is our desire to be close to another human. It's something about biology.

There have been a number of studies on sex and disabilities; not surprisingly, most involve men. Not



that I have anything against men but, I want my body studied too!

In my workshops and presentations, I try to break stereotypes. Stereotypes you may have had before you found yourself in our little exclusive club. One of the biggest misperceptions is sex.

Yes, I can.

Yes, he can.

Yes, she can too.

Yes we do.

Together, we can help dispel the myths that a piece of fancy titanium attached to us makes us asexual.

*Liz Treston is a mentor with NYSCIA. She and her Canine Companion for Independence service dog, Finney, are a spokesperson team for Hearthfire (a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the role of the artist as a catalyst for personal and global evolution). She has also been very active with emergency preparedness efforts since Hurricane Sandy hit our area. Nassau County's Executive Ed Mangano has honored her for her service to the community. Liz is available for panel discussions and conferences on a number of subjects focusing on advocacy, personal growth, and persons with disabilities in emergency and disaster preparation.*