

Dan Johnson Advocacy Award

About Dan

Dan Johnson loved life and lived it to the fullest. He was born Christmas day 1947, and his childhood was pretty normal. He lived with his parents and sisters in the country outside of Racine, Wisconsin. As a high school freshman, Dan played football and was also a member of the wrestling team. However, the days following President John F. Kennedy's assassination were unlike any other. The entire country was in shock, but it was the decision by Dan's wrestling team to meet that Saturday for practice that would change Dan's life forever. During practice Dan's wrestling partner came in low. As Dan attempted to jump over him, his legs tangled, and he landed hard between the mats arranged around them for protection. Dan knew instantly something was terribly wrong when he could not move—or feel—his legs. His family doctor told him he had fractured his fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae, damaging his spinal cord. He needed immediate surgery and would have a lengthy recovery.

Once Dan began rehabilitation, his doctors were direct; he was paralyzed and would not walk again. He would require a wheelchair for mobility and would need to depend on others for bathing, dressing, toileting, and transfers. However, he was told through hard work he could learn to do many things independently, complete his education, and become employed.



In the 1960s, there were few services available for people with physical disabilities or their families, and Dan's family struggled both financially and emotionally. His parents spent the time Dan was in rehabilitation preparing for his new life and making their house wheelchair accessible so their son could return home. To ensure Dan did not fall behind his peers in school, he was provided with a tutor during his rehabilitation. Dan returned home with support from his family and went back to Horlick High School in the fall of 1964. For the remainder of Dan's time in high school, his friends transported him in his manual wheelchair to classes.

After high school graduation, Dan attended the University of Wisconsin–Parkside; he sought help from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, which provided support for him. Dan's first job was as a manager trainee at Goodwill Industries, and he purchased his first home in Racine at the age of 25.

Dan made it his life's work to advocate for people with physical disabilities and to ensure they have access to the same opportunities as any other person. Dan had many professional accomplishments including:

- Founding Society's Assets, one of the first independent living centers (ILCs) in the state of Wisconsin.
- Supporting expansion of a lawsuit to prevent public transit authorities from purchasing inaccessible buses to cover all of the public transportation systems in the South Eastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.
- Securing Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funds in 1976 to provide employment benefits counseling and placement service for people with physical and sensory disabilities.

- Developing a curriculum to provide a training program for CETA recipients to become personal-care attendants.
- Developing educational materials on the need for agencies receiving federal funding to become accessible (both facilities and programs), according to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- Creating the first telephone message relay service in the Racine area for people who were Deaf or hard of hearing, as well as for people with speech impairments who required telephone assistance. Society's Assets was the first state and national contractor of the message relay service.
- Becoming the first board president of Wisconsin Disability Coalition, this group worked to pass amendments to the 1978 Rehabilitation Act and on the Community Options Program (COP) as an alternative to institutional care.
- Working to increase funding for ILCs, this led to the creation of four more ILCs and the provision of independent living services statewide.
- Creating the taskforce that led to the creation of the Wisconsin Council on Physical Disabilities.



- Working on an initiative to improve the employment outcomes for people with physical disabilities and the creation of the Ticket to Work Act.
- Developing a model of supported employment for people with physical disabilities called Vocational Futures Planning, which piloted in Dane County with 40 individuals on long-term support waivers securing employment.
- Working with the Department of Health Services to establish the Medicaid Assistance Purchase Plan (MAPP). MAPP provides work incentives that allow people with physical disabilities to earn money, save for their futures, and retire with access to the health and long-term care they need.
- Identifying individuals to serve as a steering committee for people with physical disabilities. Recommendations from this committee were used to support the development of Family Care and the Wisconsin Partnership Program.

Dan was one of many individuals who have had their lives turned upside down by an injury. Dan was much more than an advocate who possessed courage and unwavering persistence; he was generous, kind, compassionate, wise, funny, and gentle. His life was full of colleagues, friends, and family. He always had his work cell phone on, because someone might need his mentoring skills. Among his many accomplishments, he treasured the family he created as a foster parent and adoptive dad. In his wife Kathy, he found someone who shared his passion for family and adventure. He loved camping, raising kids, being a soccer dad, and driving. He was a great son, brother, cousin, uncle, friend, husband, father and grandfather.



Doug Nelson, former president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, now retired, met and became good friends with Dan during Nelson's time as the deputy secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services. Nelson wrote, "I have never known a finer human being, or a friend I was prouder to have, than Dan Johnson."

