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Case Study #17 The Case of the Challenging Cruise

by

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Shorty Powers

Michael “Shorty” Powers was a “hell on wheels” kind of guy. His adventures appeared to have ended in 1969 when a car accident killed one of his friends and paralyzed Shorty from the waist down. Shorty felt grief and depression at the sudden loss and the sense that life as he had enjoyed it was over.

As Shorty will tell you, when faced with such a dramatic change of circumstances, you have a choice—give up or live fully. Shorty has always been committed to living life fully, which for him means being competitive in athletics and taking on other challenges. Rather than give up, Shorty looked for a sport in which, despite his lack of useful legs, he could compete on equal terms with ABs (the “able bodied”¹). He discovered fishing. Thus began 30-plus years of fishing-tournament wins.

But that is just background to the real story.

Turning POINT

Imagine for a moment how you would get around your house in a wheelchair, and what you would go through emotionally, knowing this was how the rest of your life was going to be. Shorty had experienced the depression and the battle for mobility faced by a person who has lost the use of limbs.

For Shorty, living life fully also meant contributing to others who could benefit from his experience. Twenty-five years ago he founded *Turning POINT* (Paraplegics On Independent Nature Trips) to support paraplegics (“paras”) as they go through the emotional aspects of loss and assist them to see that they can build new lives, just as exciting and fulfilling as the old, using fishing and other outdoor activities. Symbolic of the organization is a poster showing four empty wheelchairs parked at water’s edge. A sign on the chairs reads, “Gone Fishing.”

Climbing Guadalupe Peak

After founding *Turning POINT*, Shorty could have just kept things going as they were. However, his life is a demonstration of, “It’s only a limit if you think so.” He



looked for other breakthroughs to demonstrate to paras “that they can do a whole lot more for themselves than everybody, including themselves, thinks they can.” Guadalupe Peak is Texas' highest mountain. At 8,751 feet, it looms more than 3,000 feet above the surrounding desert. In 1982 Shorty inspired five of his friends to take on the challenge of climbing it. No ABs were allowed to help.

Adding to the challenge, the six committed to the climb before they figured out how to do it or even did any research concerning the conditions with which they would have to deal. They committed to producing the breakthrough, then figured out how to do it. I'll return to this later.

It turned out that the 4.2-mile stony trail to the summit crosses dry streams with rocky beds. It's difficult hiking even for those who walk. ABs can step over the rocks and the tree trunks laid across the trail to prevent erosion; for wheelchairs, each one was a major obstacle. During the hike, rainy days turned the ground to mud. Sometimes it took Shorty and his friends six hours to cover the same ground ABs could traverse in 20 minutes. For five days they made their way along the rocky trail, crawling most of the time, pulling their wheelchairs with ropes held in their teeth. (“We had no idea it was going to be that rocky,” Shorty said later. “But we didn't let that stop us.”) Three made it to the top.



Joe Moss (left), Dave Kiley (center), and Don Rodgers (right) at the summit monument of Guadalupe Peak, Texas²



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You are starting to get a sense of the man. And that still is not the story I want to tell.

***Turning POINT* Nation**

When I first met Shorty, *Turning POINT* was a collection of relatively independent chapters scattered across the country. Shorty was committed to the organization being able to deliver services nationally and having the clout to cause change. How to accomplish that was unclear, and there wasn't even agreement on the goals (some chapters liked their independence). I was hired to facilitate the Board developing a strategic plan, starting with creating the national organization's vision/future and working backwards to the present³ (just as Shorty and his friends figured out how to get to the top of Guadalupe Peak after committing to do it—what we call, in the discipline of transformation, a true breakthrough).

The planning sessions took place between ports during a Caribbean cruise. The process was successful, resulting in today's *Turning Point Nation* organization (www.turningpointnation.org).

The Cruise: a Lesson in Freedom from Limitations and Constraints

I always believed, as I imagine most heterosexual people do, that I needed to be physically able and good looking to attract the opposite sex. The first night out that assumption was destroyed. Their wheelchairs didn't stop the Board members from getting out on the disco floor and dancing, sometimes on two wheels.

That was impressive enough, but then I noticed that ABs (including some very good looking ABs) were lining up to dance with Shorty and his colleagues. There they all were on the floor—moving with the rock music, sweating, flirting, having a great time. The wheelchairs were simply not relevant. That did not fit what I “knew” to be true. I started to suspect that because their physical situation was irrelevant to them, it was irrelevant to others as well. Shorty and his fellow board members were in wheelchairs, but they weren't stuck *being* guys and gals in wheelchairs, with the obvious (to me) limitations that come along with that. Instead, they were fully expressing themselves, unconstrained and uncontained—playful, sexy, funny—totally alive and, as a result, enormously attractive. I thought to myself how much we are all suppressed by our own thinking. We let ourselves be victims when we could be free, powerful, alive.

During the entire cruise, despite obstacles such as getting from the ship to small shuttle boats and negotiating the cracked streets in a Jamaican city, the Board members never let anything stop them from enjoying any activity. Their physical condition was as relevant to them as their height or hair color—things you might



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have to take into account, but nothing that would stop you. They were a joy to be with because they were so completely authentic and alive.

What I Learned

Instead of paying attention to our circumstances and using those as reasons why we can't have what we want, we can— like *Turning Point Nation* members— make a commitment and then figure out how to fulfill it. We can have our circumstances rather than allow our circumstances to have us.

As Shorty says, "It's only a limit if you think so."

¹ When I worked with the Turning POINT board, I was in a distinct named group, the ABs ("able-bodieds"), while everyone else, in this instance the paraplegics, had no group designation. Maybe there is an insight here: we ABs consider ourselves "normal" and thus not in need of group identification, and we assign group names to those we view as different in some way from ourselves.

² For a video of the news story of their climb go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=gW8KjSrF11w.

³ See "Strategic Planning #5: Designing the Future from the Future."