

Interview with:
Anna Renault
'Anna's Journey'
And
Sheri Denkensohn-Trott
Co-Founder, Happy on Wheels

2:41 [Renault]: Let's bring Sheri live on the air with us and talk about Happy on Wheels and the journey that Sheri has had, especially with cancer, but also about forming a nonprofit organization.*

Good morning Sheri, thanks for being on the show with me today.

[Denkensohn-Trott]: Good morning Anna. I want to thank you so much for having me and also give a kudos to your sponsor. It's so wonderful that you have someone that's got such an interest in pets. I know being a quadriplegic how much Canine Companions International and dogs in general have helped many individuals with disabilities, obviously those that are blind, but many quadriplegics who just to find that dogs and other animals really make a difference in their lives so that's wonderful, but thanks for having me today.

[Renault]: I am so glad that I crossed paths with you, and it just happened to be a Facebook post that I saw. I thought, "That sounds really interesting, Happy on Wheels." And then once I found out more of your story it was like, I need to meet this lady, I need to talk with this lady and we need to let the world know that there is so much that needs to be addressed. Certainly, regarding any type of disability, non-access to care, all kinds of things. I mean there are so many topics we could probably have a show about each one, but lets just start it because I know you said you made a list of things you wanted people to be aware of. So first of all tell people who you are and what you do.

[Denkensohn-Trott]: Sure, my name is Sheri Denkensohn as has been announced. I am 49 years old, just turned 49, but at age 16 I sustained a spinal cord injury, which rendered me a quadriplegic. For those that aren't familiar with that, it's an injury of the cervical spine. For me it was at the level of four, which basically means that I require assistance with all activities of daily living. I have caregivers. I am able to feed myself with a special device on my hand. I cannot move my fingers. I can get around with the assistance of a motorized wheelchair. And I can feed myself and do other things after a long stead of rehabilitation. But, it does mean that you are pretty much paralyzed from your midsection down. Ironically, we'll talk about breast cancer I'm sure, but from mid-breast level down I really can't feel anything, heat or anything like that. So that did play into my breast cancer treatment.

But back to my story, so I was injured when I was 16. I went to a rehabilitation center that was about an hour and a half from where I grew up which was in the rural part of New York in the Catskill Mountain area. And I was two and a half hours from home,

which as a 16 year old is not the easiest thing. And I was far from my siblings. Which, even though they were older, far from my parents, and far from my all my friends in high school and at that point they didn't have licenses so they couldn't come and see me. So it was rather isolating. It was something that was sort of unheard of. I had never heard of a quadriplegic and there I was. So rehab was pretty intense. And it was a wonderful place but I came back to my home in upstate New York, where my parents had made some modifications so I could have a bedroom that was accessible. I had a large wheelchair van that I could get around in. But I lived in an area where there were no sidewalks, no bike paths, nowhere that you could really go to a park or just roll down the street. It was very isolating and you needed a car or a van to go anywhere. And I couldn't drive so I always needed someone to do that and everywhere was about 30 minutes away. And I realized that that was just not going to be a good life for me and I soon adopted the attitude that I couldn't change my physical situation but I can change my environment such that I could do more.

I did get tutored and I graduated high school with my graduating class. I was actually commencement speaker. And I went away to college in Albany, New York, which was a wonderful experience on the Albany campus except for one thing, which was snow. And snow and wheelchairs are not compatible. So I wanted to go to law school. My sister lived down in the Washington, DC area and I had traveled down here a number of times before and I had felt that this was a user-friendly city where I could be independent and get around. I could use the metro. So I got into Georgetown, to my surprise. I went to law school at night and worked during the day and I was lucky enough at the time, the only place at the time where a pre-existing condition did not preclude you from getting insurance was the federal government. Now a day's people may start to take that for granted but it was a huge issue in 1989 and the 90's. I was no longer covered on my father's insurance and I needed my own health insurance as a quadriplegic because my health care costs have been rather exorbitant.

So I went to law school at night and I got a job with the federal government during the day and since then I have been an attorney for the federal government for almost 25 years. It's been a great experience. I love my work. I work with amazing people. I have always wanted to do something related to advocating that people can overcome challenges despite their obstacles. I feel that it applies to people with or without disabilities. So Happy on Wheels is something that I am moving towards doing full-time, not yet. My husband, who I never thought I'd get married as a footnote, who also has a disability, is doing it full-time. We're doing it together and we're hoping that there can be many facets that can help people improve their lives.

So that's my short story. There are lots of bumps in between. One of which is breast cancer. There are many other health scares. I'm quite frankly incredibly familiar with the medical community. There's good, there's bad, there's lots of room for improvement. And there's a lot of tips that I have that I think that I can help people. I also have a 94-year-old dad, who is on the line listening. And he is getting hospice care and just seeing what he has been going through and navigating that process. That's sort of my story in a nutshell and you know my view is that two-fold. You cannot change, many times, your

physical condition but you can get yourself in an environment that maximizes your independence. And secondly, and most importantly, we can all—every single one of us has challenges- and for each person you can say, “oh yours are worse than mine, or mine are worse than yours” that’s just a waste of time sort of measuring up, the bottom line is we all deal with challenges, but it’s not about what happens to you in life but it’s how you handle it. My view is it takes a lot more energy to be angry than it does to be positive. That doesn’t mean that every single day is a joy fest. That would be an unrealistic thing to think about. But, the majority of the days can be good if you focus on what surrounds you because there’s a lot of good things. [11:05]

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