

“Nobody Would Help End My Life.”

“**B**efore my accident, I’d describe myself saying, ‘I played football or wrestled or liked baseball. By the way, I’m a good student.’”

Then came October 31, 1970. “I was playing football at Cornell—linebacker—the day of my accident. We’d just scored a touchdown. Next play I tackled the ball carrier, broke my neck and damaged my spinal cord—C4, C5. I’m paralyzed over most of my body.”

Sitting in Ken Kunken’s Rockville Centre kitchen I asked him if he wanted to die. “Absolutely. If I’d had the option I wouldn’t have lived, but nobody would help end my life.”

Ken’s mom had died of polio when he was 27 days old, but he had tremendous support. “My family and friends encouraged me saying, ‘You’re the same person, with a good mind. Use it! We’ll be your arms and legs. There’s always hope something will improve, but don’t sit around waiting for it to come to you. Do something!’” Ken didn’t want

to let them down. A family friend also suggested he write a book.

Ken got a different message from his medical team: “You’ll never be independent.” He was given a pamphlet with career options for someone with his severity of paralysis. He could sell magazines over the phone. “I couldn’t even dial a rotary phone or write orders!” This was long before today’s technology and almost 20 years before the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act demanded public building doors, ramps, bathrooms and elevators accommodate people in wheelchairs.

Even though Ken wasn’t much of a God person, clergy continued to visit “They’d ask how I’m doing. I’d answer, ‘Terrible. If you have a special relationship with God, why’d I get hurt?’ Their response was usually, ‘God

works in mysterious ways. I’m sure he has a plan for you.’ That never bought solace. It was depressing.”

After a year in rehab, Ken decided Cornell was again his best option. He returned in a wheelchair, paralyzed, unable to write notes. His aide didn’t understand his engineering courses and Ken couldn’t bear hearing them again on tape. He finally gave carbon paper to a classmate. With new notes and new hope, Ken earned his Cornell Engineering degree. Then a Cornell Master of Arts, a Columbia Master of Education, and a Hofstra Law Degree.

By 1982 Ken had an apartment and was a Nassau Assistant District Attorney. His first trial was in traffic court.

But the elevator to the third floor was broken and the courtroom doors didn’t accommodate his wheelchair. On day three, after complaining directly to building services, Ken was promoted to District Court cases. The elevator worked in the District Court building.

In 1999 Ken needed a new weekend aide. He placed an ad in a local Polish newspaper. Anna Blazejczyk applied. She’d come from Poland to study English in school but realized she could learn more in a one-on-one job. Ken hardly interviewed Anna. They talked about everything else. She left Ken’s apartment thinking, “Even if I don’t get the job, I need to know more about this fascinating man with a great personality, great voice and beautiful blue eyes.” Anna and Ken knew within a month they had something special.

When they talked engagement, Anna told Ken she wanted children. He thought, “I’m in my 50s, paralyzed for more than 30 years, and she wants children. But I’m so in love. Let’s try it!” They’d heard about the Miami Project. The organization trying to cure spinal cord injuries already had a fertility program. After several tries, doctors extracted enough of Ken’s sperm and Anna’s eggs to create three viable embryos. Doctors implanted all three in the hopes they’d get at least one baby.

Ken can’t forget their first sonogram, “The doctor said, ‘Here’s a sack, (an embryo.) here’s another sack, and a third sack!’” On January 24, 2005, Joseph, James and Tim Kunken were born! The triplets weren’t allowed to play football but had to be active. Each has a Taekwondo second-degree black belt. They’re jiu-jitsu instructors. Today they’re freshmen at SUNY Morrisville, Syracuse University and Dad’s alma mater, Cornell.

However, Dad remains the family hero.

Joseph: “He’s so knowledgeable. He doesn’t waver. He’s always confident; there for us with wisdom and knowledge. We trust he’s always right.”

Tim: “He’s definitely the wisest man. He’s lived through insane life experiences that prepared him to help us in any way. You trust him, completely.”

James: “That intellect. He’s extremely smart and wise with multiple degrees. It’s really difficult to argue with him; he’s known best for debating. He’s a lawyer! We’d get in trouble and Mom would say, ‘You shouldn’t do that.’ But with Dad, we’d have ‘The Talk.’ You try to explain yourself, then he’d ask, ‘Oh really??’”

Tim (smiling): “You’d walk away thinking, ‘How did I stoop SO LOW?’”

Before bicycling to work, James yelled back, “Buy his book!” Seems Ken Kunken has a doctorate in persistence, too. He’s now an author, having finished *I Dream of Things That Never Were*, the book he started 52 years ago. (Available on Amazon & Kindle)

I asked Ken about his spirituality today. “If God’s plan was that I would become so disabled that I needed to look for somebody like Anna for help, fall in love, and have three incredible kids, I guess it was a pretty good plan all right.”

Amen to that, Ken. ●

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